Extreme Story-telling: Constructing Someone Else’s Archaeological Site

Introduction

While the physical remains of the past undoubtedly exist, archaeological sites are concepts created by excavation and research and thus by archaeologists. Nothing is self-evident, though it may appear so, but based on a complex interplay of observation, documentation, analytical construction and explanation, which is integrated, assessed and abstracted into useable information and presented in a final report. These are highly constructed narratives. This is particularly true of prehistory. As prehistorians our data base is comprised of inert physical matter (stones, bones, pots), unmediated by ancient texts and entirely dependent on the excavator for its recovery, interpretation and narrativization. That the excavator is in the best position to tell the story is beyond doubt. So what happens when he/she fails in this duty? This occurs for many reasons. People become ill or die unexpectedly. In the case of government employed archaeologists in the Mediterranean and elsewhere, the demands of formal and rescue excavation, research and administration are often so great that publication of all work undertaken is impossible. In other cases, however, the excitement of excavating overshadows the tedium of research and writing and the difficult but essential task of publication does not get done. More insidious is the

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impact in recent times of the measurement of research output, which encourages short studies and fails to reward the effort required to prepare a substantial monograph. All this leads to a serious breach of disciplinary ethics and of our wider obligation to cultural heritage. Such ‘wanton destruction’, nonetheless, is widespread and has been referred to as archaeology’s ‘dirty secret’.

What is to be done about unpublished excavations and material? Do those of us with experience in excavation and publication have a responsibility beyond our own projects? Should we, particularly when funding for new projects is tight, take on the challenge of publishing ‘old’ excavations? How do we tell the story when we were not involved in the complex set of decisions and observations that attend any excavation? When so removed not only from the past but also from its ‘recovery’, can we become the ‘creator’ of the site, the author of a convincing and legitimate narrative?

What follows is another story: that of my own experience, together with my colleague David Frankel, of publishing an excavation undertaken in 1942 at Ambelikou in Cyprus. This is not the first time we have taken responsibility for publishing the work of our predecessors. In 2009 we published excavations carried out by James Stewart, then Professor of Middle Eastern Archaeology at the University of Sydney, at two Early and Middle Bronze Age cemeteries at Karmi in northern Cyprus in 1961. Stewart himself died less than a year later. The task was rewarding, despite the fact that the excavation notebooks were lost soon after Stewart’s return to Australia, and greatly helped by the existence of meticulous site and tomb plans, black-and-white photographs, a daily personal diary kept by Robert Merrillees, one of Stewart’s students who assisted on the excavation, and drawings and descriptions of over 800 pottery vessels and other finds. There is no doubt, however, that in most instances recovering a cemetery excavation is a less complex exercise than that of

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2 This is a reference to Mortimer Wheeler’s observation that ‘All excavation is destruction. Excavation without publication is wanton destruction’, in Mortimer Wheeler, *Archaeology From the Earth* (Oxford: Penguin, 1954), 2.


a settlement, where architectural sequences and formation processes require more detailed treatment. The excavations at Ambelikou presented just such a set of challenges.

**Ambelikou Aletri. From excavation (1942) to publication (2013)**

The excavations at Ambelikou were carried out during the Second World War by Porphyrios Dikaios. Dikaios was Curator of the Cyprus Museum from 1931 to 1960. He had already directed important excavations at Early Bronze Age Vounous, Chalcolithic Erimi and the Neolithic settlement of Khirokitia. He went on to excavate another Neolithic settlement at Sotira and the Late Bronze Age urban site of Enkomi. These projects were fully published and contribute significantly to our knowledge of prehistoric Cyprus. Like all staff of the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus, however, he also conducted many smaller-scale and rescue excavations, including those at Ambelikou, few of which were reported in detail.

