Boxes

Bauer, Susanne, Schlünder, Martina, Rentetzi, Maria, Kismet Bell, Jameson, Brownell, Emily, Mechler, Ulrich

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ARCHAEOLOGY AND CIGARETTES: ‘EKPHORA’ AND ‘PERIPHORA’ OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL IDENTITY THROUGH CIGARETTE PACKS

Styliana Galiniki and Eleftheria Akrivopoulou


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OLD CIGARETTE PACKS SEEM TO HINT AT THE MYTHOLOGY ATTACHED TO smoking in previous times, especially in our days, with the marginalisation of smoking and its ban – at least in public places. Such packs were subsequently used for the storage of archaeological finds, and are now kept in the storerooms or displayed in the exhibitions of the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki (AMTh), and of many other Greek museums. If the priority of archaeological museums is the rescue, study, and display of the material remains of antiquity, then for what reason do they retain, and sometimes even exhibit, modern industrial products, such as cigarette packs – that is, trivial objects which were meant to be discarded after their first use? Are these objects preserved simply because they belong to the past? To be sure, the institutional role of Greek archaeological museums is restricted to the preservation of ancient, not modern, objects. Could it then be that the preservation of the latter is being triggered by some other kind of valuation? And what is that? Does that valuation carry information about the past and/or meanings related to the present?

Being ourselves fanatical smokers, we felt the urge to investigate whether tobacco has imbued the past of the Archaeological Service, in order to remind ourselves of the role of smoking in the biography of archaeological practice – at least in Greece. Our desire was to give space to and recover a habit that is nowadays regarded as a disturbance, a problem, and not politically correct in a contemporary European country. And through this re-ordering of things and customs we also sought to assert our de-marginalisation as smokers, and our return in the public space. First of all, though, the study of the lost value
of smoking through the surviving cigarette packs in an official archaeological collection was a game of memory— and, maybe, more than that.

At the heart of our quest was a sense of loss, the loss of the right to publicly perform an identity – the smoker’s identity, now being banned. This retrieval was therefore pursued through the investigation of objects which, although connected with a lost habit, were themselves conserved, as if a now incriminated practice was transformed into a museum piece in need of storage and projection. The conservation of cigarette packs, on one side, and our study, on the other, were similar to the ritual and process of mourning. If the process of turning artefacts into museum exhibits parallels the process of mourning (Liakos 2004: 15–16), then the cigarette packs could be considered as a public expression and at the same time as a commission of mourning. This is what is meant by the ambiguous term *ekphora* in the title of our paper, which in the Greek tradition denotes the process of carrying the deceased to the place of burial, but also means the expression of an opinion through speech. In funeral ceremonies *ekphora* is succeeded by *periphora*, the ritual of public demonstration of the deceased among religious symbols. Therefore, we were faced with a simple question: why are smokers rejected when their waste is preserved? Does the study of garbage from adherents of a proscribed practice finally saying more about us than about those who in the meantime managed this garbage? Or does the preservation of these cigarette packs signify a choice regarding the museum’s role as a guardian of the past and not as its excavator?

The oldest cigarette packs at the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki date from the early years of the presence of the Archaeological Service in Thessaloniki, which was first established exactly one century ago (Vokotopoulou 1986). Although the local Archaeological Service and the Museum did not acquire a permanent home until 1962, these packs survived for decades, following the fate of the archaeological finds that they contained, which were successively transferred to several exhibition and storage spaces. Moreover, in spite of a series of developments which were to occur in terms of administration, exhibition, and building conditions, the use of industrial boxes – and, thus, of cigarette packs – for the storage of finds never ceased, especially in emergency situations, such as a rescue excavation or in case of lack of funding for the purchase of modern packaging materials.³
What makes cigarette packs ideal for the storage of modest-sized or larger but fragmentarily preserved finds, is their hard material – paperboard or, more rarely, metal – along with the form of their opening, especially that of cases. The interior wrapping paper offers an additional protective material, while their surfaces are often convenient for taking cursory notes. Their archaeological contents, and the handwritten notes they may bear, connect them with specific excavations in the centre of the city, such as that of the Sarapis temple in the 1920s; with agonising attempts to rescue antiquities by storing them into crates, right before the outbreak of the Second World War, for instance; with excavations in the wider area, such as those in Derveni in the 1960s; and with particular individuals who worked at the Archaeological Service. They may further contain pieces of old newspapers that allude to the multicultural past of the city, while their own decoration and logos bear witness to the once flourishing Macedonian tobacco trade and its association with the ideological construct of ‘hellenicity’, after the incorporation of Macedonia into the Greek state (Charitatos and Giakoumaki 1998).

