

Chersonesus: public archaeology on the Black Sea coast

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The ancient city of Chersonesus on the Crimean peninsula was founded by Greek colonists in the fifth century BC. Today it is part of an enormous multi-period archaeological site where Greek, Roman and Byzantine ruins mingle with mortar shells and soldiers' skeletons of the Crimean and Second World wars. Aspiring to become a UNESCO World Heritage site, it is now the focus of intense local, national and international interest in its future, as the editor of Public Archaeology explains.

Editing the journal *Public Archaeology* for the past two years, from an office within the Institute, I have sometimes wondered why classical archaeologists are often less accessible to the concerns of public archaeology than prehistorians are. In one way, that is unfair. Certain public-archaeology themes, above all the interlacing of state-sponsored archaeology and nationalism, have produced some spectacular contributions from classicists.¹ But I have become very aware of the curious segregation that so often exists between these branches of the profession. It exists not only in Britain but also in most continental European countries, and above all in the USA, where classical archaeologists who study the Old World, and archaeologists concerned with the pre-colonial Americas, seem scarcely to notice one another's existence, let alone to talk to one another.

This ridiculous palisade has little or nothing to do with respectable scientific categories, much to do with politics and contemporary history, and a great deal to do with resistance to technical and ideological change in archaeology. That is hardly an original remark. But two kinds of development seem at last to be wearing holes in the palisade. One is computerization, and the revolution in analytical capacity and intellectual approach that it has brought to the profession. Techniques such as digital imaging and retrieval, the use of data from satellites to create an archaeological geographical information system (GIS), and the use of a software package to generate the so-called Harris matrix to examine stratigraphical relationships,² have all entered the fieldwork and post-excavation procedures of classical archaeology. One of their effects is to integrate discovered objects into much broader intellectual frameworks. The old habit of mind – one of the features that marked off traditional classicists from prehistorians – was an intense concentration on objects, which could sometimes be at the expense of context. With the new technology, that is no longer possible.

The second development is public archaeology: the cluster of concerns that

no archaeologists, whether they be prehistorians or Roman or Hellenistic specialists, can any longer legitimately ignore (political context, public and indigenous senses of continuity and of ownership, respect for the claims for the non-archaeological user of a given site, and so on).

I spent part of the summer of 2001 at a site on the north coast of the Black Sea, which illustrated this change vividly. It also seemed to me a paradigm of all the intersecting, competing, sometimes mutually exclusive, claims that have to be recognized and researched and weighed against each other – the public archaeological point of view, in fact.

The site and its present status

The site is Chersonesus on the shore of the Crimean peninsula, which is now part of the independent state of Ukraine (Fig. 1). It abuts immediately on the naval port-city of Sevastopol, the main base for the Black Sea fleets of Russia and later of the Soviet Union, and the focus of large-scale sustained and brutal fighting during the Crimean War (1853–56), the Russian Civil War (1918–20) and the Second World War.

Chersonesus is an urban site. It began as a Greek colony, founded in the fifth century BC by colonists from Heraklea on the southern shore of the Black Sea. It survived Scythian attacks, became a Roman city and then a large and prosperous Byzantine city, which was at once port and military base. Unlike almost all the other Greek and then Byzantine colonies around the northern shore of the Black Sea, Chersonesus was not destroyed by Hunnish or Gothic attacks but survived at least until the Mongol invasions of the fourteenth century and probably longer.

The site of the city, on a rocky peninsula on the outskirts of Sevastopol, has been stone-robbled over the millennia but – astonishingly – scarcely built over. But Chersonesus is not only an ancient city; the site includes a huge "chora": the inner hinterland of a Greek colony that was laid out in rectangular homestead plots with individual farmhouses. The Chersonesus chora covered many square kilometres of

