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Oracle of the dead, farmstead, or trading station?

Some thoughts on the interpretation of archaeological remains

Björn Forsén

Abstract

The Hellenistic fortification located next to the outlet of the River Acheron in Epirus, northwestern Greece, offers a splendid example of the problems connected with how to interpret archaeological remains and how to combine them with places and events mentioned by written sources. The imposing fortification that has been interpreted as Homer's Oracle of the Dead, or alternatively as a fortified farmstead destroyed by the Romans in 167 BC, is here suggested to have been a fortified trading station, taken over by the Romans while expanding towards the east, after which it was destroyed in connection with local skirmishes in the 180s BC.

Keywords: Greece, Epirus, Hellenistic, Oracle of the Dead, fortification, farmstead, trading station, Romans, destruction.

Then you must go to Hades' murky home.
There Periphlegeton and Cocytus,
a stream which branches off the river Styx,
flow into Acheron. There's a boulder,
where these two rivers meet. Go there,..

Hom. *Od.* 10.457–461, transl. Johnston 2020

According to Homer, Odysseus on his way home to Ithaca visited the Oracle of the Dead which was located at the confluence of the rivers Kokytos and Periphlegeton with the Acheron. Here Odysseus could meet the famous prophet Teiresias, who already was dead, to receive advice from him concerning how to get home. The famous Oracle of the Dead, or *Nekyomanteion*, was located at the confluence of the rivers somewhere close to the Acherousian Lake in Epirus, northwestern Greece, in "a region always wrapped in mist and cloud" (Hom. *Od.* 11.10, transl. Johnston 2020).

I had the pleasure of visiting the Oracle of the Dead in Epirus together with my good colleague and friend Mika Lavento on a cloudy and rainy day back in June 2004, during the first field season of the Thesprotia Expedition, an interdisciplinary project directed by myself combining archaeology, history and geology with the aim of writing the diachronic history of the Kokytos valley from prehis-

toric to modern times. Mika was responsible for the geo-archaeology of the project, of which so far four volumes have appeared.

I still vividly remember our visit to the Oracle of the Dead, as we descended together into the underworld along a rusty and creaking staircase. The underworld was located in a dark and damp subterranean vaulted cellar, illuminated only with dimmed lights creating long and spooky shadows. But something was still obviously wrong. The cellar belonged to an impressive Hellenistic fortification, built on the southernmost edge of a ridge with a good view towards the today drained Acherousian Lake and the confluence of the Kokytos with the Acheron. How on earth did this cellar become known as the underworld of the Oracle of the Dead mentioned by Homer?

16.1 Dakaris and the Oracle

Epirus has always been a poor and peripheral region, which was not formally attached to Greece until 1913. It had a large Albanian minority which was not forced to leave until the Greek Civil War (1946–1949), the final battles of which were fought in Epirus. Modern archaeology was developed in Epirus by Sotirios Dakaris who worked in the local archaeological service from 1949 on, first as acting director and later as director, before in 1965 becoming the first professor of Classical Archaeology at the University of Ioannina. He conducted systematic excavations of several sites, the most important one perhaps being the site which he identified as the famous Nekyomanteion of the Acheron (Kotjabopoulou 2018: 27–29).

The first phase of the Nekyomanteion fortification was built during the late fourth or early third century BC, followed by enlargements in the southeast, east and north during the early and mid-third century and finally also during the late third century in the west (Baatz 1999: 151–152). Inside the fortress large numbers of pithoi, filled with grain, broad beans and fruit, as well as transport amphorae, a whole series of plain table amphorae, hydriae, jugs, lekanes and cooking pots, and some fine pottery, were found together with millstones, a pair of scales, different types of wheels, ratchets and weights, loom-weights, weaponry and agricultural tools (for a good summary of finds, see Voulgaraki 2018).