‘If being collected means being valued and remembered institutionally, then being displayed means being incorporated into the extra-institutional memory of the museum visitors’ (Crane 2000: 2). The Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki has made use of cigarette packs on the occasion of three exhibitions, for the first time in 1998, at the exhibition on ‘Prehistoric Thessaloniki’. In the introductory section of this exhibition, which was dedicated to the excavation of prehistoric sites in Macedonia during the early twentieth century, archaeological finds were complemented with ‘objects typically used for their storage’ such as ‘packs of cigarettes and tobacco’, included here in order to ‘familiarize the public with the ambience of that era’. This was also the reason for the ‘re-use of some of the museum’s old showcases’ (Pappa 2001: 12–13).

With the re-exhibition of the museum’s collections, it is again the section on Prehistoric Macedonia (Stefani 2009) that has incorporated cigarette packs and other products, ‘which’, according to the related label, ‘were employed by those archaeologists who were the first to excavate prehistoric sites in Macedonia’. In this case, the exhibition is organised on the basis of the dipole ‘archaeologists of the past-archaeologists of the present’, inasmuch as the diametrically opposite side of the exhibition hall hosts a projection room where one can
watch interviews with prominent modern prehistoric archaeologists. If this second space is dominated by the direct archaeological discourse, through the cinematographic representation of physical presence, then the first section, which throws light on the past of archaeological research, has incorporated physical presence through photographic representations and boxes. In this section, boxes function as talking objects (Tilley et al. 2006), substituting the voice of the first archaeologists, and taking over the role of human testimony; they intermediate the narration of archaeological action. All hints as to their original use, their relation to smoking and cigarettes, illness and medication, for instance, have been cast out of their biography. These objects are displayed purified of their original function, as parts of another biography or, better, of a hagiography. Human absence is thus represented as presence.

The cigarette packs are exhibited, along with other objects, in an old showcase placed near the entrance to the administrative spaces of the museum, and thus next to the Director’s office. The label of this showcase reads: ‘museum remains from the function of the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki in past eras’. This particular showcase does not belong to any exhibition and does not form part of any obvious museum narrative. It appears to be timeless, floating in a liminal space, at the threshold between the exhibition space and the ‘inland’ of the museum, as an introduction to a narrative in progress. This showcase was placed there at a time when the re-organisation of the museum’s storerooms, and the discovery of accumulations of such later objects, led to the vision of an exhibition on the history of the museum. This was also the time when the digitisation of the museum’s historical archive was begun.

The showcase in hand therefore marks the beginning of a process of re-contemplation on the part of the museum, as well as its choice of self-narration and self-exhibition. The museum is presented as a reliable guardian of the work of its predecessors (Pearce 1995: 27). The objects displayed in the showcase function as keepsakes of the archaeological community, so as to stress the continuity of its long life, to conceal its ruptures and discontinuities, and produce a romantic meaning-fullness (Pearce 1992: 197–98). The objects are removed from their historical context and, thus, frozen in timelessness, they are integrated into a mythology that inspires the sense of belonging to a glorious past. If every narrative has a beginning, then its starting point must always be defined. And
the starting point chosen by the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki is not the time of the erection of its current building in 1962, but the time of the establishment of the Archaeological Service in 1912.

The storerooms of the pottery and metalwork collections of the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki house a number of industrial boxes, including packs of cigarettes. Although in most cases these no longer preserve their archaeological contents, they remain in the antiquities’ storerooms. If we assume that these boxes were originally retained for want of other packaging material, then why were they not removed after the recent retrofit of the storage spaces, which formed part of a programme for the wider retrofit of the museum and the re-exhibition of its collections in 2006? When invited to answer this question, the curators in charge commented on the oldness of these objects, on their connection with the archaeologists who worked for the service in its early years, and, more vaguely, with unknown archaeologists of the past, on the suspicion of their association with excavations that were carried out a long time ago. Furthermore, the curators stressed the aesthetic value of these packs, and wondered whether the archaising scenes on some of them could have drawn upon ancient vase-paintings.

