

# Novelist Ben Okri on the primal appeal of archaeology

‘Every dig is existential. Excavation is simultaneously an act of destruction and revelation’

beachcomber October 19, 2018



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What you think you will find is not what you find. That ought to be an axiom

in archaeology.

I have come to the Cyclades at the invitation of Colin Renfrew, one of the world's foremost archaeologists, to be poet-in-residence of what may be the last [dig](#) on the Greek island of Dhaskalio for the foreseeable future. I have been assigned to Trench A.

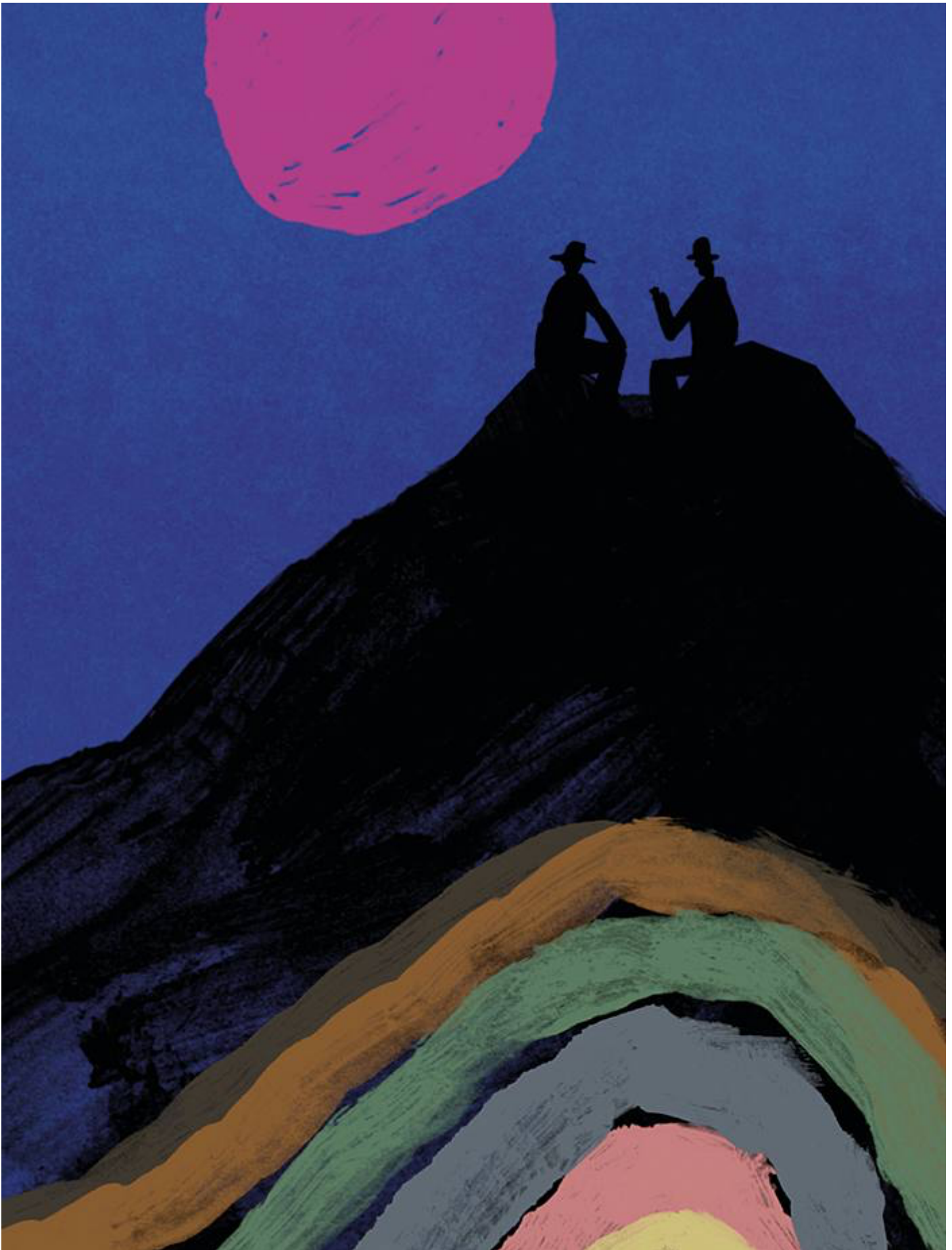
With the sun blazing on my back, having been given a trowel, I begin to work. If you don't have a proper hat, you risk sunstroke. In Trench A, we are excavating the suspicion of a wall. Already the team has revealed a stone joist where the axis of a door turns. The second one is a few feet away. From this, it is possible to deduce two walls. Archaeology is about deduction.

