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CHALLENGING MYTHS IN THE MUSEUM  
THE ACHERON ORACLE OF THE DEAD  
IN THE IOANNINA ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

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ΑΜΦΙΣΒΗΤΩΝΤΑΣ ΜΥΘΟΥΣ ΣΤΟ ΜΟΥΣΕΙΟ  
ΤΟ «ΝΕΚΡΟΜΑΝΤΕΙΟ» ΤΟΥ ΑΧΕΡΟΝΤΑ  
ΣΤΟ ΑΡΧΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΚΟ ΜΟΥΣΕΙΟ ΙΩΑΝΝΙΝΩΝ

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Στο άρθρο αυτό παρουσιάζεται και συζητείται η περίπτωση εφαρμογής, στην τελευταία μόνιμη έκθεση του Αρχαιολογικού Μουσείου Ιωαννίνων (2008), ενός ανατρεπτικού μουσειολογικού μηνύματος για το πολύ γνωστό εύρημα από τη Θεσπρωτία, του λεγόμενου «Νεκρομαντείου» στον Αχέροντα. Το παράδειγμα αυτό συνιστά μέρος της ευρύτερης ιδεολογικής, επιστημολογικής και μουσειογραφικής προσέγγισης, που το ριζικά ανανεωμένο εκθεσιακό πρόγραμμα ακολούθησε στο μητροπολιτικό μουσείο της Ηπείρου. Στον πυρήνα του βρίσκεται η έμπρακτη αμφισβήτηση πλήθους αγκυλώσεων και παραμορφώσεων σχετικά με την ερμηνεία και τις χρήσεις του παρελθόντος. Στο

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επίκεντρο της μουσειακής περιοχής για το «Νεκρομαντείο» τίθεται η ανάλυση της διασύνδεσης της αρχικής ταύτισης (τέλος δεκαετίας 1950) του ελληνοιστικού οικοδομήματος στη θέση Μεσοπόταμος (σε συνδυασμό με το φυσικό περιβάλλον της περιοχής) ως «Νεκρομαντείου» με την ανάγκη οικοδόμησης τότε ενός τοπικού αφηγήματος, το οποίο αναπαρήγαγε και συντονίστηκε με το κεντρικό εθνικό ιδεολόγημα της ελληνικότητας. Ιδιαίτερα συζητείται η συνεχιζόμενη ακόμη και σήμερα διστακτικότητα, τόσο από τη μεριά της ελληνικής αρχαιολογικής κοινότητας όσο και από το ευρύτερο κοινωνικό σύνολο, απέναντι στη νεότερη ερμηνεία για το εύρημα (δεκαετία 1980), σύμφωνα με την οποία αποτελεί δείγμα οχυρωμένης αγροικίας. Στο άρθρο παρουσιάζονται τα διλήμματα, οι επιλογές και ο τρόπος με τον οποίο η νέα έκθεση διαχειρίστηκε τελικά, ακολουθώντας συγκεκριμένες επιλογές, έναν εθνικό μύθο βαθιά ριζωμένο στο κοινωνικό φαντασιακό. Απώτερος σκοπός είναι να καταδειχθεί η αναγκαιότητα το αρχαιολογικό μουσείο να αναλάβει ενεργό ρόλο στον αναπροσδιορισμό της σχέσης ανάμεσα στο παρόν με το παρελθόν.

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents and discusses a recently implemented reformative museological message about the widely known find of the so-called “Nekromanteion” at Acheron (Thesprotia), in the new exhibition (2008) of the Ioannina Archaeological Museum. This example makes part of the wider ideological, epistemological, museological and museographic approach adopted in the exhibition programme at the metropolitan museum of Epirus; this approach has challenged a number of long standing anomalies about the interpretation and various use(s) of the past. The focus of the analysis is on demonstrating the interconnectedness between the initial interpretation (in the late 1950s) of the Mesopotamos Hellenistic site, its contents and surrounding landscape, as the mythical Homeric oracle of the dead, and the then need of creating a local narrative in tune with the mainstream national ideology of Hellenism. Particular attention is given to the continuing reluctance by the Greek archaeological community and by the local society towards the re-interpretation (in the early 1980s) of the find as a fortified farmstead. Emphasis is placed on the challenges, choices and way the museum has opted to deal with this thorny and deeply embedded national myth. The scope of this endeavour is to show the need for the archaeological museum to engage in a more active role in the re-orientation of how the present relates to the past.

## Introduction

For some time now, it has been demonstrated that the articulation and, in some cases, the invention of a deep past that is uninterrupted, homogeneous and unspoiled by whatever “external” influences has served as the existential and ideological prerequisite of any modern nation-state; the polity model of European inception that was put into motion and has spread globally since the early nineteenth century (e.g., Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Trigger 1984; Gellner 1987; Arnold 1990; Gathercole & Lowenthal 1990). Abridging the past with the present is evidently a context specific process related to various historical circumstances and contingencies, as well as to multifaceted agendas and challenges. In the construction of national culture narratives, Konstantinos Tsoukalas (1999: 234-246) has stressed the constitutive role ascribed to and played by two sets of variables: on the one hand, the array of various tangible manifestations or performances –for example, symbols, objects, monuments and rituals– and, on the other, the extension of national narrative values to include the natural environment and the landscape.

