

No Country for Old Control Freaks

I chose the topic of my paper this evening in response to several requests from friends in the Literary Club who have asked me what doing archaeology is really like. Here, then, is the unburnished truth.

Had I known what I know today about my profession I am not certain that I would have continued to pursue my dream of organizing my own archaeological expedition in Greece, or perhaps anywhere else. There are, after all, easier and more profitable ways of cashing in on a Ph.D. in Classics. I could have never left the library. It is a "safe space," as kids today say. (I have googled in vain without finding any reference to disasters or homicides there – at least not since the destruction of the Library in Alexandria in the 7th century A.D). I could have written all the best-selling popular books that people have told me to write. Maybe I could even be in the business of giving inspirational TED talks by now and converting them into lucrative lectures to annual meetings of corporate shareholders – as several friends are doing.

But I chose a different path, personally, if not financially, rewarding – one for which I was entirely unprepared. After nine years at university, so many that my father was concerned that I would become a “professional student,” I had learned absolutely nothing of the practical realities of directing archaeological fieldwork or of archaeological politics. And, in the Balkans, archaeology is all about politics. There we are trapped between priorities of the academy and those of state authorities who are charged with cultural heritage management. In Greece, perhaps in particular, life and politics move at their own pace; one needs to go with the flow. My wife and I often say that god must have sent us to the Balkans to learn patience.

I was also incredibly inexperienced in respect to the world at large. I had fallen in love with Greece and Rome through university classes in Latin, Greek, and art history, and made the decision to go to graduate school to become a Mediterranean archaeologist after spending exactly one week in Greece and never having gone to Italy. It was the romance of the discovery of the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations that pulled me in this direction, particularly the adventures of Heinrich Schliemann at

Mycenae and Sir Arthur Evans at Knossos. Such innocence was perhaps not unusual for someone my age, a first-generation college student at a state university in the Midwest, at a time when air travel was expensive and opportunities for study abroad were far fewer than today.

In any case, I was not ready for life in Greece. Greece, after all, can be a confusing place for the uninitiated to do business, sometimes delightful, even comical. One-way street signs are only a suggestion and don't apply to cars that drive in reverse. Motorcyclists carry helmets on their arms, since the law says they must have one, without specifying that they must put it on their head.

And life in Greece also can be frustrating and chaotic. The country has been packed with refugees since the 1990s. Not so long ago the population of Greece was homogeneous in religion and language. Today, a large part of the residents of Athens are not native Greek speakers.

Africans, Asians, Near Easterners, Albanians, and other Balkan and Eastern European immigrants are a common sight.

Citizens depend on governmental social services and unions resist privatization. But salaries are low, taxation

heavy, and government pensions have been cut drastically. Strikes were so common until lately that there even is a web site where you can check daily to see who is on-strike and which streets will be closed.

Tax evasion can for some be a self-defence mechanism. Professional services have two prices, one with tax included and officially receipted, another discounted and without tax if paid in cash. Capital controls make it difficult to withdraw your own money from a bank.

Greeks rightly pride themselves on their hospitality, but the Syrian crisis has strained resources to the limits. European confidence in Greece's ability to control its borders has been eroded because of the circulation of so many forged passports. It is also a country where a highly educated workforce is drastically underemployed. This is particularly true in archaeology, but unemployment overall is hovering around 30%.

At this point I should step aside to comment on my narrative thus far. You may well be wondering why I have continued to work in Greece for more than four decades in light of what I have told you. Not only do I keep working

there, I bought a house in Athens last week. Simply put, I love the place and its people. I feel more alive when I am there. I feel comfortable in Greek society. Some days I think I have more or less mastered the language, although my composition tutor tells me there is room for considerable improvement and I still manage to provoke laughter by misusing words. Perhaps most importantly, living in Greece has taught me to understand our planet better – the importance of globalization and internationalism, and to gain a much more objective perspective on the role that the country of my birth has played and continues to play on the world stage.

