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I have always loved Ancient Greece. When I was a child, my Greek grandmother's bedtime stories consisted of Hercules' labors, the Iliad and Odyssey, and what I discovered later to be plots from Greek tragedies. No wonder happy endings were rare. My love for these ancient Greek tales grew into a passion for learning about the time period during which they originated, namely the Aegean Bronze Age and, more specifically, the Mycenaean and Minoan civilizations. Through this work I also have been fortunate enough to meet people who have dedicated their lives to exploring this ancient corner of human history.

In the summer of 2021, I found myself on an island that has served as the backdrop for many of these myths: Crete, the birthplace of the first advanced European civilization, land of the Minoans. Sir Arthur Evans, archeologist and explorer of the 19th and 20th centuries, dubbed its most notable inhabitants after their mythical king, Minos. Though mystery still shrouds the Minoans, partly because we still have not been able to decipher their script, Linear A, we know quite a bit about their civilization, which boasted a complex bureaucracy, important trade activity in the Mediterranean that led to significant wealth and power, and widespread influence on neighboring civilizations.



Dr. Jan Driessen with the author

Too Many Shards

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I was invited by a Belgian archaeologist, Dr. Jan Driessen, to visit the Sissi archaeological project, on a windswept hill about 30 miles east of Minos' legendary palace of Knossos. Founded in 2007, the site is home to a team of about two dozen archeologists and students from all over Europe and the United States. According to Dr. Driessen, the director of the project, the site represents one of the most important active Bronze Age excavations in Crete, because of its size, chronological range, and types of structures it contains. The team aims to unveil the mysteries about the rules of power and the complex structure of Minoan society. The site, located at one of the most geographically strategic areas of Crete, attracted many of Crete's inhabitants and visitors across the millennia: it only took a few steps to spot the remains of an early Minoan palace, traces of Mycenaeans when they conquered Crete in 1450 BCE, and what was left of an Italian outpost during World War II.



Cemetery section of the Sissi site

As I walked around the site, my eyes glued to the ground, I couldn't help but notice that a multitude of what seemed like red stones littered the ground. I faintly recognized them from visits at other Cretan excavations, but I had never seen this amount of red on the ground before. Every step I took, I walked over at least 15 of these finger-sized pieces. Puzzled, I turned to Dr. Driessen and asked him what they were. Much to my

surprise, he responded that each and every one was a shard, a fragment of almost four-millennia-old pieces of pottery.

Astounded, I wondered why these shards were not collected, catalogued, and studied as archaeological artifacts; they were, after all, relics of ancient civilizations and cultures, and we were treading on a half dozen of them with each step. Dr. Driessen explained the practical constraints of cataloguing these artifacts. His team was of course charged with finding, cleaning and cataloguing these them, whenever possible reconstructing the original object. And they do all this work with about a *quarter million* of these shards every single year, adding to a total nearing *four million*, in Sissi alone.



Pottery shards in Sissi

The sheer volume of pottery shards and the complexities it generated exposed an aspect of archeology that I had previously ignored. I had had experience with cleaning and cataloging archaeological artifacts at the Weiner Lab of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens. Over there, archaeology involved lab coats and electron microscopes and adequate resources allowing researchers to be thorough and comprehensive. Yet under the hot Cretan sun archaeology looked very different. Whereas researchers at the Weiner Lab could focus on their most important findings, Dr. Driessen and his team were bogged down for weeks during their short excavation seasons by the enormous effort required to catalogue all the pottery fragments, an effort they could not ignore even for the most obviously inconsequential ones, as it was required by Greek law.

In my naïve mind I had been imagining the discovery of every ancient artifact, however small, to be a celebrated event on an archaeological site, a source of untold enthusiasm. In Sissi, however, and I suspect at many other sites like it around the world, what seemed to be an embarrassment of riches turned out to be a laborious task for the brilliant but small team. I was witnessing an often unspoken but quite important issue of archeology, notably for the scale of operations like the one managed by Dr. Driessen. Much of their time, like that of many other explorers, is occupied by mundane duties. Despite this the team persevered, treating this work as a necessary step towards achieving their research objectives, never losing their passion and enthusiasm.

The efforts of explorers are sometimes more tedious than people may think, but this does not make them trivial – it only makes the necessity of supporting explorations more important. So much work happens behind the scenes for all types of exploration, and I can't help but think, with a tinge of sadness, of all the opportunities lost, the knowledge that was never uncovered, and the discoveries missed due to resource constraints and practical obstacles faced by explorers.



Larger pottery fragments

Dr. Jan Driessen is a remarkable explorer. I respect and admire adventurers and scholars like him who tackle the mundane out of love for and dedication to the discovery of the unknown, and in pursuit of knowledge. These relentless individuals embody humanity's urge to push the limits of knowledge and understanding, in spite of all obstacles. If we wish to better understand the civilizations that gave rise to many of the myths that have become an integral part of our human narrative, we need support these explorers and their work, one shard at a time.