From a historic perspective, the above inseparable pair was no doubt integral to the formulation of modern Hellenism, initially a European vision created to suit its own collective identity and subsequently projected onto the first nation-state experiment at the southern tip of the Balkan Peninsula (see e.g., Shanks 1996; Athanassopoulou 2002; Mazower 2008). The whole process, not devoid of re-shaping and adjustments, for example, the late inclusion of medieval heritage in the national narrative under the ad hoc invented rubric of Byzantium, or some variation or frustration in terms of vantage point on the part of the modern Greeks themselves, has been a long one and is continuously (re)worked (e.g., Hamilakis & Yalouri 1996; Voutsaki 2003; Hamilakis 2007; Plantzos 2008; Tziouvas 2008; Gazi 2011). The weaving of the national symbolic capital began well before 1830, the year a small Modern Greece was proclaimed independent. Decisive was the romantic spirit of European travellers and intellectuals who rediscovered and revived ancient Hellas *on the ground*, while they appropriated it in their motherlands’ museum galleries by depositing material *memoranda*, often ravaged and violently extracted from the monuments they belonged to in the first place. More specifically, the primary ingredients of the Greek national identity building project, that is, the ancient ruins and the rural landscape, along with language, by being documented in ancient written sources (textual and epigraphic) were indisputable in terms of their considerable age and authenticity. In other words, the material remains of antiquity, notably the ‘white’ but once polychrome marbles of architecture and sculpture, especially of the Classical period, and their picturesque surroundings provided an ideal and rich universe of a ‘unique’, ‘pure’ and ‘sanctified’ past. Hence, the protection, excavation and restoration of monuments were from very early on entrusted exclusively to the state. Prominent in the toolkit of the ethnocentric

national historiography were the “treasure-house” state-owned archaeological museums established progressively across the country (see Gazi 1994; Gazi 2011). Regional or site-specific archaeological museums have piously reproduced the master national ideal. This museum image, entwined with the history of archaeological thought and practice (e.g., Kotsakis 1991; Morris 1994), proved very resistant over time. Up until the mid-1990s, ‘high’ art relics (e.g., pots, funerary stelae, metal weapons, religious offerings, items of personal gear and prestige) were taxonomically displayed as self-evident ‘eternal’ aesthetic values to meet the ruminating neo-classical tastes and needs of educated local and foreign elites.

Undeniably and owing to the opportunities provided by the European Union’s (EU) Community Support Frameworks, the *icon* of many archaeological museums and their “permanent” exhibitions has been recently ameliorated and upgraded (see Mouliou 2008; Gazi 2011). For instance, the majority is now equipped with technologically modern display cases that comply to advanced conservation specifications and with various means of detailed explanatory information, textual and visual, including digital devices. As a rule, museums have made the effort not to overcrowd the displays with artifacts. They have also adopted the thematic alongside the chronological unfolding in their narratives. Notable is the care devoted in some instances, for example, as regards the prehistoric record, of focusing on the biography of artifacts. Effectively, the manner of exhibiting remains largely descriptive and immersed in a latent empiricist and loosely understood positivist approach. Artifacts, conceived as passive reflections of ideas and social structures, still constitute the backbone of displaying genres. To put it in a nutshell, the great majority of renovated and newly built archaeological museums now *look* modern and, from this point of view, have certainly become more appealing to the public. However, as Mouliou (2008: 100) has remarked, “Less daring or diverse have been the changes at a conceptual and interpretative level.” As has been persuasively argued, the reluctance to launch a plural discourse is finely portrayed in the emblematic National Archaeological Museum and the New Acropolis Museum at Athens, wherein the nation’s “epic” times and objects/symbols are venerated (see Gazi 2011; Plantzos 2011; Gazi in press). Still, cases of ground-breaking revisionist rationale have been implemented, for example, at the Museum of Byzantine Culture (Thessaloniki) and especially at the Christian and Byzantine Museum (Athens) (see Gazi 2011 for overview).

In this paper, the focus is on a reformative example from the new permanent exhibition – opened to the public in November 2008 – of the regional Ioannina Archaeological Museum (IAM), Epirus, northwest Greece.<sup>1</sup> Therein the narrative introduces a radical re-assessment of one of its worldwide known exhibits, namely the so-called “Nekromanteion” in the Acheron River Valley. As will be argued, its “discovery” in the late 1950s, initial interpretation, meaning and inexorable association with the

surrounding landscape are intricately linked to the construction of the local cultural identity, in line with mainstream, ethnocentric, national ideology and historiography. Despite the fact that the “Nekromanteion” model has been profoundly undermined since the early 1980s, its formidable resilience to this day, in the archaeological community as much as in the public sentiment, more than underscores the challenges and dilemmas the new exhibition has had to face. Moreover, it provides an evocative case by which the archaeological museum has acted as a privileged public space for redefining perceptions, attitudes and uses of the past.

### **An ‘exotic’ landscape with a sturdy ancient building complex**

Epirus is located at the collision front of major and minor tectonic plates. Its structural regime sets it apart from the country’s environmental southern and eastern norm. Geographically, it is a mixture of extensive and successive high and steep mountain ranges, deep gorges, meandering rivers, lakes and marshes of varying catchments and only narrow alluvial coastal plains. Moreover, climatic conditions are more akin to continental Europe than to the mildness of the Mediterranean.

After the mid-eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries, especially under the Ali Pasha regime (1787-1822), Epirus, appropriately positioned between the West and the East, became a favoured destination mainly by male upper class Europeans in search of the intellectual “Grand Tour” adventure and/or in the service of their countries political interests (e.g., Fleming 2000; Vigopoulou 2006). These were the times when Europe’s “Sick Man”, the Ottoman Empire, was rapidly disintegrating. The travel literature abounds with descriptions and depictions of an Arcadian kind of landscape, rich in crumbling ancient material vestiges. All along, the educated bourgeoisie painstakingly tries to correlate places and ruins with the limited, often vague, references about the area and its history in the ancient texts (see e.g., Papaioannou 2007).