These ‘poetics of the old’ (Mavragani 1999: 183) were, in a way, further enhanced by us. During our research, we re-opened the packs, we admired and fully photographed them, we piled them up in chronological order but also according to their original price, which was inscribed on their side. We let the logos of the cigarette companies transfer us through space and time to Cairo, Alexandrea, Salonica. We further discovered, or perhaps re-discovered, the traditional – at least in Greece – habit of using cigarette packs as an accidental notebook for writing lists of things to do, rough accounts, even drawings and poems. So we read and re-read the information that was scribbled on the cardboard of the packs: lists of numbers, administrative orders, dates, and place names. We also wondered who had designed the man’s face that was hand-drawn on one of the packs: whose face was it, and why had the drawing remained unfinished? Was it really a man’s face or was our approach gendered? Why were we thinking of ‘him’ and not of ‘her’? The truth is that the majority of archaeologists in the past, and of smokers as well, were male (Kokkinidou 2012; Rudy 2005: 148–70) – although nowadays the balance has in both cases been
reversed. So, the imagined official past has a gender, a male one, even in its very innermost unofficial aspects. In that sense our research could be considered a quest for a lost, ‘old-fashioned’, masculinity, or an attempt to redefine ‘current’ femininity – who knows?

Undoubtedly, the preservation of the packs to date is the accumulated result of a series of choices made in the past. The first of these is related to the excavator, who, instead of throwing the pack away – as one would normally do – decided to use it for the storage of archaeological finds.

The further preservation of the packs has resulted from an additional selection process, performed by several individuals, under various circumstances, and perhaps for various reasons during the following decades. Several times archaeologists chose to retain the boxes and repeat the choice of their predecessors not to discard them.

According to Susan Pearce, the selection process lies at the heart of collecting (Pearce 1992: 7). This process involves, on one hand, social perceptions of the value of objects within the frame of modernist narratives, and on the other hand, values that can be traced in the deeper levels of one’s personality. If ‘the transformation of an object from formally private to formally public’ (Pearce 1992: 37) is an important aspect of collection-making, then hasn’t the archaeologist, who once chose to use an object as private as a cigarette pack for the storage of antiquities, exposed a part of privacy to the public sphere? The cigarette pack functions, for each smoker, as a mark of his own identity. Once thrown away, it is immediately replaced, and so it is as if the same pack is always there in daily life, as an integral part of one’s most private world. Could it be that the use of such an object, which is involved in the process of one’s self-definition, for the storage of antiquities reflects a personal connection between the excavator and his finds, and his consideration of antiquities as part of his private world? Is it possible that this action does not denote the exposure of the private to the public, but the symbolical appropriation of the latter? Does the find belong, first of all, to me, who was the one to bring it to light? Could it be that this choice is, or at least was, indicative of the archaeologist’s wider attitude towards the finds of the excavation he conducted? Is it, perhaps, precisely this relationship that is being acknowledged by those who eventually decide to preserve the cigarette pack?
As Maurice Rheims (1980) writes, ‘the collector values the object for its associations, that it once belonged to and was handled by a man he can visualize as himself. The object bears witness: its possession is an introduction to history. One of a collector’s most entrancing day dreams is the imaginary joy of uncovering the past in the guise of an archaeologist’ (Rheims 1980: 51). Could we then assume that in the case of the packs retained at the museum, these roles are reversed, with the archaeologist disguised as a collector? The preservation of the packs was a choice, and not dictated by some institutional regulation. In a way, the groups of packs seem to form private collections that are ‘safeguarded’ within institutional public collections, such as those of archaeological museums. Interestingly enough, in the daily life of museums, it is not unusual even for objects belonging to official collections to be named after their excavator, and not their provenance. In this way, public cultural goods are assigned the character of objects of a private collection.

If the process that turns an object into a museum piece is one of selection, through which a certain value is assigned to it (Rheims 1980: 5), cigarette packs, in which antiquities are kept, enclose a content that has already been valuated as collectible. Nevertheless, it is not merely because of their content that they are deemed worthy of preservation; it is also because of their own rarity, since their production has now long ceased (Rheims 1980: 33). In a way, they are dead, relics of the past, and it is precisely this discontinuity that, according to David Lowenthal, focuses attention on them, particularly if scarcity or fragility threatens their imminent extinction (1985: 240). They are commemorative of an era not experienced by their contemporary users but carry the weight of the memories of individuals who have otherwise fallen into oblivion. Since all memories are necessarily related to oblivion (Hamilakis and Labanyi 2008: 12), cigarette packs are not only places of memory – ‘lieux de mémoire’, according to Pierre Nora (1989) – but also places of oblivion, places that denote loss and project absence (Meyer and Woodthorpe 2008). They remain authentic evidence of the past, not just as industrial products, but also as carriers of traces of the lives of other individuals. All kinds of evidence attesting their use (notes, newspaper cuttings, etc.), are traces of a ‘sensory memory’ (Mavragani 1999: 177), that allows ‘direct’ contact with individuals of the past, and produces the sense of their surviving continuity.
The cigarette packs that no longer house archaeological content may be understood as ‘cenotaphs’, empty tombs as monuments in honour of people whose remains are far from their native land. The empty boxes narrate how something that once existed is now gone. Could it be that, apart from the memory of the archaeologist, they are also related to the memory of the absent object? Isn’t the ancient object thus humanised (Pearce 1992: 56–57)? A note found in an otherwise empty box, reading ‘the box in which the two silver earrings, the silver ring, the silver Medusa/Gorgon mask and the fragments of a silver sheet were found’ looks like a funeral inscription in honour of those objects, people, gestures, and habits which have been lost.