The settlement at Ambelikou is located on the upper slopes of a high hill (known as Aletri) near the modern village of Ambelikou in the northwestern foothills of the Troodos Mountains (Figure 1). The site dates to an early phase of the Middle Bronze Age (circa 1950–1850 BCE) and lies close to Skouriotissa, the most extensive copper sulphide ore body on Cyprus. Dikaios decided to excavate here following the recovery of Middle Bronze Age sherds and stone tools some nineteen metres from the surface where a modern copper mining adit intersected ancient workings in a small copper ore body on Aletri hill. Dikaios, who was then acting Director of the Department of Antiquities, was not able to spend much time so far from Nicosia and the excavations were largely left to experienced assistants. Although clearly recognising the importance of the site, Dikaios’ main research focus was on establishing the sequence of Neolithic and Chalcolithic developments in Cyprus and he published only brief preliminary notes on the excavations. These included a plan of

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Figure 1. Map of Cyprus showing the location of Ambelikou.

Figure 2. The crucible (a), double-sided mould (b) and blowpipe nozzle (c) found at Ambelikou.
the architecture of one of the two areas excavated and photographs of some of the more important finds, including a crucible and a two-sided clay casting mould (Figure 2a–b). The site has since been widely cited in the literature as having produced the oldest direct evidence for copper mining in Cyprus and for the recovery of items indicating on-site copper working. In the absence of full publication, however, none of this material could be seen in its full cultural and behavioural context and no other information about the site was available.

Indeed, it seems that the story was not an easy one to tell. In the early 1980s Robert Merrillees was given permission by the Cyprus Department of Antiquities to publish the Ambelikou excavations. In 1984 he produced a report on the topography and history of the site and the discoveries in the modern mine. It was to be the first of three papers amounting to a full publication but no more reports appeared and, some twenty years later, Merrillees made his documentation available to Anne Dunn-Vaturi, who took over responsibility for the project. Dunn-Vaturi compiled the available documentation and photographs and arranged for drawings of a selection of artefacts in the Cyprus Museum. Personal circumstances, however, prevented her from continuing and we took on the task of completing the project in 2010, with the help of funding from La Trobe University, the Australian Research Council and the US-based Shelby White–Leon Levy Program for Archaeological Publications.

We faced several immediate and major difficulties. There were no field notes describing the progress of the excavations. Dikaios visited the site every two weeks during the several months of excavation but appears not to have kept any records. We therefore lacked that most essential of all testimony: the excavator’s own evolving understanding of features and finds. A series of letters written by the excavation foreman, Kakoullis Georgiou, to Dikaios and by Dikaios to Georgiou are held in the State Archives in Nicosia. These for the most part contain basic instructions and reports on work carried out but proved useful, and in one instance critical, to our reconstruction of the site. The second major problem arose from the political situation in Cyprus. Since the Turkish invasion in 1974 the north of the island has been beyond the jurisdiction of the Greek Cypriot authorities. While there is now rela-

tively free movement from the south to the north, Ambelikou is close to the so-called ‘green line’ and the village itself is a Turkish army base. It was therefore not possible to visit the site. Had we been able to do so, we could certainly have provided a far more detailed account of the surface features as well as the topography and geology of the area. The best we could do was to ascertain from Google Earth that the site remains undisturbed. This at least offers some hope for the future.

On the more positive side, we had detailed plans and sections of the architecture in the two main excavated areas (Areas 1 and 2), the former showing the exact find-spots of complete vessels and stone artefacts. There is also a series of black and white photographs of the excavations in progress which proved invaluable. In one more stroke of good fortune, while both Dikaios and Georgiou died over twenty years ago, the draftsman who worked at Ambelikou in 1942, Elias Markou, is still living in Nicosia. Now ninety-two, his comments on the plans and sections were extremely helpful, particularly as these came to us without legends and the symbols used to indicate different materials (limestone, diabase, plaster, mudbrick etc.) would otherwise have been impossible to identify.

