

FORUM NOTE

Hearsay About the “Keros Hoard”

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INTRODUCTION

The so-called Keros Hoard, a major group of unprovenanced Early Cycladic antiquities, which first appeared in the now-notorious Karlsruhe exhibition of “Cycladic Art” in 1976,¹ has recently been the subject of an *AJA* Forum discussion.² Further evidence, albeit anecdotal and therefore unreliable in character, now offers fresh insights into the remarkable episode of unauthorized excavation (*archaiokapilia* [i.e., looting]) that took place some 50 years ago at Dhaskalio Kavos on Keros, from which much of this material is alleged to have come.

Anecdotal evidence from nonspecialists about important archaeological discoveries always carries with it the risk of misinformation. This is particularly the case when the finds are concealed from professional archaeologists at the time of discovery. Moreover, it is generally and reasonably assumed that dealers’ provenances are of little value in the case of unprovenanced antiquities. In such cases, the dealer may well invent a story that maximizes the possibility of a profitable sale and deliberately conceals the true source of the discovery. And, of course, many fake antiquities offered for sale are accompanied by a good story.

Some discoveries, however, are of such considerable interest that any available background information may be of value. Such is undoubtedly the case with the Keros Hoard and its hypothetical origin in the episode of looting at the site of Dhaskalio Kavos. This was followed by the recognition of the site by archaeologists in July 1963³ and by the consequent rescue excavations that took place that year⁴ and subsequently.⁵ Aspects of these discoveries have recently been discussed.⁶ The nature and importance of the site of Dhaskalio Kavos has been clarified by recent excavations,⁷ and the existence of a major settlement

on the small island of Dhaskalio, lying some 80 m offshore, has now been documented.⁸

It is now clear that the island of Dhaskalio was the settlement opposite which, on Keros itself, lay two major areas of ritual deposition of artifacts, including broken pottery, fragmented marble vessels, and shattered marble figurines. These two areas of deposition are now designated the “special deposit north” and the “special deposit south.” The special deposit south, essentially undisturbed by looting in recent times, was excavated during the 2006–2008 seasons by the Cambridge Keros Project.⁹ The special deposit north, clearly the locus of intensive illicit excavation—looting that may have produced at least some of the material allegedly constituting the Keros Hoard¹⁰—was reexamined in 1987 and its scale and extent established.¹¹

The purpose of this short note is to present and discuss oral testimony, gathered in Kouphonisi in 2008 by Papamichelakis, about that episode of looting of the special deposit north some 50 years ago. This allegedly yielded most or all the Cycladic material, formerly part of the Erlenmeyer Collection, that constitutes the Keros Hoard in the narrow sense of the original documentation and publication by Getz-Preziosi.¹² Other materials have subsequently been claimed by Getz-Gentle and others¹³ as coming from this location, although, given the lack of independent corroborative evidence, this may seem at best uncertain or in some cases improbable. Sotirakopoulou and Getz-Gentle have recently offered detailed arguments to sustain such claims,¹⁴ but almost without exception these rely upon Getz-Gentle’s record, or sometimes simply recollection, of the testimony of the dealer Nicolas Koutoulakis. We are invited to accept these claims, even though (as Getz-Gentle reports) Koutoulakis on occasion changed the alleged provenance

¹Thimme 1976; Getz-Preziosi 1983; Sotirakopoulou 2005.

²Getz-Gentle 2008a; Renfrew 2008; Sotirakopoulou 2008.

³Renfrew 2007.

⁴Doumas 1964.

⁵Zapheiropoulou 1968; Renfrew et al. 2007a.

⁶Getz-Gentle 2008a; Renfrew 2008; Sotirakopoulou 2008.

⁷Renfrew et al. 2007b.

⁸Renfrew et al. 2009.

⁹Renfrew et al. 2007b.

¹⁰Getz-Preziosi 1983; Sotirakopoulou 2005.

¹¹Renfrew et al. 2007a.

¹²Getz-Preziosi 1983.

¹³Sotirakopoulou 2005, 176–242; Getz-Gentle 2008a, 2008b.