It appears that the continuing value attached to even those packs which are now empty is in some sense a residue of, or otherwise related to, the value that was, has been, or would be assigned to their ‘most concealed body’ – that is, their archaeological content. The outer part consecrates the content and, in its turn, the latter consecrates the pack. The act of opening a pack, exploring or simply glancing at its content, together with the expectation that the latter may be examined and offer valuable archaeological information, is a form of ‘mnemonic excavation of this material, which brings into the present layered sympotic [i.e. relating to a symposium] meanings and stories’ (Mavragani 1999: 183), as well as feelings.

Cigarette packs, within an environment that is devoted to the protection and display of the ancient past, form an Otherness. They are personal possessions, and even if their owner is anonymous, he may, by virtue of the cigarette packs, potentially be assigned an identity, somewhat vague but at the same time rather solid – that is, the identity of the archaeologist who performed his duties ‘with a sense of mission’, ‘working with limited resources in difficult times’ (Kotsakis 1998: 48). Consequently, being a lot more than mere artefacts, these packs are emblematic of a sacred figure, that of the archaeologist-missionary, who has become a reference point among the members of a specific community. Cigarette packs are covered with an historical dust, the dust of an ambiguous story, the length and narrative of which have not yet been conclusively determined. Whether they preserve their content or not, there is always a choice involved that incorporates them into a system, and this choice may be understood as a rite of initiation.
The one who chooses to preserve them is thereby initiated into this value system. In other words, the one who valuates them does so because he has been initiated into this particular value, which pertains to the association of packs either with archaeologists of the past or with an industrial production that has now ceased for good. If the act of collecting manifests itself as a sort of poetics that determines the process of one’s self-definition, then the choice to preserve cigarette packs in museum storerooms as material evidence of archaeologists whose presence in the past retains great significance is an indirect statement of self-definition on behalf of the one who decides to preserve them: packs denote his or her own ability to recognise in them a certain value that echoes the value of the archaeologist who was the first to use them. Packs keep alive, among us, ‘the first pioneers’ (Kotsakis 1998: 89), and the recognition of this association turns them into powerful objects. Their preservation and possession constitute behaviours of power display (Pearce 1992: 45).

In addition, if the archaeological storeroom where the objects are kept forms the subsoil constructed by the museum itself for itself, as Umberto Eco suggests (1992: 38), then the preservation of packs further functions for the museum as a means of defining itself as an institution: the museum has a long history and is perfectly capable of preserving and narrating it. Cigarette packs claim an ‘anti-narrative’ (Mavragani 1999: 178) amid the official museum narrative, attempting not to negate, but to appropriate the latter. The only way to assign a personal hue to the official museum narrative is by recognising in it the figures of the narrators. The only way for the individual to embrace collective memory is by recognising in it features of its own biography, by finding its own place within the ‘symposium’ (Mavragani 1999: 176) of the archaeological community.

Cigarette packs as museum objects take on a new familiarity. Their initial context is lifted and frozen in timelessness as they enter a mythology that acquires this new familiarity. In the words of Benedict Anderson (2003: 9, 10), the cenotaph-monument of the Unknown Soldier reflects ‘an imagined community that visualizes itself as a political entity, as a nation’. In analogy to this, we may think of cigarette packs as monuments to the ‘Unknown Archaeologist’ that bring the imagined community of archaeologists together, as mnemonic places that bolster the ties among the members of this community. They thereby constitute sites of memory, ‘lieux de mémoire’ (Nora 1989) for the
ritual contextualisation of archaeological identity, through its performance and refamiliarisation.

The museum is not a space restricted within its walls, but a place of utopia; it encloses an archaeological and social vision. By exhibiting traces of the work of the first archaeologists, it claims its place in the archetypal narrative of the nation and the archaeological community, in the Pantheon of the Eminent. In the end, the museum itself is a box that contains, apart from antiquities, archeologists, guards, and visitors, as well as an entire world of meanings, expectations, and ideas.