When we first looked at this documentation we realised immediately that the site had exciting aspects which we had not envisaged. In particular, the plan and photographs of Area 2 show a scatter of over fifty vessels, including thirty-nine cut-away-mouthed jugs, across the floor of one room (Figure 3). These had been heavily burnt as a result of a severe conflagration. This appeared to be a case of catastrophic abandonment—a rare circumstance in archaeology and one which is particularly valuable because it provides unequivocal associations of artefacts and their place of last use. The fire appears to have been an isolated incident, confined to one building. The concentration of jugs, furthermore, suggests that this area was not used for everyday activities. Dikaios himself suggested that it was a potter’s workshop, something otherwise unknown for Early and Middle Bronze Age Cyprus. This indicated also that Ambelikou was not just a mining village but engaged in the full array of activities found on other settlements of the period.
These unexpected observations gave a new impetus to our engagement with the site and the project was transformed from a relatively mechanical duty to one with challenging research potential. It also became clear that we would need to re-examine and document the artefacts more fully. Here we were again fortunate, for the Cyprus Department of Antiquities has a rare policy of storing all the finds from their excavations so that all complete items, sherds and surface finds were still available in the Cyprus Museum. Moreover, the many complete vessels had been carefully mended in the months immediately after the excavations. Without this prior painstaking work our task would have been much more difficult.

In May 2011 we spent three weeks in the Cyprus Museum in Nicosia with a small but expert team. We drew, photographed and documented over 200 pottery and stone artefacts and examined over seventy trays of sherds. We were rewarded with the discovery of much interesting material, including a heavily distorted bowl, damaged while in a leather hard state and subsequently ‘fired’ in the conflagration, and
a jug with a firing flaw at the rim. Together with blocks of prepared clay, a probable potting surface and a structure which we believe to be a simple box kiln, these confirm the presence of a potter’s workshop in Area 2 (Figure 4).

This is of major importance. The scale and context of ceramic production and the method of firing pottery in Early and Middle Bronze Age Cyprus have long been matters of speculation. Vessels with chromatically uniform or deliberately mottled surfaces suggest good control of firing conditions and a variety of firing techniques. We can now identify at least one of these and suggest the use of a simple firing
structure of a type difficult to identify in the archaeological record. With an area of about seven square metres, the Ambelikou kiln would have had the capacity to fire the thirty-nine jugs found scattered nearby. These may, then, represent the last kiln load, stacked under cover ready for distribution. This suggests that the potter or potters were making pots in batches by type, which in turn suggests that they were producing vessels for distribution rather than responding to the replacement needs of a single household. The series of cutaway-mouthed jugs also provides an opportunity to examine the degree of standardisation of a specific production event and, very probably, of the work of an individual potter.

While carrying out our documentation of the pottery in the Cyprus Museum, we were also able to bring a new technique into play. In recent years archaeologists have begun to take advantage of the development of hand-held portable devices to measure the elemental composition of material using X-ray Fluorescence. Although not a substitute for more comprehensive analyses, we now have the tools to assay large numbers of samples quickly and efficiently and without damaging the items or removing them from museums. Because it must have been made locally, the assemblage from the Ambelikou potter’s workshop provides a valuable starting point for characterising the clays used at the site and identifying those vessels brought in from elsewhere. The results of our analyses show clearly that most vessels were locally made in Red Polished ware, while those of a less common fabric known as Drab Polished ware have a different chemical composition and must have been brought in from elsewhere, probably from the west of Cyprus where this fabric is found in large quantities. The more highly decorated juglets and bowls of Red Polished ware were also made of different clays. These are stylistically similar to vessels in the north of the island and probably came from that region. This movement of vessels and their contents to Ambelikou was no doubt related to networks associated with the distribution of copper from the site.9

The importance of Ambelikou in the reconstruction of early mining and metalworking in Cyprus has long been recognised. Some years ago analyses were undertaken of the slag contained in the crucible and of copper ore and manganese-oxide found

at the site in order to investigate smelting procedures. It was suggested that this evidence attests not copper smelting but only copper melting at Ambelikou. We have been able to significantly refine and add to this aspect of the site’s history and there can now be little doubt that all stages in the chaîne opératoire (the sequence of activities in a technological process) from mining, ore beneficiation and smelting to the casting of copper ingots were carried out here.