Epirus’s full annexation took place in 1912/1913 during the Balkan Wars (Divani 2000). Archaeology was immediately summoned to assert the antiquity and identity of the place. Under the aegis and funding support of the Archaeological Society at Athens (ASA), the leading scientific institution for major archaeological projects for many years, excavation and restoration work was initiated at the vast littoral site of Roman and Early Christian Nicopolis, with its many partially standing public monuments (see Konstantaki 2013; Zachos 2015: 46-51). Soon, research was also resumed –for the first time in an organized manner– at Dodona (see Gravani 2007), the oracle site of Zeus, famous in the ancient world, under the precipitous summits of Mount Olytska (ancient Tomaros) in the hinterland.

Epirus, however, entered the modern era at a very slow pace and effectively not until the mid-1960s. The main confounding parameters were its remote location, rugged terrain, long established pre-industrial stockbreeding and handicraft economic substratum and multi-ethnic/religious/cultural matrix. Other decisive factors were the traumatic and devastating events of World War II (1940-1944) and the Civil War (1945-1949). The latter had long lasting consequences and left the nation deeply divided, especially in areas like Epirus, where confrontation reached a dreadful climax. Waves of emigration to the major cities within Greece and abroad resulted in acute depopulation. Milestones in the modernization process that are directly related to the theme of the present paper were the establishment of the University of Ioannina (1965), the building of the Ioannina Archaeological Museum (1963-1966) and of the state-owned Xenia Hotels at Ioannina, Igoumenitsa and Arta (1950s-1960s). The architectural design of IAM and the Xenias was either the work or embraced the spirit of the idiosyncratic modernist architect Aris Konstantinidis, who held, unlike the dominant Hellenic doctrine of his time, a profound ideological aversion for neo-classicism. Although important developmental steps have been taken in recent decades, Epirus is to this day ranked among the poorest of Greece and the EU (see e.g., Kikilias, Gazon & Ntontis 2005).

Equally, the introduction of modern archaeology lagged behind. Undeniably, Sotiris Dakaris (1916-1995), in his capacity as Acting Director/Director of the local Archaeological Service (1949-1965) and as first Professor of Classical Archaeology at the University of Ioannina (1965-1968, 1974-1983), is to be credited with the systematic investigation, often in collaboration with other institutions, of many sites and localities across Epirus from remote prehistory to the Ottoman Rule (see e.g., Souli, Vlachopoulou & Gravani 2007). An Epirote by birth, he also envisioned and prepared the establishment of the regional museum in Ioannina, the modern capital of Epirus; organized the site-museum at Nicopolis; and assembled the small archaeological collection at Arta. Because of his democratic ideas and his progressive lectures on prehistory and the antiquity of the hominid lineage (see Plantzos 2014), he was dismissed from his university post by the military regime of the Junta (1967-1974). Dakaris' enormous contribution and overall legacy as regards the rescue and protection of antiquities and the opening up of Epirus to the outside world are still duly and highly appreciated by the local society at large. However, as it will be sketched below, he remained entangled with the main corollaries of the ethnocentric, national historiography throughout his life.

In a recent temporary exhibition (2012) organized at the Ioannina Archaeological Museum and distinctively entitled for his popular icon "Sotiris I. Dakaris: The archaeologist of Epirus", his immediate intellectual offspring praised the fact that "Professor Dakaris didn't just see the monuments of Epirus with the eyes of knowledge,

but also with those of the *soul*.” (Souli, Vlachopoulou & Gravani 2013: 16, emphasis added). Moreover, because of his extensive and tireless surveying, he was also compared to the second century AD traveller/geographer Pausanias (ibid.: 17). These attributes and their manifold undertones epitomize Dakaris’ attitude towards archaeological practice and interpretation and his role in decisively shaping the collective desire of tuning the local with the national narrative. This need also related to the uneasy political situation with the northerly bordering Albanian state (created in 1913) and that country’s national myths and aspirations developed especially under the idiosyncratic communist Hoxha regime. These focused on proving and interconnecting the antiquity and the geographical extent of the Illyrians, the “epic” ancestors, with the imagined “great” new nation-state (see e.g., Hodges 2015). A further aspect of Dakaris’ intellectual apparatus needs a brief comment: his rudimentary positivist and direct analogical “ethnographic” thinking, to which he often resorted for working out explanations about past land use patterns, social customs, technological processes etc. (e.g., Dakaris 1976). In many respects, Dakaris can be considered as the local equivalent of the nation’s archetypal archaeologist, Manolis Andronikos (see Hamilakis 2012: 159). Like the excavator of the tombs of Macedonian royalty at Vergina, Dakaris also assumed a shamanic mediator’s role between the past and the present. Perhaps, nowhere can the combination of the afore delineated traits be better demonstrated than in his long involvement with the archaeological site he laboriously identified as the literary “Nekromanteion” in the Acheron River Valley.

In May 1958, under adverse accessibility and funding conditions, Dakaris intensively prospected the Thesprotia coastal region as part of his life-long quest for reconstructing ancient geography and settlement history (e.g., Dakaris 1972). He was escorted by Spyros Mouselimis, a schoolteacher and dedicated archaeophile who acted, in the custom of those days, as a state-appointed, non-stipendiary, temporary curator of antiquities for that region. Together they undertook a *three*-day exploratory dig at a low lying hilltop above the village of Mesopotamos (Dakaris 1958: 107) in the Phanari floodplain, which extends westwards from the highly dissected Souli mountain range (Picture 1).

Underneath a deserted eighteenth century monastery complex,<sup>2</sup> Dakaris correlated “beyond any doubt” (ibid: 118) the remains of a stoutly constructed Hellenistic building (end of the 4th/beginning of the 3rd century - beginning of the 2nd century BCE) with the literary Oracle of the Dead at Acheron, first alluded to in the *Odyssey* (Picture 2).