The acts of storing or exhibiting cigarette packs, of replacing them on or removing them from a shelf, cleaning, opening, and emptying them, involve the human body in the performance of memory. It is a ritual like the *ekphora* of mourning a lost world of meanings; and like the *periphora* through which carrying around and publicly displaying the alterity of the past is a way to appropriate it, to bring it to light as a matter for the present.

Our gestures further conjure up the performances of other individuals and their own gestures, from smoking to excavating, to the filling of the pack with archaeological material, and the making of notes. The preservation of the packs further embodies the performances of the users who were to follow, including ourselves. Besides, isn’t this paper itself another performance? Our discourse becomes part of the packs’ biographical discourse, our bodies and senses transform their narrative.

Still, our discourse has been far from detached. The way we approached the material, from the stage of looking for the packs to the stage of photographing them and piling them up according to their price, and even the fact that, on account of our obsession with seeking a mythology (or maybe more than one, if we take into account all our thoughts about gender and smoking) among all boxes we chose to focus on cigarette packs – doesn’t all this strongly recall the archaeological practices of recording, stratifying, documenting, classifying, and selectively publishing those objects that are valued as the most significant? Hasn’t the study of these objects validated in a way the choices made by other individuals, along with their own place within the same imagined community? After all, isn’t this study another form of valuation leading to their immortality? Through this, don’t cigarette packs further claim a position within collective...
memory? Have we not also invested in them our deeper personal expectations and need to belong? And finally, have we not used these boxes in order to dispel our own fear of death and oblivion?

Coming to the end of this ‘excavation’, we feel that we have just tried to bring to light the invisible, non-material nature of emotions that are hidden in the material remains of the past, and in archaeological practice as well. We have noted that these emotions usually escape from the official scientific reports, like smoke from a humble cigarette. Perhaps the practice of an ‘emotional archaeology’ could reveal the multifaceted nature of people and objects, and their perpetual dialectics inside the memory box…

NOTES

1 As smoking is strongly connected with Greek identity, although the smoking ban was passed in 2012 and implemented by law to all public services and places, like coffee shops, it has never been accepted by smokers and coffee-shop owners. Furthermore, the enforcement of the ban during the recent and ongoing economic and social crisis in Greece was seen as an excuse for the government to divert public opinion from other serious problems. Since then, though the law is still in force, it has not been fully implemented. As Jarrett Rudy (2005) has shown, the ‘freedom to smoke’ is connected with liberalism and individuals’ rights in the public space.

2 The study of material culture in the humanities has shifted towards the exploration of its role in the construction of individual and collective memory (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Appadurai 1986; Tilley et al. 2006). Objects deemed to be of ‘some intellectual, scientific, or psychological value’ may also be housed at museums (Thompson 1979).

3 If objects, in general, contribute to the evocation of memory and its perpetuation, boxes in particular fall into a distinctive group, on account of their ability to contain, enclose, protect, and conceal other objects, which may as well function as mnemonic traces. According to the Dictionary of Symbols, ‘the box, like all receptacles whose basic use is keeping or containing, is a feminine symbol which can refer both to the unconscious and to the maternal body itself’ (Cirlot 1971: 31–32). From Pandora’s Box to the black box of airplanes, the television set and the computer – all of them being boxes that enclose or reflect the world – the box is a space of accumulation of human experience. The act of opening and closing a box may well be associated with the dipoles life-death, knowledge-ignorance, external-internal world.
It is known that composers and lyricists of rebetiko song (a kind of Greek folk music) like Markos Vamvakaris, Eutychia Papagiannopoulou, Vasilis Tsitsanis, and poets like Niko Khoros Vrettakos, Tassos Leivaditis, and Giannis Ritsos used to express their ‘inspiration of the moment’ by writing it down on cigarette packs. See Skabardonis 2008, Vrettakos 2008, Leivaditis 1978.

Absence can be spatially located; second, that absence can have some kind of materiality (some kind of “stuff”); and, lastly, that absence can have agency [...] in a material environment such as a museum or a cemetery, absence occupies a space’ (Meyer and Woodthorpe 2008).

We owe this metaphor to the museologist Marlen Mouliou (personal communication).

Ioulia Vokotopoulou’s paper (1986) is fundamental as it incorporates local archaeological research into the narration of the city’s past. This narration is a nostalgic one, being repeated again and again in different ways over the last few decades.

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FIG. 13.1 Dandanah, The Fairy Palace (photograph by Artemis Yagou)