Dakaris who identified the site as the Oracle of the Dead considered the whole fortification a religious edifice with the subterranean cellar being the Hall of Hades. The worshippers were supposed to have moved through the labyrinth-like building during several days, conducting mystic preparations, such as sleeping sessions, baths and eating of special meals including toxic broad beans and lupine seeds which if digested raw could cause hallucinations, before they were allowed to enter the central hall where they encountered models of ghosts offering answers to their questions. Dakaris imagined that the models of the ghosts were puppets lowered down into the central hall by a priest with the help of an elaborate crane, of which only the wheels and ratchets, as well as 22 iron lumps functioning as counterweights, were preserved (e.g. Dakaris 1993).

Dakaris' identification of the Hellenistic fortification as the Nekyomanteion is based more on topography and the use of historical sources concerning a number of different oracles of the dead in the ancient world than on archaeology per se. The only archaeological finds with a clear cultic connection are some figurines depicting Persephone. However, the majority of these were found in a deposit dating between the seventh and fifth century BC at the foot of the hill, ca. 100 m away from the Hellenistic fortification (Voulgaraki 2018: 50, 78–79). Only five fragmentary figurines were found within the fortress: a very low number of figurines for a large sanctuary indeed. In principle we could be dealing with intrusive finds, although we should not forget that figurines also appear in domestic contexts. Dakaris' description of the procedures connected with visits to the oracle finds no

real support in the written sources and his suggestion of encounters with ghosts in the form of puppets has even somewhat rudely been ridiculed as "a precursor of the fun-fair ghost-train or the Disneyland haunted house" (Ogden 2001).

Dakaris himself was unwilling to retreat from his interpretation, although he was aware of part of the early criticism, especially that of the German scholar Dietwulf Baatz who in a series of articles beginning in 1979 showed that the wheels and ratchets that Dakaris had connected with his crane in reality belonged to seven different arrow-shooting catapults of five different sizes (Baatz 1979; 1982; 1999). Instead of accepting Baatz's convincing analysis, Dakaris suggested in his guidebook of the site (1993: 22) that the catapult wheels and ratchets would have been reused for his crane. Despite further criticism of Dakaris' identification, his conclusions in broad lines still today find its supporters, although the visitors to the oracle now are supposed to have entered the cellar where they received answers to their questions (Gravani & Katsikoudis 2018; Voulgaraki 2018).

16.2 Fortified farmstead or trading station

According to Baatz, the site excavated by Dakaris had nothing to do with the Oracle of the Dead, but should rather be considered a fortified Hellenistic farmstead (Baatz 1999). This identification would indeed fit better with the archaeological finds, such as with the large quantities of stored grain, pulses and fruit as well as of agricultural and domestic tools, including different types of mill-stones. The significance of Dakaris' toxic broad beans and lupines have recently also been downplayed when similar pulses recently were found stored together with grain and fruit at Episkopi Servianon, a Hellenistic farmstead further inland in Molossia involved with trade (Pliakou 2017). The broad beans and lupines were thus obviously used as fodder for animals or for human consumption (Gkatzogia 2018).

Baatz's suggestion has not convinced everybody, partly because of the fact that the Nekyomanteion fortification is unique: we know of no fortified farmstead of this size. Neither does the location of the site fit very well with the suggested function as farmstead (Giorgi & Bogdani 2012: 108–114 for fortified farmsteads in Epirus). The site is located on the southernmost tip of a line of hills dividing a natural harbour, the Glykys limen, on its west side from the Acherousian Lake on its east side. The Glykys limen harbour was during antiquity one of the major harbours along the Greek west coast (Octavian moored his navy consisting of 250 ships here shortly before the battle of Actium in 31 BC (Dio Cassius 50.12.2)), although today it has largely silted up. It was connected to the Acherousian Lake by the Acheron, along which not only the Acherousian Lake but probably also the somewhat further inland town of Kastri could be reached by boat (Besonen et al. 2003).

In topographical terms we find a close parallel to the Nekyomanteion fortification in Akarnania, where a small fortification was constructed on the Vigla hill some 300 m to the south of the ca. 1000 m long and 5 m wide canal which connected the Adriatic Sea with Lake Voulkaria further inland, where also the town Palairos was located (Fig. 16.1). The distance from the Nekyomanteion fortress to the Acheron is also around 300 m. The location of these two fortresses clearly indicate that their main purpose must have been to guard the approach to the inland lakes and the neighbouring towns, an aspect not previously taken into account at all. The Nekyomanteion fortress with an important outer harbour on its west side could very well also have functioned as a fortified trading station (Forsén 2019: 8–11).