And, as I will explain in the remainder of this paper, I also think that I am a better person for it all. I am more patient, although that is a work in progress. I have learned a lot about the importance of friendships. I am certainly more flexible, and have taught myself not to despair: there is always a solution to every problem. More to come later on these points.

Greeks often tell me I am μισό-Έλληνας, half-Greek. They must intend that as a metaphor tinged with flattery, although I admit to being excited last spring when Ancestry

reported that my DNA is, in fact, 10% Mediterranean. I had no idea!

When I began my professional career in Greece, in the early 1970s, life in Greece also was chaotic and contradictory, but living was easy for ex-patriots. Non-residents were required to leave the country after 90 days, but an American might could enter on a tourist visa, after 90 days fly to Cyprus, then return, essentially resetting the clock. I know people who lived and worked in Greece on tourist visas for decades. Sure, the plane tickets were a bit pricey, but they could be covered by savings in room and board. My first apartment, centrally located in Athens, cost me \$18/month, 1/5 of what I had been paying on Riddle Road in Clifton. In 1974, a nice chicken dinner in Athens set me back a whole dollar at what is still today my favorite lunch spot.

When I first arrived to live in Athens, the country was under the control of a military dictatorship, the so-called Junta of the colonels. Their rise to power in 1967 has been widely blamed on the United States, but, whatever the case, this dictatorship was imposed in reaction to fears in Greece itself that Communists might seize control of the

government. The period of the Junta was grim. Many from the Left were arrested or driven into exile. Free speech was suppressed. One could be jailed for humming a song by Mikis Theodorakis, the famous Communist popular composer. A secret police monitored behavior in all walks of life. Streets and hillsides were blanketed with signs: Ζήτω ο στρατός, "Long Live the Army."

The summer of 1974 ushered in another revolution, after the Junta backed a Cypriot movement that aimed to unify that island with Greece. The Turkish government in Ankara reacted decisively to protect the Turkish-speaking minority, and quickly occupied the predominantly Muslim, northern third of Cyprus. A majority of the Orthodox population was expelled and one state was divided into two by military force – creating a stalemate that continues today.

Meanwhile, back in Greece, both the people and the army were fed up. A revolt fueled by student protests erupted at the Athens Polytechnic. The Colonels were arrested and deposed. The monarchy was abolished. The king and queen took refuge in Spain. Democracy was restored. Berkeley

professor Andreas Papandreou returned from exile to become Greece's first Socialist Prime Minister in 1981.

This was not the happiest time to be American in Greece. There were marches on our Embassy, a tradition that continues today, each November 17. Banners proclaimed "ΣΙΑ, ΣΙΑ, Προδωσία," "CIA, CIA, Treachery," "Get Out of NATO," and "Shut Down the American Bases." Under the Junta important Cold War airbases in and around Athens had been strengthened, as had a naval base for our Mediterranean Fleet on Crete.

Anti-Americanism carried over into the area of archaeology, a strange concept for us Americans, but entirely logical for Greece. Archaeology has long had an important role to play in the Greek national consciousness. In the wake of a declaration of independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1821, antiquities legislation asserted state ownership over all remains of the past. [Contrast America, where we have no such legislation.] The intelligentsia who had fomented the revolution of 1821 were concerned to stem the flow of Greek antiquities to the West, theft by Europeans being something common under the Ottoman Empire. The Greek state would exercise control over foreign archaeology by allowing

its practice only under the umbrella of national schools based in Athens.

And it is here that I need to introduce you to the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. Between 2007-2012 I was its Director – a position rather like that of a CEO, but with persuasion my only real power to govern most of 90 employees, dispersed in eight departments. Although the largest American research institution overseas, and the oldest and wealthiest, with an endowment of 160 million, its governance structure is bizarrely complex – so much so that Roy Vagelos, then still CEO of Merck, resigned after only a brief tenure as President of the Board of Trustees, failing in his efforts to impose managerial reforms.