¹⁴Getz-Gentle 2008a; Sotirakopoulou 2008.

of a specific piece and was willing knowingly to sell fakes along with genuine items.¹⁵ In these circumstances, it may seem safer to take a minimal view of the Keros Hoard, although it remains entirely likely that much of the material looted from Keros passed through Koutoulakis' hands. We cannot escape the reality that the site of Dhaskalio Kavos was extensively looted prior to 1963 and that what remained after the looting was of extraordinary richness and variety. For that reason, some evaluation of the original nature of the site is desirable.

During the 2006–2008 seasons of the Cambridge Keros Project, the excavation team felt it more tactful not to inquire closely into what could still be recalled of the major episode of looting some 50 years earlier. This activity had been unauthorized and therefore illegal. Most of our workmen were from Kouphonisi, and some were perhaps related to those participating in that earlier clandestine episode. Indeed, this circumspexion was also the general position in 1987 of the organizers of the interuniversity project working on Keros at that time. But the fieldwork phases of these projects are now complete, and the episode in question is now half a century past. It is perhaps now more important to seek to bring together what is known or remembered.

Papamichelakis is an archaeologist who, during the summer of 2008, was working as a temporary employee during the excavation of a building plot on Kouphonisi, where archaeological surveillance is a routine condition set by the Greek Archaeological Service for undertaking development work. He was therefore not part of the Keros Project team. In his conversations in the village, he was able to hear testimony either from people who participated in that much earlier episode or heard about it from those who had. The text he has put together covers several matters of interest, although some of the points seem to contradict other evidence or testimony. It does, however, offer a fresh view of the activities at that time, with possible insights into the nature of the site before it was destroyed by the illicit excavation process. For this reason, it is worth presenting. Those who spoke directly with Papamichelakis have agreed to his use of their narratives in this way, with the names of the protagonists made anonymous. What is presented here is, in parts, more hearsay than testimony, and we believe that it would be a mistake to take it at its face value. Nonetheless, it appears to offer several potential insights to which we return below.

THE VERBAL REPORTS ABOUT THE KEROS HOARD

The following verbal reports were narrated to and synthesized by Papamichelakis:

It all started in late 1957 or early 1958. A *paliatzis* (“merchant of old things”), referred to here as “A,” appeared in Keros after visiting Amorgos. He was buying scrap metal but also old cauldrons and other antiques that were gathering dust in vendors' basements. “A” was a Greek from Constantinople and was prosperous enough to live in an apartment in Athens. He had been buying Cycladic antiquities from Naxos and elsewhere before he came to Keros. When he arrived, he met up with “H,” who lived there as a shepherd. He pinpointed the place where he thought artifacts might be buried and told “H,” as well as the father of “H” and another inhabitant of Keros, to dig for him, and that he would pay them a worker's wage if they gave him what marble objects they found. Then he left and came back several days later. The shepherds of Keros apparently did a poor job because “A” was disappointed and was forced to stay on Keros and show them what to look for and how. After he gave them some guidance, the shepherds of Keros did a terrific job, and “A” was only complaining that they realized the value of the things that they found and asked to be paid per piece rather than a daily wage. “A” always came at night on a boat belonging to “D,” by which means he was smuggling the goods. In the beginning, they hid the objects on Naxos, and later, the father of “D” hid them on Kato Kouphonisi before they were taken to Athens to be sold in western Europe or to a well-known Athenian collection. “A” bought a new boat and gave it to “D” so they could make their job easier. They worked undisturbed for four years until the archaeologists came. “H” was doing all the work because the other two were old men. During those years, “H” had become an expert and could find graves and excavate them without damaging the goods.

The first archaeologist who came to work on Keros was Doumas, and the workers he employed were from Kouphonisi. He was very careful and methodical, and they were not able to hide many artifacts from him. The next archaeologist to work at the site was Zapheiroupolou. She also brought workers from Naxos, and at the beginning, there was tension between her workers and Kouphonisi's employees. The story goes that a number of marble pieces (figurines and objects) were smuggled from Zapheiroupolou's excavation. Those pieces, however, were not sold to “A” but to dealers

¹⁵ Getz-Gentle 2008a, 300.

from Naxos. During this time, “H” was picking up his work from where he had left off once the archaeologists were gone each season.