Many of the finds from the Nekyomanteion fortress also point towards a trading function. This goes not only for the large amount of stored grain, pulses and fruit, the pair of scales, but also for the transport amphorae, part of which were found sealed as for transport. Some of the amphorae were

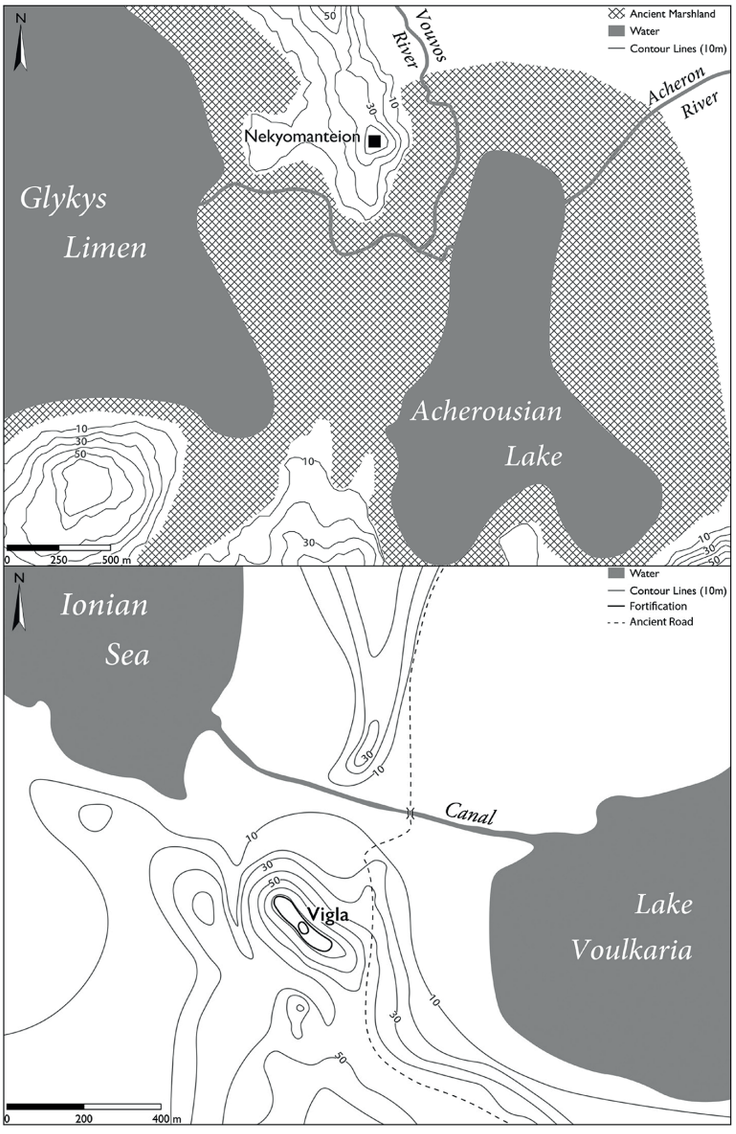


Figure 16.1. Above: The location of Nekyomanteion in relation to the modern course of the rivers, with the extent of the Acherousian Lake according to Besonen et al. 2003, Fig. 13 for 1 BC. Below: The location of the Vigla hill in relation to the canal leading to the Voulkaria Lake after Kolonas & Faisst 1992: Fig. 3. (Forsén 2019: Fig. 3. © Thesprotia Expedition).

stamped, indicating imports from Rhodes in particular, but also Knidos (Voulgaraki 2018: 85–88). Noteworthy is also the large number (ca. 70–80) of identical table amphorae, seemingly waiting to be sold onwards after having been delivered from a potter.

