

Talking Hands

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This presentation presents the project “Talking Hands” which examines the experiences and stories of residents of Episkopi village in Cyprus whose lives were influenced in one way or another by archaeological work. Even though Episkopi residents were involved in archaeological excavations conducted by Cypriot and foreign missions since the beginnings of Cypriot archaeology in the 19th century, their thoughts and experiences have been omitted from official archaeological narratives. They usually remain unnamed and their work unacknowledged. Especially during colonial times, archaeological workers were considered the “hands” of archaeology; mindless manual workers not important enough to mention or document¹. Having said that, their image is often captured in photographs of the period that are kept in photographic archives in museums and other collecting institutions. But these photographic archives reflect how foreign archaeologists saw workers and not how the workers themselves wanted to be seen. Their presence is captured by photography of the time, but their stories are absent, their voices mute.

To give voice to the “hands” of archaeology we decided to conduct an oral history and photography project titled “Talking Hands”. Since the stories of workers cannot be found in archaeological records and publications, we needed to talk directly to people who were involved in archaeological excavations or knew people who were. Oral history helps us to collect personal recollections through planned interviews with an aim to preserve the voices, perspectives and memories of our participants. In 2022 and 2023, we talked to eleven participants, between the ages of 65 and 87, who were recruited through word of mouth. Most interviews took place at the Local Archaeological Kourion Museum in Episkopi in a relaxed and informal environment; two interviews took place at the participants’ houses, and one at Kourion archaeological site. After the interviews, photographer Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert took photographs of the participants, which document the people as they appear today, the space, and the archaeological artefacts that are the most important to them. To get a glimpse of the past, we also asked participants to find and show us photographs they had at home related to archaeology. These personal photographs often served as a starting point for

¹ Given, 2004; Quirke, 2010; Riggs, 2019; Stylianou-Lambert, 2021

discussions and stories. But most importantly, they provide an “alternative” archaeology-related archive to those found in museums and other collecting institutions. The personal photographs focus on people, relationships, and places.

More particularly, “Talking Hands” includes the photographs of and stories by Eleni Christou, Socrates Savva, Thessalia (Sally) Onoufriou Kyriakou, Maroulla Triantafilidou, Antonis Polycarpou, Maria Alexandrou, Demosthenis (Dimos) Theodorou, Katina Tyllirou, Chrystalla Evangelou, Anna Konstantinou, and Irene Kontou. Most of our participants worked at archaeological excavations as seasonal workers, supporting staff for various expeditions, guards, or specialized technicians. Workers are usually in charge of the manual work at excavation sites such as digging, carrying dirt, cleaning pottery sherds, etc. Some of them have evolved into specialized workers who helped with measurements and documentation, putting together fragments, or entering untouched tombs. Some participants are the daughters or sons of people who worked as supporting staff (e.g. cooks, cleaning staff, and errand boys) of foreign excavation missions such as that of George McFadden. Sometimes, whole families were employed as supporting staff.

When seen through the eyes of a trained archaeologist, the land is a space of knowledge, measurement, documentation, careful excavation, and discovery. The main objective of the archaeological process is to understand the past through revealing, studying, categorizing, and interpreting its remains, whether objects, buildings or landscapes. Remains of buildings that are deemed important enough are fenced off and preserved as archaeological sites protected by the Government of Cyprus. Found objects, whether broken pottery or golden jewellery, are transported to museums to be studied, preserved and exhibited. The Local Archaeological Kourion Museum, Episkopi, aims to showcase finds from the nearby archaeological sites and thus aims to preserve and exhibit the archaeological knowledge of the area in a scientific way. As with many museums, it is a place of education and touristic attraction, a place of glass cases and formal labels. The land and objects become artificially frozen in time to be examined under an analytical lens.

For most of our participants, the land and objects have a very different function and value. The land is forever a living, familiar space and a source of livelihood. The area of Kourion and Episkopi was the playground of our participants as children, a land they are intimately familiar with, a land they have seen changing through time. Most of our interviewees were part of the discovery of objects: they unearthed them, transported them, cleaned them and then handed them over to archaeologists and museum professionals. Like midwives, they have brought objects to light but they are not

responsible for the objects' future "lives". During the interviews, what was surprising and moving was the familiarity and intimate approach most of our interviewees had with the objects on display at the Museum. Tellingly, when participants were photographed with an object of their choice at the Museum, almost all of them intuitively touched the object. For them, the Local Archaeological Kourion Museum, is not only a place of preservation and education, but also the home of McFadden, where they played as kids in the yard with the pond with lilies and fish. It is also the place where our interviewee Eleni Christou still has her morning coffee with the museum guards. As several participants simply explained, the Museum is their "home". The concept of "home" implies familiarity and a sense of ownership. In general, how our participants view the land/excavation sites, objects and the Museum differs dramatically from the way a foreign archaeologist will view the same things.

The project will be exhibited in an exhibition at the Local Archaeological Kourion Museum in May 2024, and it will be accompanied by a book with the stories and photographs of our participants.

References

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