In this respect, several items in the sherd trays in the Cyprus Museum proved to be of considerable importance. A small piece of furnace wall and a piece of furnace slag provide evidence for furnace smelting at Ambelikou several centuries earlier than the sixteenth-century-BCE copper smelting workshop at Politiko, which is otherwise the earliest known primary smelting site on the island. The smelting furnaces at Ambelikou are likely to have been natural draught furnaces which utilised the prevailing winds, probably in conjunction with blowpipes. Indeed Dikaios identified ‘remains of workshops where smelting was carried out’ at the site. Several photographs show a row of shallow circular burnt hollows and an array of stone tools, including heavy pounders, located at the base of a limestone scarp (Figure 5). These may be remnant fire pits over which furnaces were placed. The stone tools suggest the presence of an ore crushing platform beside the furnaces. Similar Early Bronze Age wind-blown furnaces built in rows on hill slopes and exposed promontories or below the crest of steep ridges have been found in Jordan, Egypt and the southern Aegean.

It is also clear that Area 1 was used for grinding and crushing slag to remove en-

trapped copper for melting and casting. The most comprehensive evidence comes from one of the rooms (Unit II), which contained thirty-two stone grinding and crushing tools and four large limestone mortars (Figure 6). Percussive crushing of ore and slag typically requires mortars, pestles and hand-held stone hammers between one and two kilograms in weight. The ground ore or slag may be separated from the gangue by being agitated in running water, where lighter material is carried further than the mineral, which sinks closer to the point of entry into the water. Alternatively, the copper prills may have been large enough to be separated by hand from the slag. A very large diabase block, approximately one metre by sixty centimetres, at the southern end of the room may have served as a work platform or low anvil. The clustering of artefacts along the walls suggests the presence of wooden work benches. Other work stations appear to have been located in the centre of the room, around a large mortar, and at the south end of the room, around the stone platform.

Unit II also contained a stone-lined casting hearth. Frustratingly little information was available about this installation, which was not drawn in detail on the plan. It is mentioned, however, in one of Georgiou’s letters to Dikaios and appears in several
photographs (Figure 7). Such hearths need only fire and sufficient airflow to create the required temperature in the crucible and are typically little more than a shallow hole in the ground, sometimes lined with clay or stone. The sinking of the hearth into the ground and the stone wall would have provided insulation and increased fuel efficiency. The hearth contained repeatedly burnt animal bone. This is likely to have been used as fuel along with charcoal to achieve the temperatures required for melting operations. A fragmentary clay blowpipe nozzle shows that blowpipes were used for melting and perhaps also for smelting at Ambelikou (Figure 2c). A piece of hollow wood or reed inserted into the broader end is capable of producing a directed blast of human breath to a crucible or small furnace and can produce temperatures up to 1200 degrees. No other casting hearths have been firmly identified from the prehistoric Bronze Age in Cyprus.

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A fragmentary clay mould was found beside the hearth in Unit II (Figure 2b). It is exceptional in that it has two wedge-shaped negatives aligned in opposite directions on opposite sides. If clay moulds had to be broken to release the cast, as most people believe, matrices on opposing surfaces could surely not have been used, unless one cast was allowed to cool slightly and then the mould rolled and molten metal poured immediately into the second negative. Whatever the case, the mould from Ambelikou, which shows clear signs of having been used, is unique in Cyprus and possibly in the eastern Mediterranean.

The nature of the casts produced at Ambelikou is important to a wider understanding of the site. Dikaios identified the double-sided mould as an axe mould. Any axe fashioned from a resulting cast would, however, have needed considerable work to thin and shape a symmetrical cutting edge. Axe-shaped ingots, however, are not uncommon in Cyprus and elsewhere. We have suggested that pierced axe-shaped
objects cast in an Early Bronze Age stone mould found during our excavations at Marki in 2000 may have been ingots rather than axes, the hole serving to tie a number of casts on a string for easier transport. The axe-shaped casts produced at Ambelikou are certainly likely to have been intended for off-site distribution. There is no evidence for the manufacture of other metal artefacts and the scale of production, indicated by metal workshops in both Areas 1 and 2 and a spread of related material on the surface, suggests production beyond the needs of a single community.