The American School was founded in 1881 by a consortium of a half-dozen East Coast universities and colleges. Each elected a representative to a so-called “Managing Committee,” in which was vested all decision-making power. It was this Committee that later established a Board of Trustees, but only when property began to be acquired in Greece. The same Committee retained rights to hire or fire the Director in Athens – i.e., me, my predecessors, and successors – and to draw up the annual budget. The

Trustees were expected only to raise money and safeguard investments, while keeping their mitts off of on-the-ground operations.

While such an arrangement ran smoothly in the 19th century, the Managing Committee today is unmanageable. Most of its members, all 360 of them, haven't been to Greece in years, some never, and many live in a world of ghosts and memories from the time they were students decades ago. But this committee controls all American archaeology in Greece.

In short, the governance of the American School is an overly complicated affair of a sort that only clever academics with no business experience could have devised, and one that mirrors the dysfunctional aspects of the Greek public sector and Greek politics.

And so it was that, in 1981, when I first decided that I wanted to direct an archaeological project in Greece, I found roadblocks created both by Greek and American bureaucrats. In retrospect it was perhaps merciful that I was so naïve, blinded by boyish enthusiasm mixed with arrogance.

I had heard of problems that others had had (e.g., how an entire team of archaeologists had arrived in Greece from Australia, but were then not allowed to work. Try to explain that to your university!). But I managed to convince myself that such bad luck would never be mine if I followed the rules.

Still, misfortune did fall, and there were many times when I scoffed at the attitude that had been drilled into me at school, that it was better to have tried and failed than never to have tried at all.

My first notable failure was an abortive effort to search for new archaeological sites on Kea, the nearest of the Greek islands to Athens. My professor at the University of Cincinnati had invited me to join his dig team there in 1974, just two years after I entered graduate school – and he even offered me a topic for my Ph.D. dissertation. But in order to do that I would need to learn not only about excavation, but also about the categories of finds that he had discovered.

It was baptism by fire and I was too foolish to admit what I didn't know. I had never dug before. I had no practical experience whatsoever. But I bluffed my way along and in three years submitted a thesis that had sufficient merit to be accepted for the doctorate in 1977.

Just four years later, then, I wanted to launch a program of fieldwork of my own and I was especially interested in learning if there had been other prehistoric settlements on the island of Kea. My professor's site had been an emporium ca. 1600 B.C., a place where entrepreneurs from the Greek mainland mingled with merchants from Minoan Crete. The islanders themselves lived in fancy mansions with frescoed walls and grew rich by serving as intermediaries along an important trade route that tied Crete to Attica, the area around Athens. It was a small place and had been home to only a few hundred people. Surely, I thought, there were other such centers on Kea, some perhaps even larger than his site. I wanted to discover them.

I found money to support the work by making applications to foundations. I assembled a team to work with me and arranged for two friends to co-direct the project. We rented rooms on the island ... and then the bubble burst.

Our request for a permit that was submitted to the Greek Ministry of Culture was categorically denied. We cancelled the project. We lost a housing deposit. And I licked my wounds. What had gone wrong? Clearly we had not properly understood the political and social dimensions of our request, nor how members of the deciding governmental council would react to it.

Not long afterwards I was approached by a young Greek woman – an acquaintance of a friend – who had just been appointed to a professorship at the University of Athens. She had heard of the rejection. She was interested in our work. And she proposed a collaboration.

With her on our side, we applied a second time. But what I didn't realize this time was that I was tossing myself headfirst into a maelstrom of Greek and American academic rivalries and incompatible interests. A senior professor at the University of Athens considered the entire island to be his, to give to his students as he pleased, and, when he learned of our intentions, he asked two of them to plan a similar project. Even my own professor had stabbed me in the back by secretly informing the Ministry of Culture that he didn't support our proposal, not because he lacked

respect for my abilities, but more because he wanted me to continue to work for him exclusively.

This time we received permission – but only because our new Greek colleague's brother was a lawyer and, in fact, also one of those arrested by the Junta's secret police for humming a Theodorakis tune. Riding on the coattails of Papandreou's new popularity, he had assumed the office of Secretary of the Cabinet of the Prime Minister, and he used all his influence to support his sister. But we were only allowed to explore one small part of the island.