As to what the site was like: graves were located on a slope that rose up from the shore. These graves were disturbed (probably by sea erosion) and were not as rich as the others on the site (i.e., they did not all contain marble). At the top of the slope was a wide, flat ledge in which there was a pit (λάκκος), about 15 m long, 4 m wide, and about 2 m deep, its long side parallel to the sea. In this pit were hundreds of broken statues and marble objects. “H” worked in the pit for four years and managed to clear it fairly well, although it may have been deeper—he did not reach the bottom. Beyond and above the pit, there was another upward slope. At a short distance from the pit were the richest graves, all holding marble artifacts, some of them containing 13 and even 15 objects each. The pit had no ceramic vessels in it, only some small sherds. Some of the graves had ceramic finds; some did not. “A” would buy only the intact pots. The others were thrown away, along with obsidian blades, which “A” also refused to buy. Marble vessels, however, he purchased in any state.

The graves were *μια οργιά* deep (almost 2 m), 2 m wide, round, and built with small stones. The marble objects were not all in the same level as the bones; instead, they could be found every 15 cm or so. Along with the figurines (*αγαλματάκια*) were small and large plates, cups, and other objects. The small plates had thicker walls than the larger ones. The figurines and other marble objects in the graves were always intact. In one of the graves, not 15 m up the slope from the pit, the workers found a figurine, 1.5 m long, which “A” broke into four pieces, hid at Kato Kouphonisi for two days, and then brought to Athens, where he sold it to the Goulandris Collection. They also found animal figurines—heads of rams, oxen, goats, and ducks—as well as seated human figurines. The bones in the graves were always “rotten” (*σάπια*), and when left in the sun, they crumbled away. The teeth, however, remained in good condition.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

When these stories are cross-checked with the archaeological data from the excavations on Keros, they appear accurate and therefore possibly truthful. Papamichelakis thinks that the mystery of the special deposit is solved. It was neither simply a cemetery nor

a special deposit; it was both. The fact that only one grave and not many scattered bones were found by the archaeologists does not invalidate the story, since “H” was working thoroughly for four years before the archaeologists arrived at the site; he destroyed the structure of most of the graves and scattered the bones in the sun, where they disintegrated rapidly.

It is important to note that this narrative is the result of the converging memories of several people. They have had the opportunity, over 50 years, to recollect and embellish their stories. In such circumstances, individual observations can become merged and details elaborated. But some parts of the story do conform with more recent archaeological observations. In particular, the general description of the topography of the special deposit north does correspond quite well with observations recorded during research in 1987 and subsequently. It has always been clear that the few inhabitants of Keros at that time (the island now lacks permanent habitation) must have known of, and perhaps been implicated in, the clandestine excavation process. And it has been tacitly understood, at least since 1987, that workers from Kouphonisi were involved in the enterprise.

As noted earlier, there has been a general tendency among scholars, since the Karlsruhe exhibition of 1976, to attribute a Keros findspot for unprovenanced Cycladic antiquities without supporting evidence beyond (in some cases) the testimony of a single dealer: Koutoulakis.¹⁶ The hearsay narrative above tends to reinforce my skepticism about an origin in Keros for those antiquities appearing on the market before 1958. It is clear that cemeteries in several Cycladic islands were being looted around that time, and the term “Keros” may have been a convenient one for dealers to employ in marketing their goods. Admittedly, that date of 1958, like other details in the hearsay narrative, has to be treated with caution. Yet it is one element in the narrative that would be well known to a number of observers. Thus, one notes with caution that some later commentaries¹⁷ have expanded the alleged repertoire of the Keros Hoard with many unprovenanced pieces, including several already documented well before 1958 that were not part of the inventory of the original Erlenmeyer Collection and for which no tangible evidence exists to establish an attribution to Keros. Although this point has recently been carefully and systematically addressed by Sotirakopoulou,¹⁸ Renfrew finds the original presentation of the so-called Keros

¹⁶ Renfrew 2006.