Another unexpected find from Ambelikou also proved important. The function of the ‘plank-shaped’ terracotta figurines characteristic of the late Early and Middle Bronze Age in Cyprus has long been a matter of debate. Complete examples have been found in tombs but fragments from settlement excavations indicate that they were also used and discarded in habitation deposits. Just outside the doorway of the pottery workshop at Ambelikou lay a large, complete plank figurine (Figure 8).

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see also Figure 3, left foreground). Its location suggests that it was attached to the doorway or, perhaps, dropped by someone as they fled the burning building. While this does not resolve questions of the meaning, function or significance of such figurines, we now have one piece of good contextual evidence to contribute to the constant flow of analyses and speculations.

**The excavator/publisher as story-teller**

There can be no doubt that Ambelikou is a significant site and that, if it had been published fifty years ago, some of the problems associated with our understanding of metallurgy and pottery production in prehistoric Bronze Age Cyprus could have been resolved and research channelled in more helpful directions. It is also true that a site report of fifty years ago would have been very different to the one we have produced and that publication in 2013 has allowed us to bring new techniques and concepts to bear and to locate the site and its significance within a set of research agendas, which are radically different to those of the 1940s and 50s. Indeed, from this perspective it could be argued that the reworking of old excavations, even when published, is a worthwhile exercise. This has recently been done in the case of Apliki, a Late Bronze Age mining settlement in Cyprus first published in 1952.  

While the loss of information resulting from the absence of field notes cannot be overstated, good quality plans, sections and photographs and the full recovery and long-term storage of finds have allowed us, after an interval of over seventy years, to tell what we hope is a coherent story about Ambelikou. The fieldwork may not have been carried out in the way we would choose and key evidence may have been missed but every site is unique and important. The story we have told reflects our own experience working on similar sites on Cyprus, our interest in the structure and nature of archaeological assemblages and our desire to go beyond the simple presentation of data to interpret the site within its regional context and current disciplinary debates. Our observations on stratigraphy and context, which constitute the ‘read-once’ field data that can never be directly re-examined, certainly fall short of what

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17 Barbara Kling and James D. Muhly, *Joan Du Plat Taylor’s Excavations at the Late Bronze Age Mining Settlement at Apliki-Karamallos, Cyprus* (Sävedalen: Åströms Förlag, 2007).

we were able to achieve in publishing our own excavations, but we have utilised the material available to derive a best-fit model of explanation. This will now be tested against and refined by new excavations and data. This is the nature of archaeological practice and explanation. The story is necessarily partial and recursive and open to challenge and reinterpretation.

More broadly, site reports, whether written by the excavator or long after the event, are formal constructs based on but not determined by what lay under the ground. They are informed by current practices, understandings and fashions and a particular articulation of theory, method, data and expertise with the practical trade-craft of text, drawings, tables, diagrams and photographs. Research designs and methods structure and predetermine the way data are gathered, analysed, presented and explained. Deposits, architecture and finds provide the raw material for analysis and explanation, but interpretation occurs at all levels of the enterprise. There is no such thing as ‘pure’ observation or description. Personal creativity lies at the heart of both archaeological investigation and publication; subjective observations are made by individuals and affected by field conditions, theoretical concepts and the fragmentary and confused nature of archaeological deposits.

The site report, however, becomes to all intents and purposes the site. Such reports are central to our discipline and have a lasting authority beyond the critiques and refinements that will come after. This, to return to my starting point, is why publication is important and why re-working old excavations for publication is arguably as important as undertaking new excavations. In neither case is it easy. Indeed, Martin Carver has recently suggested that the preparation and publication of a substantial formal site report is ‘among the most complex tasks asked of any professional in the humanities’.


20 Frankel, ‘Constructing Marki Alonia’.