Field work is about attentiveness. Some say that digging is a somatic experience. I use the trowel to scrape the earth and then I pull out the stones fallen from the hillside. Trowel work must be delicate but firm, diagonal in the direction of the fall.

I unearth shards of red pottery. Some are quite big and I feel a minor frisson of excitement at having made a significant find. It is a false excitement: there are plenty of pottery shards. If you don't touch them with your hands, they are put in a special transparent bag for chemical analysis.

The section head is Kristen Mann, an Australian who wears military fatigues and a long, green shirt with notes written on the sleeves and down her trouser legs. She might have stepped out of an Indiana Jones movie.

A buzzing noise in the air makes me look up. A drone hovers over the island, taking aerial photographs of the excavation, part of a comprehensive 3D computer mapping record. The sun's heat grows steadily on my back as I brush dislodged earth into a pan and pour it into a *zembil*, a kind of basket, which a dreadlocked worker then empties.



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One of the most important dimensions of excavation is the study of how

structures collapse, how stones fall, how things break, how they drift and are held in earth over time. In Trench A, as the wall becomes clearer, there is speculation about rooms. “Now we can start to contemplate how people moved around in this space,” Mann says. “We have to deduce this through hundreds of years of foot traffic.”

Those early Bronze Age people built a series of walls round the bedrock of the island to enhance it. The whole site was probably a working area rather than a living space. There is evidence of metalworking. The pottery found here was all imported.

The Aegean shimmers all about us. The wind is fresh. I drive the sharp point of the pick into the earth and pull out stones. The locals on the dig have built a new wall, called a palimpsest, with these stones.

**Each dig is informed** by the events that form the site. Building a wall is one event; the wall falling down is another. Digging is done in a specific order to get the most information out of it, to determine what happened and when. It is a highly controlled exercise with huge responsibilities. Each dig has a finality: no one else can dig it again. The 3D modelling makes possible the reconstruction of the excavation process.

Most of the walls today are about a quarter of their original heights. The stones taken away are on top of those walls. Excavation reveals not the structure of what was there, but how it is now. We live our lives forward, but archaeology lives backwards.

You pull out with the pick, scrape smoothly with the trowel and sweep away with brush and pan. You do this steadily, patiently, paying keen attention to the minutest things the earth yields. Nothing is overlooked in modern archaeology. Everything can be a clue, yielding interpretations.

*Conversation is  
intense on*

Initiating me into the art of the dig is a young man named Liam Devlin. He is lanky, from Glasgow, wears black



*excavations. I tell my dig partner more about myself than friends I have known for many years*

and likes poetry. He shows me the use of the tools. “Archeologists are very attached to their tools, which become extensions of their hands,” Michael Boyd, a co-director of the expedition, had informed me earlier. “With the trowel, they feel the changing texture of the soil they are working on. This change tells them they are working on

something new. These sensitivities become very fine.”

I am working with the trowel when the feel of the soil changes. It has been dry, but now it is moist. Devlin tells me to stop. This marks a new point in the dig, which has to be photographed before we can proceed.

Every dig is existential. Excavation is simultaneously an act of destruction and revelation. Archeologists do not always know what they have discovered. They might search for one thing and uncover something that seems insignificant now, but that future generations might recognise as important. Current knowledge is also current limitation. To save interpretable evidence for the future is wisdom.

**After working steadily, we** take a break in the only shelter on the island. Then I am moved to another part of Trench A. Devlin asks me questions about poetry. He quotes Yeats. I refer to the stones and the earth we remove as adjectives. “I suppose we are trying to get to the nouns,” he laughs.