The six Olynthos mills and parts of at least two different larger segment mills show only little or no wear at all. The volcanic stone of which they were made does not exist in Epirus, meaning that they will also have been imported, perhaps from overseas, as the segment mills finding their best parallels in Megara Hyblaia on Sicily (Chaigneau 2017; Turmo in prep.). Finally, we have the 22 iron lumps, weighing ca. 6–10.5 kg, which Dakaris first explained as some kind of pre-monetary currency, before later interpreting them as counterweights for his crane. However, trade in non-worked iron ore in large quantities over large distances was common during antiquity and might perhaps offer a better explanation for the iron lumps (Forsén 2019: 10–11).

16.3 "The last days of the Nekromanteion"

The discussion about the real function of Dakaris' Oracle of the Dead has overshadowed the fact that Dakaris, in addition to Homer's description of Odysseus' visit to the Nekyomanteion (or Nekromanteion in modern Greek), also connected the site to another event described by written sources, that

is, the destruction inflicted by Aemilius Paullus and his Roman troops on Epirus in 167 BC (Dakaris 1993: 27). According to a handful of short passages in ancient literature, Aemilius Paullus on his way back from the Third Macedonian War gave the order that all Epirotan towns that had supported the Macedonians should be punished, whereby the walls of 70 towns were destroyed and 150 000 persons were enslaved, something which is regarded as the largest slave acquisition ever made by Roman forces. Although the numbers mentioned by the ancient authors probably are exaggerated, one would of course expect that such a catastrophic event also would have left vestiges in the archaeological record (Forsén 2019: 13; 2021: 229–231).

The Hellenistic fortification of Nekyomanteion was destroyed by fire with the central tower collapsing, thereby covering and preserving the contents of the rooms in the ground floor. Baatz identified seven arrow-shooting catapults, 27 socketed pyramidal projectile-heads and at least five Roman *pilum* heads (Baatz 1982; 1999), characterised by their large flat points with distinct barbs and rectangular hafts with lateral indentations, forming an hour-glass shape (Fig. 16.2). This type of *pilum* head, a typical weapon of Roman soldiers, can be dated roughly to the first half of the second century BC (Horvat 2002: 129-133, Type 1; Luik 2002: 76–77). The socketed pyramidal projectiles were widely used by the Romans from the early second century until the mid-first century BC, although similar projectiles also may have been used for Hellenistic arrow-catapults (Luik 2002: 81–84).

According to Dakaris, the findings from the Nekyomanteion (destruction by fire, catapults, projectile and *pilum* heads) indicated that it was destroyed by the Romans in 167 BC (Forsén 2019; 2021). This picture has more recently been strengthened by the new exhibition of the Archaeological