Picture 1. Aerial view (looking north) of the Mesopotamos site and of the Xylokaastro (“Ephyra”) ridge behind it. In the background (right) the Souli and Paramythia mountain range and part of the Phanari plain. West, not in sight, lies the Ionian Sea. (Courtesy: Ephorate of Antiquities of Preveza)



Picture 2. Aspect of the remains at Mesopotamos (from east). The 18<sup>th</sup>c. church of Saint Ioannis Prodromos overlies the once towered section of the Hellenistic building complex, now preserved at the ground floor level. (Courtesy: Ephorate of Antiquities of Preveza)

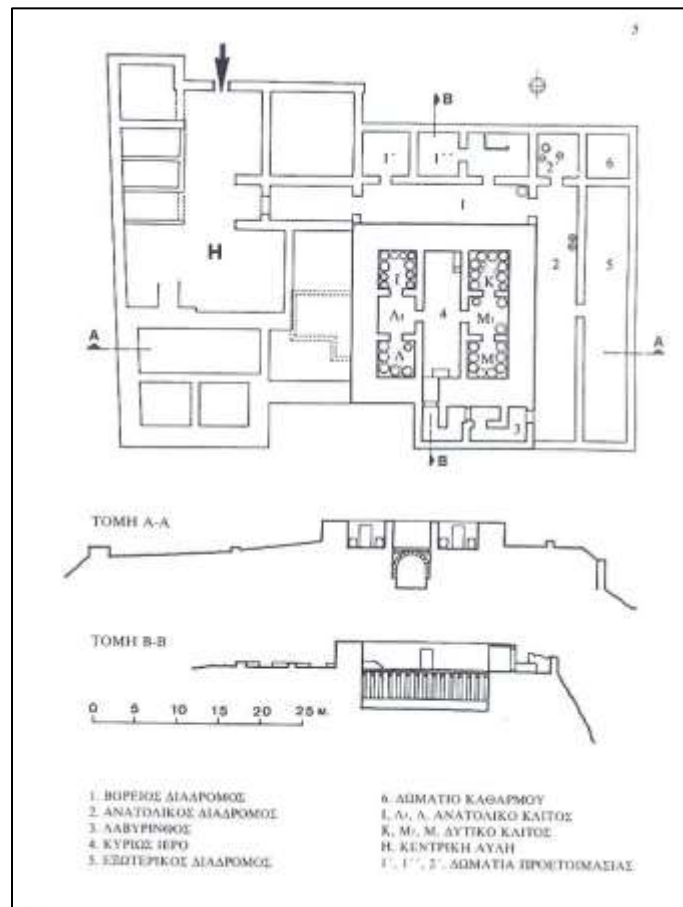


Leaving the brief duration of excavation aside, it is amply clear from his published reports that all along his argument is essentially more philological cum topographical than archaeological (see below). In fact, his inspiration for the identity of the site is easily traced to the travel chronicles of Reverent Thomas Smart Hughes, a Cambridge tutor who, in the early nineteenth century and in the company of a young undergraduate, was granted permission by the Vezir of Ioannina, and, with considerable risk, they visited the area (Hughes 1820: 306-320). The Englishman, fervently stunned by the combined wildness and serenity of the landscape (e.g., the mountains, the river gorge, the marshlands, the flora) was the first to propose that this particular river catchment conformed to the topographic layout and mystic ambiance implied in the ancient texts about the entrance to Hades, the ancient Greek Underworld. Among the many places with ancient ruins he records, he selected Mesopotamos as the best candidate for the very locus of the “Nekromanteion” at Acheron, if such a fully-fledged constructed place ever existed (see below).

Dakaris, as ecstatic as the romantic traveler, convinced the Archaeological Society at Athens about the importance of his findings. Under the ASAs’ auspices and financial support, he excavated Mesopotamos for seven consecutive campaigns. Meanwhile, he became, from 1959 and for the best part of his career, the director of excavations and restorations at Dodona and other sites. He resumed research at Mesopotamos in 1976-1977. To cut a long story short: in order to abridge the time discrepancy between the prehistoric tradition about the Underworld locale and the advanced chronology of the Mesopotamos find, critical to his argument became the Late Bronze Age remains (fortification, cemetery) he excavated in parallel at the adjacent Xylokaastro Ridge. Just as Hughes (1820: 313) had hypothesized some 150 years before him, Dakaris nominated the Xylokaastro Acropolis as the Homeric (Mycenean) “Ephyra.” In his mind, an indisputable liaison was affirmed by “tangible” material evidence (for further discussion, see Kotjabopoulou in press). In fact, the overall find at Mesopotamos turned out to be quite remarkable. The complex in plan, limestone masonry structure, impressive for its craftsmanship, was built from in situ quarried bedrock and was preserved to a considerable height. Owing to its destruction by fire, probably during the Roman conquest of Epirus in 167 BCE, only partial reuse and moderate disturbance, the ceramic, metal and bioarchaeological assemblages were in very good condition. In addition, quantity and diversity, but mostly of regional origin, was striking. Hardly any unexcavated deposits are left on the hill today, while full publication of digging procedures, stratigraphy, contextual provenance, detailed chronology/phasing etc. is pending.

Year in year out, Dakaris built up a “tight” narrative about his “identification” of the Acheron Oracle and the “actual rituals” taking place therein (e.g., Dakaris 1958, 1960, 1961, 1964, 1975, 1976, 1993). He meticulously pursued his goal primarily by

amalgamating the flimsy, scanty, often dubious and highly flexible news about necromancy practices in ancient texts spanning several centuries (for literary sources see e.g., Fouache & Quantin 1998; Ogden 2001; Friese 2013). Literally, *whatever* came out of the ground had but to be fitted and assigned a function in accord with the ‘reconstructed sequence’ of cult practices he wholeheartedly believed he was excavating (Picture 3).



Picture 3. Ground-plan sketch of the “Nekromanteion” building complex with the assigned ‘religious functions’ of the different compartments (after Dakaris 1993: 15).