Conversation is intense on excavations. In just one day I learn about Devlin’s childhood, his taste in literature and details about his friends. I tell him more about myself than friends I have known for many years.

We work through the noonday sun. The wind is strong. There are people working so close to the edge, you fear they might fall in a sheer drop to the sea. Some of the earth that is carried away is passed on to sifters who work rudimentary machines. They sift the earth to find bits of pottery or obsidian, a

glasslike volcanic rock. They wind cloths round their faces. Clouds of dust drift in the wind when they work.

At 2.30pm the dig ceases. Photographs are taken of the day's progress. The results of the sift, the special finds, the earth samples, put in blue bags, are borne downhill. We collect our rucksacks and make our way down. A long line forms up the hill as we wait for a caique, the small fishing boat that will take us home. We are exhausted, silent, hot and caked in dust.

**The next day** I am dropped off at Kato-Koufonisi, to take part in a surveying expedition. Giorgos Gavalas, a Greek archaeologist, is leading the field trip. I learn that by looking carefully at the ground you can see 5,000 years of human history. I see early Cycladic pottery next to shards of Roman amphorae next to the detritus of recent meals.

Surveying is looking at deposits on the face of the earth. You count the pottery shards or obsidian finds in the two metres of your sweep area, using clickers. There are usually five tracks. Each person walks in a line. You keep an eye open for diagnostics — special finds, such as the handles of pots.

You read the writing of the land, the evidence of human habitation going back millennia. Vincent van Gogh could see in a patch of grass patterns for a masterpiece. Archaeologists see in an undisturbed field stratas of time. The past is more present than the present.

While the volunteers sweep across the field, Gavalas shows me the rest of the island. Among the white stones, asphodels have flowered. In Greek mythology they are associated with the afterlife.

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In the morning I am taken to [Keros](#) by Boyd. Keros is where it all began. It was where Renfrew, in 1987, made one of his first internationally important expeditions. It was on this island that the famous [Cycladic](#)

## *act of destruction and revelation*

figurines were deposited by early Bronze Age people in a ritual that still fascinates. Looters discovered the sites long before archaeologists

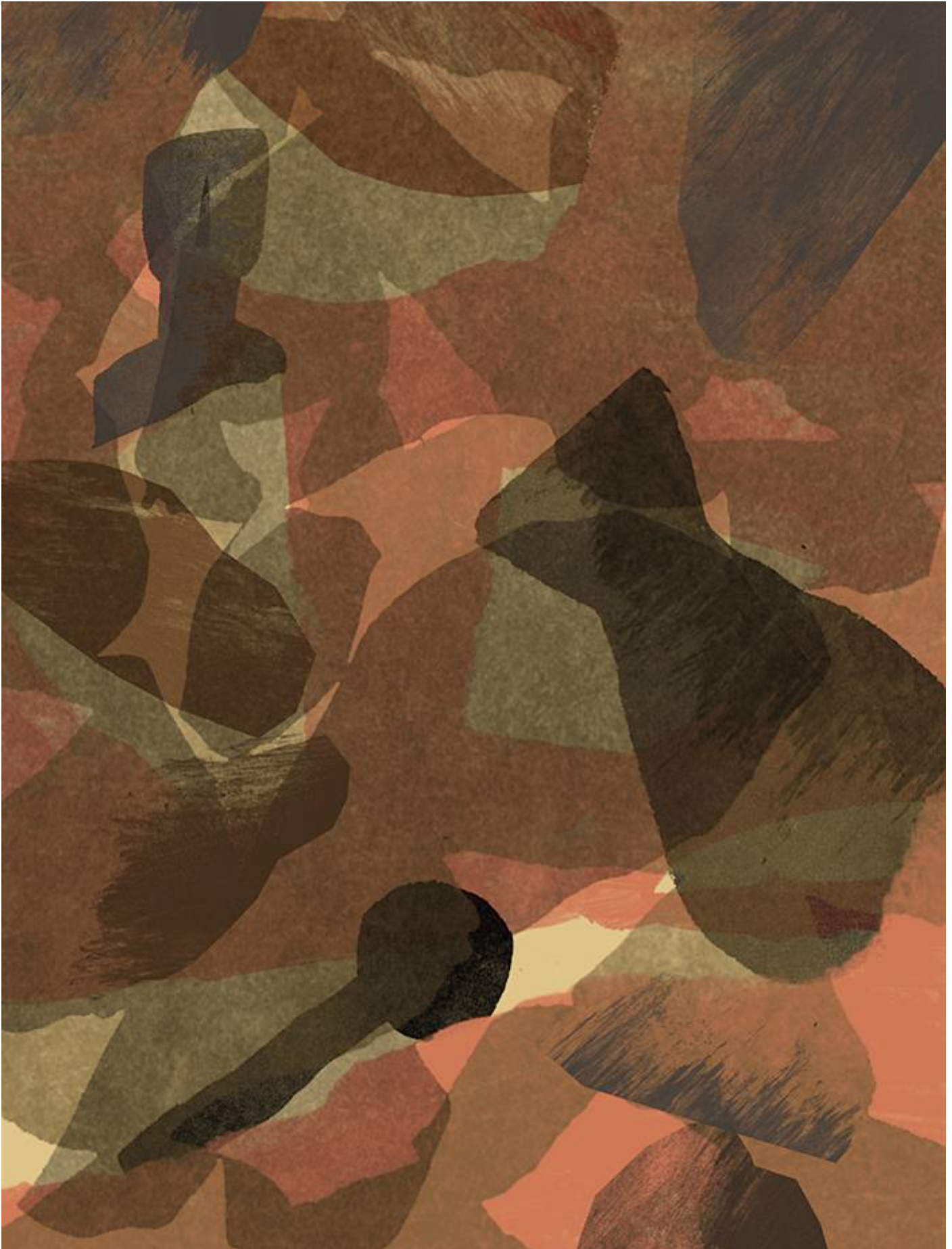
moved in for systematic excavations. The island is large and has been uninhabited for more than 50 years.