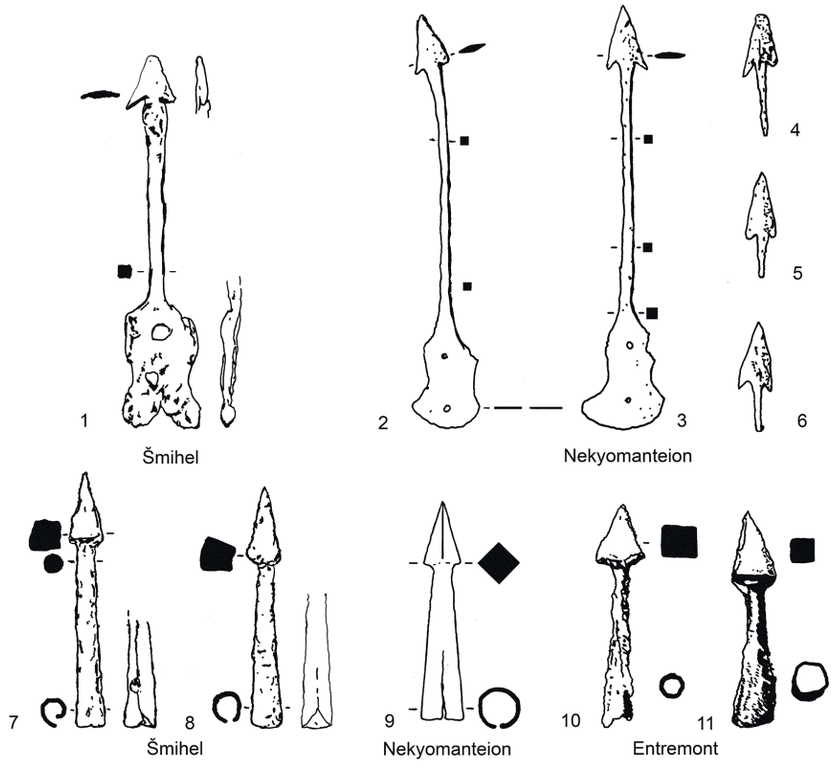


Figure 16.2. Pilum heads from Šmihel (1, after Horvat 2002: pl. 2.2) and Nekyomanteion (2–6, after Völling 1997: Fig. 11b), as well as pyramidal projectile heads from Šmihel (7–8), Nekyoanteion (9) and Entremont (10–11, all after Luik 2002: Fig. 50.1–5). After Forsén 2019: Fig. 5. © Thesprotia Expedition.

Museum of Ioannina, where a section of Nekyomanteion has been given the name "The Last Days of Nekromanteion", referring not only to the actual destruction of the site in the past, but also to the reversal of its initial interpretation in the present. A full-scale replica of a catapult has been exhibited amidst a selection of local agricultural and household tools and vessels (Fig. 16.3). Behind the catapult there is a sketch of two defenders in the course of loading the catapult with projectiles against the attacking Romans (Kotjabopoulou 2018: 37–39).

I have myself also tended to connect the destruction of the Nekyomanteion fortress with the events of 167 BC, but there may yet be reason to question this interpretation too. The main problem with this interpretation is the fact that the *pilum* heads were found inside the fortification, below the collapsed tower (Baatz 1999: 153; Forsén 2019: 17, n. 91), something which indicates that the fortification at the time of its destruction was in the hands of the Romans. Their presence would imply that the Romans at some stage had taken over the fortification and stationed troops there, who later were surprised by an attack, presumably by local Greeks, perhaps supported by the Macedonians or some other eastern power. Such a course of events seems rather unlikely for the Third Macedonian War, which in turn brings up the question of how reliable the suggested date of the destruction really is. Without going into details, it can be stated that the latest securely datable objects found below the collapsed tower seem to be a series of Rhodian amphora stamps, the date of which can be pinpointed rather exactly to between 190 and 180 BC (Voulgaraki 2018: 85–88), thus offering a *terminus post quem* of the destruction at ca. 190 BC or somewhat later.

The Romans became involved in trade on the eastern Mediterranean during the late third century BC. In order to protect their merchants from Illyrian pirates they had sent troops to the other side of the Adriatic already in 230 BC. At the end of the First Illyrian War in 229 BC, the Romans took over Corcyra and parts of the Illyrian coast including Epidamnos (Dyrrachium) and Apollonia. Despite these bases along the eastern trade route, which passed between Corcyra and the mainland towards the south, the Illyrians still caused problems for the Italian merchants during the Second Illyrian War (219–218 BC) and shortly again before the Third Illyrian War in 180 BC. The Roman trade route was also threatened from the south during the beginning of the First Macedonian War (214–205 BC) with Macedonian and Carthaginian fleets being sent into the Adriatic Sea, the Macedonians temporarily capturing Corcyra and besieging Apollonia (Eckstein 2008: 83–87, 99–100).