Nonetheless, the fun wasn't over. We finished the work and we published a book that won an award, but then, in a burst of anti-Americanism, the Communist Director of Antiquities of Greece accused us of violating the terms of our government permit. I was expelled from Greece for a year.

And now you know why I needed to give you so much background in modern Greek history. I thought my life as an academic was over.

But it clearly wasn't. And in the process of surviving these traumatic events, that is where I learned two important lessons about working in Greece:

1. Friendship is more important than politics and ideology.
2. It is almost impossible to get yourself into so much trouble that you can't get out of it - usually by asking friends for help.

In actuality, my career was just beginning. In 1991 I published a book about our work on Kea, I completed eight years of fieldwork around the Sanctuary of Zeus at Nemea, near where Heracles slayed the savage lion and fashioned his unique helmet from its hide. In 1993 I returned to Cincinnati from Chicago to become the first holder of a distinguished professorial chair, named in honor of the great Carl William Blegen.

Some of you will know the name Nestor from your reading of Homer. Just a reminder that in the *Iliad* he was an elder councillor to the assembled forces of Agamemnon and Menelaos under the walls of Troy. But his most memorable role comes years later in the *Odyssey*, when Telemachos,

accompanied by the goddess Athena, arrives at his palace in Pylos, seeking information about his father Odysseus, who, ten years after the fall of Troy, has yet to come home to the island of Ithaca.

By the end of the 19th century, the palaces of most other Homeric heroes had been located and excavated, notably Mycenae itself – which lent its name to the Mycenaean Civilization of the Greek Bronze Age from 1600 to 1200 B.C. But the palace of King Nestor had eluded would-be discoverers, until 1939, that is, when Carl Blegen found it on his very first day of excavation. By 1960 Blegen had revealed to the world one of the greatest all-time finds of archaeology, not only a palace fully preserved in its plan, but also its archives of more than a thousand clay tablets incised with symbols representing the oldest form of the Greek language.

The world had not seen the likes of Blegen since Heinrich Schliemann and it is no exaggeration to say that, because of his discovery of Pylos and his excavations at Troy in the 1930s, he became the best known American archaeologist of the 20th century. And Blegen was particularly familiar to our Club. Elected in 1942, over the next 15 years he brought eleven papers, the last in 1957, the year of his

retirement from the University of Cincinnati. These range from a delightful tale about the friendship between a horse named Nelly and children at Clifton School to mind-numbing reports on the results of his excavations. One suspects that in the latter instances he felt hurried and grabbed the first thing at hand.

Although overshadowed in Cincinnati by his reputation as an excavator at Troy, adventures that were promoted in the Tafts' *Cincinnati Times-Star*, Blegen's discovery and publication of the Palace of Nestor was arguably his greater success. Still, after his death in 1971, the site of the Palace of Nestor languished, until our team sponsored by UC returned in the early 1990s. It was, however, only in 2015 that we could excavate anew.

At this stage in my career, I rarely, if ever, face the political problems that I confronted as a young archaeologist. Yet now, as an aging control freak, running an archaeological project can still be nerve-wracking because of the social and cultural context in which we work. Let me give you an idea of those challenges.

In February 2015, as we were preparing to reopen excavations at Pylos, my wife and I spoke to the mayor of

our town. In May we planned to arrive with a staff of 35 and needed sleeping rooms for them and workspace.

These days archaeological campaigns are more complicated than ever before. Gone are the times when four or five foreigners supervised gangs of local farmers in the agricultural off-season. As in space exploration, a large team supports those who venture outside the space capsule. Trained archaeologists are increasingly outnumbered by a support staff of specialists who study soils, date pottery, record finds, manage our electronic databases and computer systems, and much, much more. But, unlike NASA, archaeologists must necessarily do things on the cheap. Government funding was never great and has now been substantially reduced. The priorities of National Geographic changed radically when Murdock bought it. Our own universities give us nothing. Only a few programs can rely on steady support from private foundations. We in Classics at UC are one of these, since we are beneficiaries of a fund established by Litterarian Will Semple and his wife, Louise Taft Semple.

