

FORUM RESPONSE

The Keros Hoard: Remaining Questions

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Sotirakopoulou's Forum Article in this issue of the *AJA*,¹ like her valuable book *The "Keros Hoard": Myth or Reality?*,² takes its importance not so much from its subject matter or from the exemplary thoroughness of its treatment of the material as it does through the significance of the site from which much of that material may derive. The site of Kavos, on the Cycladic island of Keros—along with the small islet of Dhaskalio, which lies 80 m to the west—is gradually emerging as one of the richest and most remarkable of the Aegean Early Bronze Age.

When I first visited Dhaskalio Kavos, on 24 July 1963—the first visit by an archaeologist—it was evident that it had been extensively looted. The investigations that rapidly followed, first by Doumas and then by Zapheirou, as clearly reviewed in *The "Keros Hoard,"* documented the richness as well as the fragmentary nature of the remaining finds. In 1987, it was possible to mount a systematic survey of Kavos (the results of which are now published)³ that questioned the view that the looted area represented a destroyed cemetery. The very abundance of the finds was one troublesome problem, but it was their fragmentary nature and the realization that the majority of the breakages were ancient ones that led to the formulation of other hypotheses.

With a new program of excavations that began in 2006,⁴ the position has become clearer, yet at the same time more complicated. Information from the original looted area, now designated the "special deposit north," has been supplemented at Kavos by the discovery of a new and undisturbed assemblage, the "special deposit south." It, too, has abundant finds of the sort of high-status materials widely found in the Cycladic cemeteries (as well as in the special deposit north). They were all deliberately broken before burial, and the evidence indicates that the breakage processes occurred elsewhere. The excavators currently regard the

special deposit south as a location for the systematic ritual deposition of symbolically significant material during the Early Bronze Age. Work on the island of Dhaskalio shows it to have been the location of a significant settlement at the same time.

These new discoveries might help provide a context for the earlier and looted finds from the site. And it is in that light that I look upon *The "Keros Hoard"* and the present discussion surrounding that publication and the artifacts it describes. What more can the book tell us about the site of Kavos and about Cycladic prehistory than we already know or are now in the process of learning? Are there any features suggested by the finds discussed by Sotirakopoulou in *The "Keros Hoard"* that might lead to different conclusions than those resulting from the 1987 survey and the ongoing excavations—and if so, how are they to be assessed? These are questions I sought to raise in my 2006 review article on *The "Keros Hoard."*⁵ We can now return to them with the experience of the 2006 and 2007 excavation seasons to draw upon, as well as Sotirakopoulou's useful and detailed comments.⁶

It should be recalled that the term "Keros Hoard" was introduced by Getz-Gentle in the Festschrift for Jürgen Thimme⁷—sometime curator of the Badisches Landesmuseum in Karlsruhe, where the now infamous exhibition, *Kunst und Kultur der Kykladeninseln im 3. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, was held in 1976 under his direction.⁸ That exhibition was open to criticism in view of the very large quantities of unprovenanced material it included, some of it (like the material from Keros) undoubtedly looted and illegally exported from Greece in recent years. Elsewhere, I have questioned the ethical propriety of the Karlsruhe exhibition and called into question the role both of Thimme and of the director of the Badisches Landesmuseum at the time, Ernst Petrasch. I noted that around that time, the Landesmuseum itself was acquiring similarly un-

¹ Sotirakopoulou 2008.

² Sotirakopoulou 2005.

³ Renfrew et al. 2007.

⁴ Renfrew et al. (forthcoming).

⁵ Renfrew 2006b.

⁶ Sotirakopoulou 2008.

⁷ Getz-Preziosi 1983.

⁸ Thimme 1976.

provenanced (and therefore looted) Cycladic material for its own collections.⁹ Those who had been invited to contribute articles to the catalogue of the exhibition—including this author—found themselves in the embarrassing position of apparently validating an exhibition that, at least in retrospect, we can recognize as violating the ethical principles that careful museum policies and association with the International Council of Museums should have led them to uphold.¹⁰

The material in the exhibition, reportedly from Keros and described as a “Depotfund von Keros,”¹¹ included 18 figurine fragments. Many were from the Erlenmeyer Collection, which was said to contain 140 such fragments, and are familiar today from the celebrated photograph of them first published by Thimme in 1975.¹² The Erlenmeyer Collection was subsequently auctioned in London at Sotheby’s, and many pieces were purchased for the Nicholas P. Goulandris Foundation–Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens. The circumstances of this unfortunate sale are recounted in *The “Keros Hoard,”* which seeks to identify and describe, in satisfying detail, the various relevant pieces from the Erlenmeyer Collection and (where known) their present location. It goes on to discuss a rather miscellaneous series of other Cycladic figurines and figurine fragments that have subsequently appeared on the antiquities market and for which a Keros origin has at some time been claimed (generally, in my view, without any good reason).