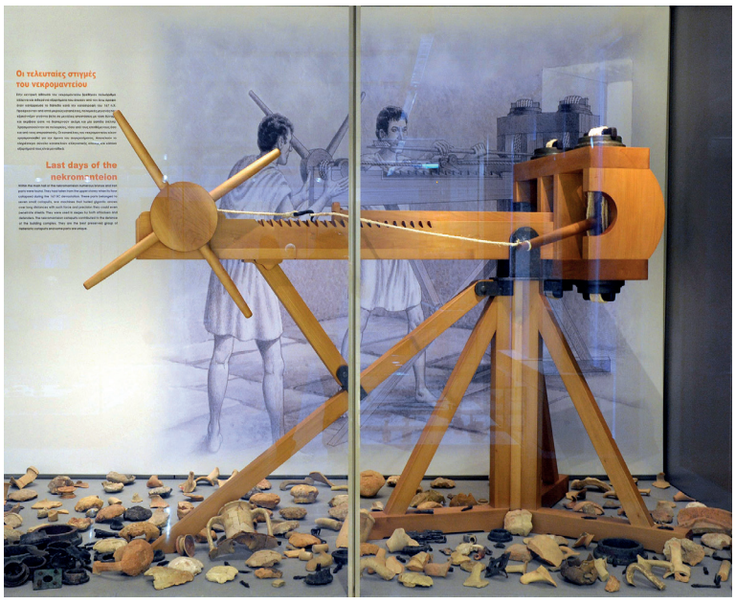


Figure 16.3. Section of the new exhibition concerning the Nekyomanteion in the Archaeological Museum of Ioannina entitled "The last days of the Nekromanteion", showing a full-scale replica of one of the catapults found, in the background of which two defenders are shown in the course of loading the catapult with projectiles. Photo Konstantinos Zachos.

Just like the Romans, the Venetians some 1500 years later, when wanting to secure their trade route to the east, took control of the eastern coast of the Adriatic, Corcyra and the other Ionian islands, in addition to which they established a series of bases on the mainland opposite Corcyra (Butrint, Strovili, Sagiada, Parga, Phanari (the Glykys limen bay) and towards the south at a later stage also Preveza and Vonitsa) (Hakkarainen 2009). The fact that we lack sources mentioning any Roman bases along the mainland opposite of Corcyra does not mean that there never were any. Strategically it would have made perfect sense for the Romans to have had a couple of such bases, especially during the last decades of the third and the first decades of the second century BC. The most likely place for such a base would without doubt have been at Glykys limen.

We will never know why and by whom the Hellenistic Nekyomanteion fortification was destroyed, but there are two events occurring between 190 and 180 BC that perhaps could have had repercussions on a possible Roman base at Glykys limen. Firstly, Epirus was touched by the Roman-Seleucid War (192–188 BC), in which the Aetolians supported Antiochus III against the Romans. Towards the end of the war the Romans under Marcus Fulvius Nobilior took Ambracia and the Ionian island of Kephallonia, from where pirates had been operating (Grainger 2002: 231–237, 338–340, 347). Secondly, Illyrian piracy is reported for 180 BC. In that year the praetor Lucius Duronius, according to Livy (40.42), accused the Illyrian king Gentius of supporting the piracy, ravaging the Adriatic coast, mistreating Roman and Latin citizens and even detaining Roman citizens on Corcyra. Gentius denied having had anything to do with the pirates and seems to have got away without further punishment (Dzino 2010: 55–56).

16.4 Conclusions

The Hellenistic fortification at Glykys limen which was interpreted by Dakaris as the Oracle of the Dead offers a splendid example of the danger not only of letting ethnocentric national historiography influence how we interpret archaeological remains, but also of trying to connect archaeological remains to places and events mentioned in written sources. The further we go back in history the more fragmentary the written sources become and regions located at the periphery like Epirus during antiquity are only sparsely mentioned. We need to put more trust in the archaeological record and first of all see what it can tell us. This does not mean that archaeologists should ignore historical sources, quite the contrary we always need to put the results reached from the study of the archaeological remains into their historical context, although not necessarily being able to connect them to any single event mentioned by the written sources.

Identifying the Hellenistic fortification with the Oracle of the Dead has turned it into a tourist attraction, attracting lots of curious people who all wish to descend into the underworld. In the public's mind the site will always be connected to Nekyomanteion, which perhaps also is the reason why the authors of the recent guide book have chosen not to take sides, and rather to present Dakaris' and Baatz' interpretations of the Nekyomanteion as two alternative views (Aggeli 2015: 31–32). This only underlines the need for a more detailed study of the finds from Dakaris' excavations. Alas, it will not bring forward any new information about Hades' murky home, but instead without doubt it will broaden our knowledge of the early Roman trade on the eastern Mediterranean which in a way laid the foundation for the development of the Roman Empire.

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