His top-down model can be summarized as follows: the architectural complex, with a once two-storey tower and an underground chamber ‘corresponding’ to Hades, is a religious edifice, a “temenos” with “three aisles”, “three successive entrances” and some auxiliary units.<sup>3</sup> Pilgrims carrying uphill various offerings (e.g., pots, tools, weapons, crops, figurines) sojourned at the premises. There, they were subjected to a series of mystic preparations –for example, sleeping sessions, baths, special diets and meals, mainly of toxic broad beans– in order to fall into states of altered consciousness. The initiation was accentuated by staggering through a “labyrinthoid” passage. Ultimately, in a dark room, the hallucinating believers encountered and consulted the future-telling gifted shadow-souls of the dead. During the last “stage” the alleged

priests, who secretly orchestrated the whole process, used a crane-like machine to deceive the vulnerable and unsuspecting worshippers with puppets.

In 1982, this captivating narrative, so impressive in detail, was challenged. The metal objects interpreted as parts of the lifting mechanical device were thoroughly studied by Dietwulf Baatz (1982). He demonstrated that they belonged to at least seven defensive catapults of various sizes and ranges, some in operation during the last siege. This re-appraisal was ignored by the eminent excavator, as is evident in the official site guidebook, published by the Archaeological Receipts Fund, which is the state-controlled organization responsible for this series across country. In this last publication, his initial model was reiterated in full (Dakaris 1993). He bypassed the issue of the machine by creating a weird catapult/crane-lift in second use (ibid: 21-22). Any alternative to his religious model was simply unthinkable. The critique was further amplified at the end of the 1990s, after Dakaris had passed away. Fouache and Quantin (1998) pinpointed various inadequacies of Dakaris' use and interpretation of ancient written sources about the degree of fit between the mythological landscape and the present day southern Thesprotia. Notably, they stressed the ambiguity inherent in the texts about whether and in what forms built structures ever existed and can be identified with places of necromancy performances and/or rituals. Moreover, they also pointed out, as did Baatz (1999), the flimsiness and argumentative leaps regarding the supposed "hard" evidence about the following: the necromancy rituals; the overall function of the building complex; and, not least, its range and calibre had this been a Panhellenic religious centre, as Dakaris contended. To name but a few examples: just nine figurines – all directly attributed to Persephone (see Tzouvara-Souli 1979: 103)– were recovered from the deposits at the hilltop; coins were also limited in number and mostly of Epirotic origin; different phases of the building complex were accommodated to the overarching religious scheme. In short, a strikingly different and far more plausible picture of the Hellenistic site was put forward – that of a fortified farmstead strategically located in an area where important seafaring and land routes crossed.

More recently, intensive geo-archaeological research at Phanari Valley has shown the dynamic evolution of this tectonically active and well-watered landscape. The changing course of the river system and the formation and history of the fabulous Acherousia Lake have been reconstructed (Besonen, Rapp & Jing 2003). Also, the systematic study of the prolific charred archaeobotanical remains from Mesopotamos suggests that stored semi-cleaned legumes and cereals, not as yet ready for consumption, formed important dietary staples. Furthermore, the plant spectrum represents a far wider and complex agricultural and economic structure, rather than a strict site-specific and ritually oriented case, as Dakaris had hypothesized (Gatzogia 2013; Gatzogia & Kotjabopoulou submitted). Moreover, growing research in Epirus and Albania, as well as in other areas of Greece, shows that fortified farmsteads, which come in various

forms and combinations, represent a widespread architectural type spanning several centuries and respective socioeconomic contexts (e.g. papers in Adam-Veleni, Poulaki & Tzanavari 2003; Condi 2013; Poulaki-Pantermanli 2014). Also, the data on domestic architecture in Thesprotia has been recently enriched (e.g. Riginos 2006; Riginos & Lazari 2007) and can shed added light on the issue. It goes without saying then, that it is of utmost importance for a systematic study to be undertaken as regards the Mesopotamos find.

### Exhibiting a controversial find

The first exhibition ever compiled at the Ioannina Archaeological Museum (1970) conformed tightly to the traditional, all-encompassing, ethnocentric, national ideal. Thus, initially and until as late as 1996, it included antiquities and works of art from prehistory to the modern era (Vokotopoulou 1973: 20-21; see also Zachos 2008). These were displayed in a linear, historiographic way. That exhibition's fundamental premise strived to demonstrate that Epirus' image of isolation, in the past as much as in the present, deserved to be reconsidered (Vokotopoulou 1973: 11). Peripheral in some respects, it rightfully, however, had to become an integral part of the mainstream Hellenic narrative. The past, in particular the archaeological evidence, was there appropriately and incontestably to support the legitimacy of this doctrine. Hence, inscriptions, architectural remains and sculptures were given a prominent place in the museum. The message targeted many recipients: the Epirotes; the rest of the Greeks, especially those who looked down, as it were, on the underdeveloped rural north; the slowly emerging tourist industry; and, indirectly, the aspirations, including territorial ones, coming from the other side of the northern border. Even though research on Mesopotamos was still in progress, the "Nekromanteion" was a strong asset in the construction of the local narrative. Thus, a showcase mainly containing ceramic wares, female figurines and some of the metal parts of the "crane-machine" (Vokotopoulou 1973: 40-45) was included in the first gallery (Picture 4), which aimed to give a chronogeographical overview of the archaeology of Epirus (ibid: 20).