The central point of this Forum Response is to assert that looted antiquities, even those accompanied by dealers’ provenances, provide secondary and unreliable data that are difficult to validate in confrontation with materials that have a secure field context, such as those recovered by Doumas, Zapheirou, and subsequent workers at Kavos. Sotirakopoulou, through her meticulous work in establishing some joins, has been able to confirm that some pieces in the Erlenmeyer photograph of the Keros Hoard did indeed come from the site of Kavos on Keros. It is plausible, although difficult to document, that most or all of the remaining pieces in that photograph had the same origin.

But what are we to make of the other pieces discussed by Getz-Gentle and Sotirakopoulou?¹³ Were any complete or nearly complete figurines found at

Kavos during the looting process? We know that Zapheirou found one complete folded-arm figure, some 58 cm in height, during her excavations.¹⁴ But were others previously found there by the looters? My own position, particularly in view of the absence of complete figurines from the excavations of the special deposit south in 2006 and 2007, is one of skepticism. It does not, of course, follow that the finds in the special deposit north were all of the same character as those that can now be attested in the undisturbed special deposit south. But plausible evidence is needed if it is to lead us to other conclusions.

It has now been confirmed that the source of the fragmentary Cycladic figurines seen in the photograph of the Erlenmeyer Collection (and of some complete figurines allegedly found with them) was the notorious Parisian antiquities dealer, Nicolas Koutoulakis, now deceased. I had suspected this when recognizing (as did Getz-Gentle)¹⁵ that a pyxis fragment of chlorite schist in the Louvre¹⁶ must belong with other fragments found in our 1987 work at Kavos;¹⁷ this piece was presented by Koutoulakis to the Louvre in 1960, three years before the Kavos site came to official notice.¹⁸ It would thus seem that the entire evidential basis for the statements made by Thimme, the Erlenmeyers, and Getz-Gentle about the origins and extent of the Keros Hoard derive from the provenances declared by Koutoulakis.

Should we believe Koutoulakis in the case of any specific assertion about provenance or association? We know that the Cycladic cemeteries on various islands were being extensively looted in the 1950s and early 1960s, and it is clear that Koutoulakis was in a good position to supply a number of complete or reasonably complete figurines to clients who were sufficiently lacking in scruple to acquire them from him (e.g., Thimme, the Badisches Landesmuseum, the Erlenmeyers), since such sales and purchases seem reasonably well attested. Are we to assume that Koutoulakis derived his stock exclusively from Keros, specifically from the Kavos site on Keros? Is it not more likely that he purchased his Cycladic antiquities wherever opportunity arose and sold them (in most cases after their illegal export from Greece) with whatever description would achieve the most profitable sale? Was Koutoulakis a creditable witness? Like other dealers

⁹ Renfrew 2004, 2006a.

¹⁰ Brodie and Renfrew 2005.

¹¹ Thimme 1976, 577, excursus 8.

¹² Thimme 1975, 20; Sotirakopoulou 2005, 38.

¹³ Getz-Preziosi 1983; Sotirakopoulou 2005.

¹⁴ Zapheirou 1968, 97.

¹⁵ Getz-Gentle 1996, pl. 12a (1, 2).

¹⁶ Hamiaux 1992, 15.

¹⁷ Renfrew et al. 2007, fig. 8.30.

¹⁸ I am grateful to Getz-Gentle for confirming the Koutoulakis provenance of the Keros Hoard in the course of discussion.

in antiquities whose questionable activities have recently been documented in full (e.g., Robin Symes, Giacomo Medici, Robert Hecht),¹⁹ Koutoulakis was a trafficker in illicit antiquities who induced his clients to purchase tainted artifacts. Although it does not follow from that unsavory characterization that all the information he gave to the Erlenmeyers or to Thimme or to Getz-Gentle was necessarily untrue, it can certainly be regarded as unreliable. For that reason, I consider the documentation amassed by Getz-Gentle in preparation for her 1983 article as essentially uncertain. The same must apply to those components of the archive of the Badisches Landesmuseum that rely on dealers' provenances or on the testimony of Koutoulakis.