As the sea is rough, we disembark on the north side. It is an arduous ascent. Footholds are dangerous, the climb steep and the paths overgrown with thick thorn-bearing plants. There are droppings of mountain goats and wild dogs. The first thing that strikes me about Keros is its overwhelming peace. To the ancient Greeks it must have been sacred.

**After visiting the Roman** ruins we make a hair-raising journey to the south side, across sliding scree and precipitous drops and narrow ledges of rock. At a potentially perilous moment, I realise that in the archaeology of discovery there is always the presence of death. Maybe this is its primal appeal. The past is inaccessible to those who do not breach the world of the dead.

We make it across and arrive at the site of the last excavation of Cycladic figurines. It is covered with white netting. Nearby is a landing site. Thousands of years ago, a strip of land connected Keros and Dhaskalio. Four metres of water now cover that strip, dividing the islands. Back then you could walk from one island to the other. Their fates are still linked: to understand one, you have to understand the other.

Around midday, a caique takes me to Dhaskalio for my last day of excavation. For the others, this is their last dig there for a long time. Now they must classify their finds, sort and publish them — the long aftermath of every archaeological expedition. I shift soil and rock in a task that seems to yield nothing but that adds to the slow revelation of what was there. When I pause and look out to sea, I wonder if there ought not to be an archaeology of the spirit.



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Then it is time to go. On the way back, the rough waves smash against us,



drenching the crowded caique. A young man, sitting on the bulkhead, says: “Nowhere else is time dissolved like this.”

Beyond the roaring waves, history is a faint echo.

But they have another five weeks to go. As the end draws near, they could be working 16-hour days to complete their mission. Renfrew assures me, however, that they have already found what they sought. “Our job is to make sense of poor men’s rubbish,” he says. They are doing much more. They are making sense of the earliest sanctuary in Greek history, two thousand years before Homer.

“One value of archaeology,” says Boyd, “is the way it shows how quickly societies collapse. When they go wrong, they collapse very quickly, virtually overnight.”

This might be a lesson for our times, as we contemplate what future archaeologists might make of the rubbish of our civilisation.

*[Ben Okri](#) is a novelist and poet. His novel ‘The Freedom Artist’ is due to be published early next year by Head of Zeus*

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