Picture 4. The showcase (No 10) of the "Nekromanteion" in the first exhibition at the Ioannina Archaeological Museum (1970). (Courtesy: Ephorate of Antiquities of Ioannina)

The IAM's first renovation to date (2002-2008), a large and complex EU co-funded project, already from the early stages of preparation raised the curtain on a critical approach and attained a multifaceted, reformative scope (Zachos *et al.* 2007, Kotjabopoulou 2008, Kotjabopoulou & Vasileiou 2009, Kotjabopoulou & Zachos in press). Succinctly put, the new exhibition programme, museologically and museographically, has intentionally departed from the past-as-history-of-art model. In its place, it has shaped and implemented a multicultural and anthropocentric approach. Artifacts are not venerated for their aesthetic values and are not arranged as if to "speak for themselves". Instead, they are instrumentalized for the ancient people to be brought centre-stage, be they ordinary or highly ranked individuals, hunters, shepherds, farmers, merchants, technicians, priests, warriors, men or women, communities or segments of societies. Conflicting and/or blending beliefs, ideologies, traditions, customs, institutions etc. are thereby revealed. Cultural variability and discontinuity in time and space, for example, between coastal and mountainous areas, cities and villages etc., have become constituent elements traversing the multi-tiered narrative and interpretations. Significantly, the exhibition systematically and in manifold ways creates an open, *dialectic* and dynamic experience (see especially Kotjabopoulou & Vasileiou 2009; Kotjabopoulou & Zachos in press). The visitors are invited, even encouraged, to *actively* participate in and make *informed* decisions upon the production of the "new" past(s). In this framework, special care has been devoted to constantly reminding viewers of the interpretative, context specific, role of the archaeologists and in exposing to debate long-established stereotypes about perceptions and definitions of time, space/environment, cultural agencies, and the use (or abuse) of the past (see Kotjabopoulou & Zachos in press). The thematic subsection on the so-called "Nekromanteion" is but one such instance, yet most challenging in many respects.

Given the academic controversy over the Mesopotamos site and the strong and widespread popular belief about its religious identity and not least 'uniqueness', we have opted for a narrative wherein subtleness and acuteness intersect.

Leaving aside space-restrictions, we have emplaced the "Nekromanteion" in the gallery dedicated to the "Archaeology of Death," albeit as a separate and independent entity (Picture 5). Briefly, in this gallery are exhibited freely devised reconstructions of funerary customs from the 10th century BCE to Roman times. It is the complex structure, the beliefs systems (e.g., traditions, innovations), the particularities and the identities of the respective societies and peoples that the narrative and the museography aim to comment on. There were two main reasons for the Mesopotamos find to be included in this museological landscape (Picture 6).



Picture 5. Partial view of the hall entitled “Archaeology of Death” of the 2008 exhibition at the Ioannina Archaeological Museum. The section with the exhibits from Mesopotamos in the far left. (Courtesy: Ephorate of Antiquities of Ioannina)



Picture 6. The section with the exhibits from Mesopotamos (2008). (Courtesy: Ephorate of Antiquities of Ioannina)



Firstly, because some association of the rough lands west of the Pindos massif with the twilight zone of ‘encounters’ between the living and the dead is echoed, not only in the ancient literature, but in certain material culture remains as well (see Fouache & Quantin 1998: 39). The latter, especially, may indicate appropriated or propagated folklore religious beliefs, at least over particular time windows in the past and in relation to ideological and/or political interests intended primarily for local consumption. A case in point is the depiction of young Persephone, Hades’ wife, and the three-headed Cerberus, the fearsome dog guardian of his underground world, on short-lived issues of the bronze coinage from Elea (335-331/330 BCE, see Liampi 2008: 52-53), the first capital of the Thesprotians. In other words, and irrespective of the interpretation of the Mesopotamos find itself, ancient Epirus at large, in myth and/or in certain historical phases, had been contextualized with qualities linked to the afterworld.

Secondly, because the Dakaris “Nekromanteion” scheme is, at any rate, part of the history of archaeological research in Epirus on issues related to past metaphysical beliefs. In other words, we made the decision to locate the “Nekromanteion” find where the visitor had long been ‘trained’ and ‘educated’ and by extension would expect it to be, in order to motivate a *sharper* response by giving the option of *questioning* the initial interpretation *within* that very framework. This choice is in line with our wider standpoint throughout the new exhibition to approach the visitors not as passive consumers of irrevocable ‘facts’ or ‘truths’, but as critical interpreters.



Picture 7. Close up view of the catapult subsection.  
The almost life size replica stands amidst original remains (pottery, metal objects etc.).  
(Courtesy: Ephorate of Antiquities of Ioannina)



Equally, the title and primary museological message we ascribed to the display, that is “The Last Days of the Nekromanteion”, operates on a dual level (Picture 7). It is intended to refer *both* to the *actual* destruction of the Mesopotamos site *in the past* and *symbolically*, to the *reversal* of its initial interpretation *in the present*. Out of choice, the focus of the narrative and of the museography is on the sophisticated example of Hellenistic artillery, that is, on the *very* relic that gave the impetus for undermining the “invention” of the Nekromanteion, as Fouache & Quantin (1998: 43) have bluntly argued. A full size replica of a catapult is brought centre stage. It stands amongst the rubble of material into which the building and its content was turned by the last attackers. To strengthen the message, instead of “priests” manipulating a “crane-machine,” two defenders in the course of loading the catapult with arrows are sketched in the background. In the rest of the long showcase, we have deliberately assembled a large selection<sup>4</sup> of agropastoral and household toolkits, mostly of local/regional manufacture (see e.g., Vlachopoulou-Oikonomou 1979, Gravani 1988/89) used in everyday life at a busy establishment amidst a productive, yet demanding, rural coastal setting (Pictures 8a, b & c).