This does not imply that I consider the work on the so-called Keros Hoard undertaken by Sotirakopoulou or Getz-Gentle as lacking in value. On the contrary, I am very much aware that there remain many unanswered questions in Cycladic prehistory. It has always seemed to me that we still have no persuasive context of use for the larger Cycladic figures, and that it is not plausible that they were produced simply to be placed in Cycladic cist graves, for which some were too large anyway.²⁰ My initial hypothesis, before the 1987 project, had been that the Kavos site represented a Cycladic sanctuary, where such large figures might have been used. But the 1987 finds and those of 2006 and 2007 do not support the hypothesis that the site represents a sanctuary in that sense. It does, however, appear to be a location where rituals involving symbolic materials were practiced. And in the 2007 season, a fragment of a large figure, originally almost 1 m in height, was recovered from the special deposit south. But there was no hint of complete figures or figurines in that undisturbed deposit. So it would seem that my original hypothesis has to be abandoned. The complete figurines mentioned in 1983 by Getz-Gentle²¹ and those listed by Sotirakopoulou in the later part of *The "Keros Hoard"* lack any plausible contextual evidence. They are just as likely to have been excavated from a number of different Cycladic cemeteries and assigned a spurious provenance (Keros) by Koutoulakis or whichever purveyor of illicit antiquities.

I do not wish to be dogmatic about the date when the looting of the Kavos site began, which I imagine to have been in the late 1950s. Any plausible indications that material likely to come from the Kavos site had appeared on the market by 1955 would be relevant to the question. If the Erlenmeyers had acquired their collec-

tions of 140 pieces by that time, I would find that very relevant. But such does not seem to be the case, and the acquisition of one piece, apparently in isolation, cannot carry much weight. Sotirakopoulou's willing acceptance of the proposition that all the Erlenmeyer pieces were part of a unified group that was looted together and then purchased together by the Erlenmeyers seems, rather, to raise a central question.²² And there, indeed, is the rub. Through her careful research, which includes the evidence of joins, Sotirakopoulou has shown that some of the pieces in the Erlenmeyer photograph of 1975 must have come from the Kavos site. However, there is no way that this firm conclusion can be extended to other pieces in the same photograph. This observation applies with even greater force to the considerable range of pieces discussed in *The "Keros Hoard"* that are not in that photograph. I find it difficult to see what argument would lead us to find plausible their alleged (and anonymously assigned) provenance "from Keros." That observation applies, of course, both to the complete figurines discussed by Getz-Gentle in 1983 and to the various pieces in part 2 of *The "Keros Hoard."*

In my view, the entire discussion surrounding the so-called Keros Hoard offers a paradigm case of the damage done to prehistoric archaeology and to our understanding of the past by looters, dealers, collectors, and museums in the process of the provision of unprovenanced antiquities and of their subsequent collection.²³ We are fortunate that, from the work initiated by Doumas in 1963 and subsequently undertaken by others, sufficient further information has emerged from the Kavos site, and now from Dhaskalio, to allow some hypotheses as to its function to be formulated. We shall hope for more. And we must be grateful to Sotirakopoulou for documenting so effectively how much information, some of it perhaps very relevant to the Kavos site, has been lost to systematic prehistoric archaeology and to Cycladic studies through the activities of Koutoulakis, the Erlenmeyers, Thimme, and their ilk.

This Forum, then, is an important discussion. Like Sotirakopoulou's book, it allows us to confront frankly, openly, and in detail the various complex problems of attribution that arise when antiquities are excavated illicitly and in secret and then sold on the international market. The book's commendably thorough documentation will make it indispensable for further discussion of this question, both in relation to the

¹⁹Watson and Todeschini 2006, 246.

²⁰Renfrew 1984.

²¹Getz-Preziosi 1983.

²²Sotirakopoulou 2008.

²³Gill and Chippindale 1993.

Kavos site and more widely. For me, the merit of this whole controversy lies in allowing us to assert again that there is in archaeology no substitute for a good and well-published primary context of excavation.

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