Yet the fund is not deep enough to cover expenses of the vigorous programs of fieldwork our department maintains at

Pompeii, Knossos, and Caesaria Maritima, in addition to Pylos. The cost of archaeological research has increased tenfold during my forty-year career and all of us these days must depend on the kindness of strangers.

We thus were delighted when the mayor offered us use of a former children's summer camp built in the time of the Junta, in the hope that a couple weeks there would instill deeply patriotic, conservative values in young people.

Stocker and I visited the camp. We planned how we would use the space. And then, at the beginning of May the deal fell through. The mayor had simply been trying to make us happy by telling us what we wanted to hear. And now, with only two weeks to go, there was no place for 35 people to live.

We, of course, had a back-up plan, but it, too, failed — with only a week to blast-off. A local real estate tycoon and hotelier had offered us an old discotheque free-of-charge. The mirrored disco balls were still in place and a hallway of rooms upstairs, formerly occupied by ladies-of-the-night, would have been perfect housing.

I thought to myself at the time: "Jack, you fell for it again." For the umpteenth time I needed to remind myself not to trust Greek politicians (or perhaps any politicians) and rather to put my faith in the pessemistic judgements of my wife, a constant foil to my eternal optimism.

In such a crisis you do realize, however, that Greeks in the public sector naturally understand better than we do how to operate according to the rules and customs of their own society: some problems are best confronted at the last moment, and solutions to many problems can be found without much in the way of advance attention to details. Most of the time such an approach to life works, except when it doesn't – and, whatever the case, stress comes as a short, sharp, shock, rather than as prolonged, haunting dread. Very often temporary solutions become permanent. There is, in fact, a Greek proverb: "Nothing is more permanent than something temporary." Such solutions, of course, kick the can farther down the road, but then the problems likely become someone else's to deal with.

In 2015 we also faced challenges of the sort that are generally incomprehensible to university bureaucrats and lawyers in America. In order to excavate in Greece we

needed to buy land and we had commitments from supporters to purchase it for us. After land is bought it must be donated to the Greek state before excavating. We pay all the costs and have only a handshake agreement that the State will allow us to dig on the land that we have donated to it.

In so far as our university is concerned, we must sometimes operate on a "don't ask, don't tell" basis. It is the only way. After all, it took me a year to convince the Treasurer of UC that he couldn't open a bank account in the European Union unless the university incorporated itself there and exposed itself to an enormous tax liability.

We had first started to think about buying property to excavate on in 2004, and there was one field with olive trees and currant grapes that particularly interested us, and promised to shed light on how people lived in the Mycenaean period – if we could dig there. We approached the land owner through our lawyer. An aged Communist, he refused to sell, reportedly uttering a series of expletive-deleteds about Americans. In 2006 we asked the officials of the Greek state to begin expropriation proceedings on our behalf and they agreed, but nine years later the expropriation remained unfinished. In addition to the

problems with housing that confronted us in 2015, we also were unable to dig where we wanted.

And that's how we found the Grave of the Griffin Warrior (www.griffinwarrior.org), now so celebrated in the popular press and on-line. In the midst of all the stress and chaos, we decided to dig in a field already owned by the Greek government. And on the very first day of excavation we discovered our own find of a lifetime, just as had Blegen: in our case it was the top of a shaft that led to a pot of gold, silver, bronze, ivory, and precious stones – not only the wealthiest prehistoric grave excavated in Greece since the 1950s, but one of the most significant finds in the history of Greek archaeology and of European art history. As Blegen himself said, on receiving the Archaeological Institute of America's first Gold Medal for Distinguished Archaeological Achievement, Lady Luck plays an important role in the life of the archaeologist, along with perseverance, and the companionship and support of good colleagues.

Perhaps the Greeks are right. It doesn't pay to plan too carefully. And Greece remains a good place for an old control freak like me. Despite everything that is crazy

about working there, I am myself crazy and return there year after year. Most of my friends live there, after all, as does my wife and my cat Nestor. 2018 will mark my 42nd summer.