Pictures 8a, b and c. Close up views of the everyday agrarian toolkits, storage, preparation and serving vessels, household utensils (e.g. lumps, keys) and cult objects. (Courtesy: Ephorate of Antiquities of Ioannina)

The majority of items has been restored for the needs of the new exhibition and is displayed to the public for the first time since their recovery. The overall impression conveyed is that of the interior of an operating household, for example, with tools hanging on the walls, storage containers, cooking vessels and devices arranged on the ground, liquid serving pots aligned on shelves, plates and other consumption utensils on the table etc. The few figurines, a not uncommon find in domestic contexts, are displayed as part of the household’s private worship and/or decorative bric-a-brac. The

accompanying information texts clearly give emphasis to the functions of various sets of items and to the details that can be inferred about the status of economy and the fabric of social life during the centuries before the Roman conquest. Hence also, for the first time, in the metropolitan archaeological museum of Epirus, the alternative interpretation of the Mesopotamos site, as an important economic and social unit at the vulnerable to contention Ionian coastline, is put on display, along with the original interpretative scheme. In the same spirit, in 2009, an educational programme focusing on the catapults as complex weapons with a long history was devised for primary school kids (Vasileiou 2009).

### **Uprooting myths and overcoming didacticism**

Archaeological museums, along with monuments and sites, are places par excellence wherein public uses of History and histories are being worked out and thus decisively influence perceptions and attitudes of the society at large (for extensive discussion see Nakou 2009; see also Dietler 1994; Black 2009). In Greece, over the last couple of decades, these state properties and institutions have hesitantly started to incline towards more open, that is away from top-down, educational goals and practices. This approach applies mostly to the thematic educational programmes and/or other activities operated, and, only rarely, to the exhibition genre and rationale per se. Inescapably also, they have become places of multiple contentions, a prerequisite, as it were, down the road of democratization; if by this is meant that museums themselves (their personnel, their audiences, their narratives etc.) are complex social agencies of a kind, which, inadvertently or not, engage in power relations, negotiations, conflicts and contradictions *in the present and in the real world*.

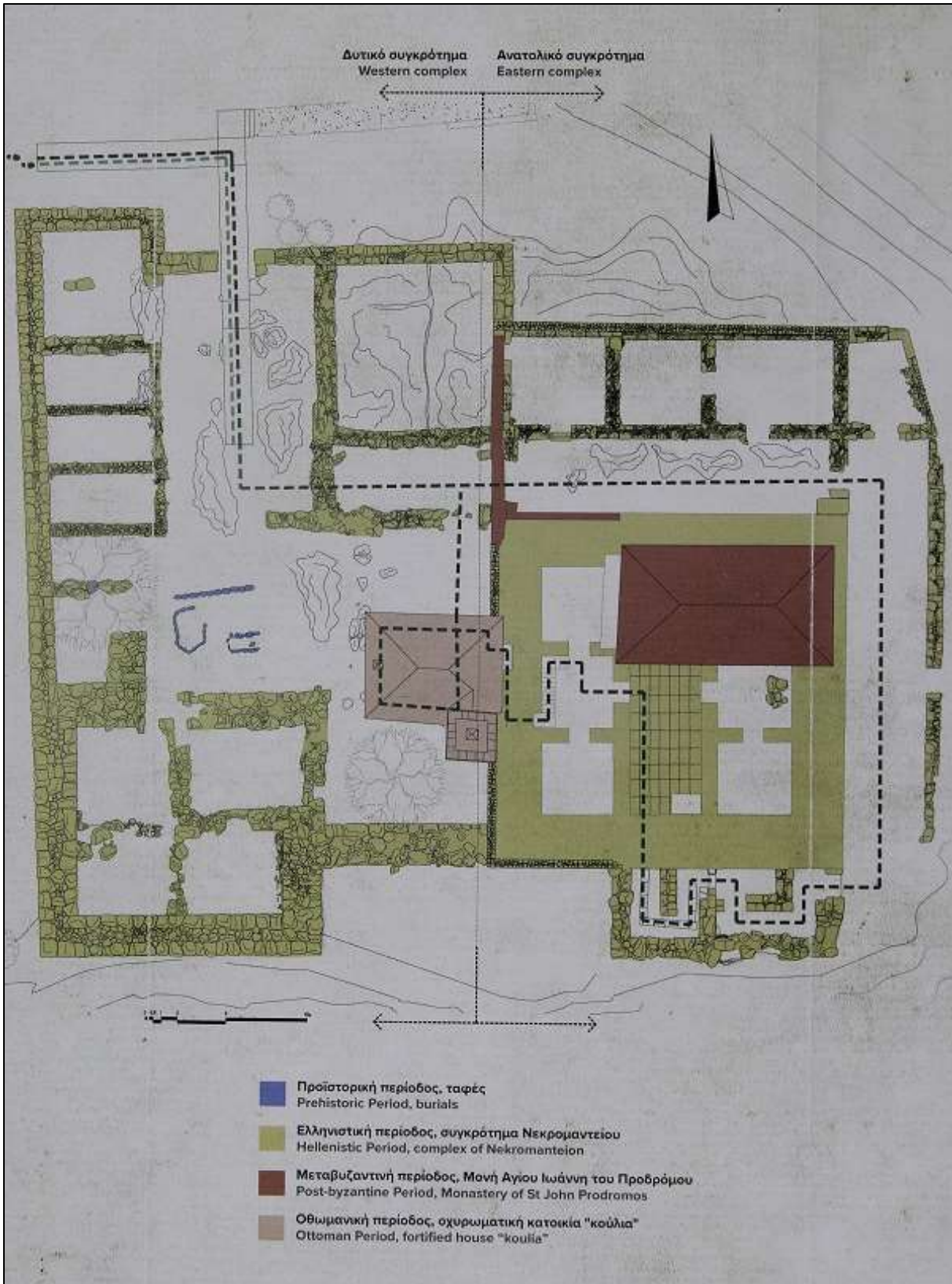
However, and in spite of such emerging trends, overcoming a long-established didacticism, whereby historical monospecific “knowledge” is offered as an authoritative, ready to be accepted wholesome, static product and value, remains a remarkably resistant tradition. As a rule, exhibition narratives, in particular, still rely on, reflect and record for the public eye and mind to consume the dominant archaeological interpretation of and ideological overprint towards past material culture remains. More often than not, uncertainty or ambivalence, or, for that matter, methodological, ideological and epistemological (alternative) approaches and their relevance to the present and the future are kept mute. In so doing, the embedded potential for setting the archaeological museum to the need for revising its educational scope and design is severely restricted.