¹⁷ Notably Getz-Gentle 2008a; see also Sotirakopoulou

2005, 176–242.

¹⁸ Sotirakopoulou 2008.

Hoard by Getz-Preziosi in 1983 to be plausible, based as it is upon a photograph from 1975. However, many of the subsequent adjustments and additions are much less persuasive or plausible. The suggestion that earlier finds, already recorded well before 1958, came from this site seems unlikely. But the recent *AJA* Forum discussion is welcome, as is the usefully detailed online addendum,¹⁹ since detailed discussion of the material may be the best way to proceed. For it remains entirely plausible that much of the material looted from the site of Dhaskalio Kavos passed through the hands of the dealer Koutoulakis.

At the same time, the discovery by Zapheiroupolou of at least one Early Cycladic grave and one complete Cycladic figure in the special deposit north²⁰ seems to make tenable the hypothesis that there was a small yet rich Cycladic cemetery at this location, in addition to the special deposit of fragmentary marble vessels and figurines. The reported discovery of a few complete (or at least restorable) figures, as originally suggested by Getz-Preziosi (on the testimony of the dealer Koutoulakis),²¹ finds some support from the oral account given above. It is clear, however, from the fragmentary condition of nearly all the material recovered by Doumas and Zapheiroupolou from the special deposit north, that most of it was already in a fragmentary condition in the Early Bronze Age. That this is entirely the case with the newly excavated special deposit south tends to emphasize the point. The two special deposits may have been similar in containing only objects that already had been deliberately broken. The presence of a number of complete graves near the special deposit north with undamaged grave goods, as implied in the narrative above, may be plausible.

There is one detail, however, that may not find credence: the reference to the very large and nearly complete figure (ht. ca. 1.5 m) associated in the above narrative with the large figure acquired during the 1980s by the Goulandris Collection.²² Other accounts from a number of sources would place the discovery of this figure at a location elsewhere in Keros, and there are alternative narratives situating it originally in Schinousa. Its integration into our hearsay narrative may simply be a case of post hoc accretion. Indeed, if there were an exceptionally large and complete figure recovered from the special deposit north area at Kavos, it might conceivably be the large figure acquired by Thimme for the Badisches Landesmuseum in Karlsruhe, which, if genuine, must have been the product of illicit excavation and illegal export,²³ although this possibility is likely

to remain unsubstantiated. Such points of uncertainty are the inevitable pitfall of hearsay evidence.

The value of such a hearsay narrative is thus restricted. Some scholars might well conclude that such speculation on the basis of hearsay evidence about the original nature of the site at the special deposit north is a waste of time. Yet the evidence of observers of these events who now have no financial interest in their recollections may perhaps be valued as highly as the reported claims of the dealer Koutoulakis, who was, in effect, the only source for the information reported by Getz-Preziosi. At this point, it is worth confirming that the merchant "A" in the oral account above was not Koutoulakis. It would be interesting to establish who, in fact, were the linking persons in the line of supply between these two.

In the work of assessing the significance of the discoveries made in the recent excavations at Dhaskalio and Dhaskalio Kavos, it will be necessary to form some general view of what we may now, in light of the abundance of recent finds, regard as a sanctuary at Dhaskalio Kavos. It is clear that the site (in both its northern and southern parts) was the locus for ritual deposition on a prodigious scale. Some evaluation of the original nature of the special deposit north, before the catastrophic episode of looting, will be a necessary part of that assessment. Here, the hearsay narrative may also prove useful. In any case, it alludes to the regrettable destruction of what may well have been the richest ritual center of the Aegean Early Bronze Age. The anonymous "A" and his accomplices on Keros and Kouphonisi were links in an illicit chain that led to Koutoulakis (the dealer in Paris and Geneva), Erlenmeyer (the collector in Basel), Thimme (the curator in Karlsruhe), and many museums and private collections in Europe and America.

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¹⁹Getz-Gentle 2008b.

²⁰Zapheiroupolou 1968.

²¹Getz-Preziosi 1983.

²²Doumas 1983, 167; Renfrew 1986.

²³Thimme 1975.

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