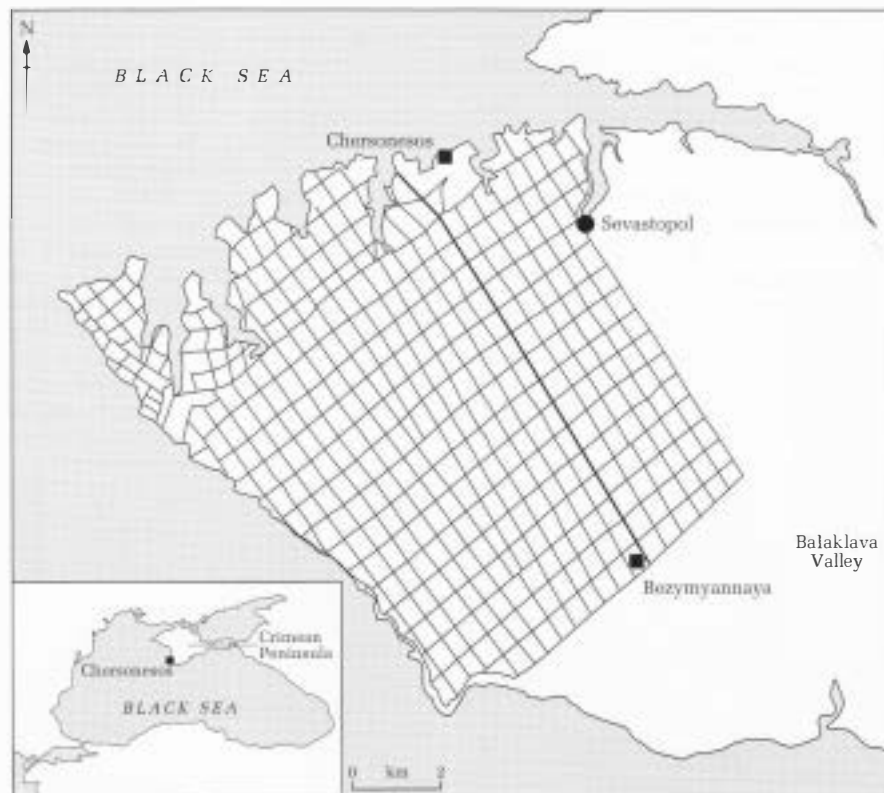


Figure 1 The location of ancient Chersonesus, showing the former extent of its chora (hinterland) divided into square homesteads occupying most of the Heraklean peninsula between Sevastopol and the Balaklava valley (based on Fig. 35 in the reference cited in n. 3 below).

the Heraklean peninsula, and its grid of field boundaries and roads (Fig. 1) has been revealed by air and satellite photographs and ground (electro-resistivity) survey.³ It is exceptionally well preserved, and excavation has been in progress on some of the farmhouses for several years.

The current status of this enormous site is that it is, officially, a Ukrainian National Preserve. Excavation and research have been going on here since the nineteenth century. The site now has two museums, a library, workrooms, and an administrative centre housed in the buildings of an old monastery that was closed some years after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. The preserve is directed by a Ukrainian team under Leonid Marchenko;⁴ they struggled valiantly to defend Chersonesus through the period following the collapse of the old Soviet system, when the funding and coherent management of culture and heritage more or less disintegrated. However, during the past decade a new partner has appeared: American expertise, technology and money have been applied to Chersonesus – it has become a co-production.⁵

The place is in several senses a battlefield – literally so. The whole ground of the city and chora is sown with metal fragments, often scattered on the surface. Most of these date from the Second World War, but many are earlier. During my visit, I watched a group of archaeologists retrieve from a Byzantine house a monstrous cast-iron sphere, which was probably a naval mortar shell fired by British or French warships during the siege of Sevastopol in 1855.⁶ And the bones of unburied forgotten soldiers are every where, close beneath the Crimean turf (Fig. 2).

Conflicting interests and current claims

Chersonesus is also the collision-point of many present-day conflicting interests, most of which are also legitimate claims to use or exploit this cultural landscape. These claims include:

- The Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox churches. Tradition asserts that Prince Vladimir of Kiev was baptized at Chersonesus in AD 988, bringing Christianity into the east Slav lands. In the nineteenth century a cathedral was erected on the site; ruined by German shelling during the Second World War, it is now being reconstructed (Fig. 3). This is an intensely sacred site for Russian and Ukrainian Christianity – and indeed for Russian and Ukrainian national identities. But problems arose following the recent arrival of a highly aggressive group of Russian monks, who continue to be loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate and who refused to recognize Ukrainian ecclesiastical authority, and demanded the return of the monastery buildings and the destruction of all “pagan idols and effigies” on the site. The monks lost influence when their leader pulled a gun on his opponent during a discussion and when they blockaded the site to prevent the Kiev Patriarch from visiting the cathedral. However, they are still present and their claims remain unsettled.
- The Ukrainian state. President Leonid Kuchma seems determined to make Chersonesus a shrine to Ukrainian independence. In late July 2001, to mark ten years of independence, he arrived for a celebration in the cathedral, in the presence of presidents Putin of Russia and Lukashenko of Belarus. This had a positive outcome, in that the Ukrainian state has now confirmed its intention to retain the cathedral as national heritage