Conditions, like those aforementioned, raise far-reaching social, in the broad sense, questions related to self-reflectiveness and responsibility for: (a) the practitioners of the disciplines involved, for example, archaeologists and museologists, and (b) the

administrative and political cultural structures and institutions, collective or single-member, notably in the Ministry of Culture. As regards the former, an increasing interest in theoretical thinking by museologists about multiple meanings and uses of material culture seems to be infiltrating positively, yet piecemeal, the virtual lack of such engagement in Greek archaeology (see e.g., Kotsakis 2010). As regards the latter, the extent to which such conditions are prioritized as worthy for debate, that is, *beyond* lip-service, in long-term strategies and/or short-term decision making, remains, in our view and experience, a situation of *belle indifférence*, but fortunately with notable and paradigmatic, yet solitary, exceptions (see e.g., Konstantios 2010, 2010/2011).

In as far as the case study presented in this paper from the Ioannina Archaeological Museum is concerned, to this day, the Greek archaeological literature has been reluctant to discuss, let alone dispute the “Nekromanteion” model and its connotations, partly owing to the limited study and publication of the excavated assemblages. Significantly, and beyond the museum, the official name used in public areas or means of communication, and the interpretation of the Mesopotamos site are still obstinately immune to any alternative. This attitude is amply evident in the official websites<sup>5</sup> of the Ministry of Culture and of the Archaeological Society at Athens. In the latter, even though the farmstead version is mentioned, it is aphoristically refuted. Also, widely circulating official leaflets about the site or the wider archaeological record of the area, either stick solely to the religious or simply index alongside it the farmstead explanation. The latter style is also adopted in the publication concerning the recently (2015) completed EU co-financed project “Enhancement of the Archaeological Sites of Nekromanteion and Ephyra” (Angeli 2015). At the information centre of the archaeological site at Mesopotamos, the compiled timeline about the history of the research there and in the wider area simply bypasses the interpretation dilemma, presumably in order to keep at bay ‘unpleasant’ reactions by those profiting, in various respects, from the “Nekromanteion” myth. However, a step forward has been taken: in the free of charge site-brochure (2015) distributed to the visitors, which replaced the 2011 one,<sup>6</sup> the ‘religious’ nomenclature (e.g., the “main temple,” “rooms of preparation” and “labyrinth”) designated by Dakaris to the different compartments of the building is omitted from the ground plan for the first time (Picture 9).

Equally, the original on-site labels of the same content have been removed. In all, the local and regional society has grown rather comfortable with the “uniqueness” of the place, including the sharp environmental setting, the product-image of which is enhanced by the “mythological”, past and present, blueprint. In particular, the stakes are high for disseminating unquestioningly the oracle model in as much as today’s booming tourist industry along the Ionian coast is concerned (see Kotjabopoulou in press for further discussion).



Picture 9. Ground-plan sketch of the Mesopotamos site from the 2015 issued information leaflet. Note the difference with Picture 3.

## Concluding remarks

The new exhibition at the Ioannina Archaeological Museum has been the first Greek official institution to have challenged the “Nekromanteion” myth and remains so to this day. In this sense, the museum has made the flaws of the original model a public, and an academic (within Greece) issue, and has encouraged self-reflection. In other words, it has by choice confronted the long-standing and powerful archaeological “invention” so closely tied to the moulding of the modern cultural identity of the region. Moreover, it has emplaced *interpretation* at the forefront, as a modal constituent in theory and practice processes, in museums as much as in archaeological production. This difficult decision, highly risky at the time, has not been an isolated instance in the new exhibition, and bespeaks of the powerful new role(s) the museum can assume. In fact, it conforms to our point of departure that the museum is not a ‘closed’ ark containing indisputable national or so called hard scientific ‘truths’, but rather an active, interactive and, not least, a highly influential social and educational agency of *plural* fabric. In other words, it is a public locale, which can acutely contribute to the re-framing of the historical production process and its uses. Most importantly perhaps, in the Ioannina Archaeological Museum and in the manner the “Nekromanteion” landmark case has been treated, we have attempted to provoke the museum to “de-musealize” itself. Within a fast-changing world in which complex and multi-layered identities are constantly, even fiercely, (re)negotiated, museum visitors can critically re-locate and re-flect upon their standpoint(s) and attitudes as citizens of today and tomorrow.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The author of this paper was personally involved in the new exhibition programme as leading supervisor of the respective EU co-funded project (2002-2008).

<sup>2</sup> The preservation of the 18th century church above the ancient ruins represents a rare such case in the archaeological practice of those days, when, as a rule, remains of later date were removed in order for the (most important) ancient ones to be fully 'revealed'. At Mesopotamos the church was also restored.

<sup>3</sup> The levelling of the hilltop, Dakaris contends, destroyed all traces of previous religious in character 'evidence' and structures that must have been associated with a sacred cave, in accordance to the kind of 'entrance' to the Underworld often alluded in the texts.

<sup>4</sup> This marks a meaningful deviation from the general rationale of the new exhibition programme (see Kotjabopoulou & Zachos in press).

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Culture: [http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/3/eh351.jsp?obj\\_id=13721](http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/3/eh351.jsp?obj_id=13721) (retrieved 28/1/2018).

Archaeological Society: <http://www.archetai.gr/media/PDF/N/212.pdf> (retrieved 1/10/2016).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.tap.gr/tapadb/index.php/component/jshopping/ipeiros/arxaiologikos-odigos-50779> (retrieved 1/10/2016).