Figure 2 The skeleton of a Second World War machine gunner exposed during archaeological excavation on Bezymyanaya hill.

property (for ecumenical use, after official permission, by all Orthodox factions) and to reinforce the authority of the National Preserve. However, presidential haste to get the restoration completed led to the unexpected arrival of bulldozers during the summer, which proceeded to tear a 2×3 m trench for pipes and cables right through the unexcavated heart of the Greek city.

- The people of Sevastopol. The Chersonesus beach is the traditional family bathing place of the people of Sevastopol, and in summer thousands of people make their way through the ruins down to the sea. They picnic among Byzantine ruins, and young people climb on them or balance on columns. Thus, the site is insecure and in effect unprotected, which is one of the obstacles preventing the listing of Chersonesus by UNESCO as a World Heritage site. Yet the closing of the shore to townspeople who don't want to pay to see archaeology is unthinkable. Any new plan for the site has to include provision for their access.
- The navies. Although most restrictions have been lifted on visiting by outsiders or foreigners and on photography or satellite survey, the Russian and Ukrainian navies still use Sevastopol as their main base in the region. Restricted access over the past hundred years has probably saved the site from development and building, but the navies remain watchful stakeholders with an alert interest in what happens to the site.
- Commerce. The arrival of capitalism means that the site is under growing pressure from commercial interests. Housebuilding over areas of the chora has been halted with difficulty. A yacht club and marina are being extended in the area of the old port of Chersonesus,



Figure 3 The ruined nineteenth-century cathedral of St Vlodymyr on the acropolis of Chersonesus under reconstruction, June 2000.

and there have been plans for a wine museum and other commercial attractions in the museum buildings themselves. The question of who is entitled to license bars and cafés (indispensable in themselves) on the site remains a murky area. But the proposition that the hard-pressed people of the city are entitled to make some money out of this huge visitor focus on their doorstep is impossible to rebut.

- Archaeology. Chersonesus is in several ways a unique site, not least in its size and state of preservation. There is continual demand from archaeologists of many countries to work there, and from visitors who wish to see the site and its museums. The authorities responsible for the National Preserve want to establish their own firm control over the scheduled areas. With their American partners, they are drafting ambitious outline plans for the whole cultural landscape, including the site, which allow for many different claims to use of the site. There is also talk of developing Chersonesus into the main international training centre for archaeologists and conservators throughout the Black Sea region.

Reconciling all these claims, especially in a country where the rule of law is far from reliable, is a matter of politics. It means understanding archaeology and conservation as negotiable interests, not divine rights. Watching Joseph Carter, Leonid Marchenko and their colleagues at work, I felt that I was watching the process of public archaeology at its best – and at its toughest.

Notes

1. For one such example, see O. Gilkes & L. Miraj, "The myth of Aeneas: the Italian Archaeological Mission in Albania, 1924–43", *Public Archaeology* 1, 109–124, 2000.
2. See pp. 34–9 in E. C. Harris, *Principles of archaeological stratigraphy*, 2nd edn (London: Academic Press, 1989).
3. Brief reports by J. Trelogan and S. Thompson on recent surveys and excavations of the Chersonesus chora are included in *The study of ancient territories: Chersonesus and Metaponto 2000 Annual Report*, 23–42 (Austin: University of Texas, Institute of Classical Archaeology, 2000).
4. Dr Marchenko's official title is Director of the National Preserve of Tauric Chersonesus.
5. A team from the Institute of Classical Archaeology of the University of Texas at Austin, directed by Professor Joseph Carter, is collaborating with the Ukrainian authorities in carrying out a wide range of archaeological investigations at Chersonesus. Funding comes from many sources, with the decisive share provided by the Packard Foundation.
6. This excavation was carried out by Professor Paul Arthur and his students from the University of Lecce, Italy, on Bezmyannaya hill (Fig. 1), a strategically located high point on the eastern edge of the Heraklean peninsula that was fought over in

both the Crimean War and the Second World War.