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**GLAMMONS**

**PROCESSES,  
TOOLS &  
PROTOCOLS OF  
RESEARCHING  
AREAS OF 'DARK  
HERITAGE'**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This deliverable explores processes, tools, and protocols of researching 'dark heritage'. In particular, we draw on our empirical data and ethnographic fieldwork from, in, and about Spinalonga Island, Greece, to reflect on the interconnection between 'difficult heritage' and 'dark tourism'. Spinalonga, a small uninhabited island off the north coast of Eastern Crete, formally acknowledged as a national archaeological site, is of particular interest here as a 'dark' destination for its recent history of hosting (until 1957) an ostracised community of people suffering from leprosy (Hansen's disease). Today, the site attracts more than 400,000 annual visitors (mostly during the summer season), and it is ranked amongst the top-10 most popular heritage attractions in Greece. This case study provides a fertile ground for researching the interplay between difficult heritage and dark tourism both theoretically, i.e., across scholarly fields of heritage and tourism studies, and practically, i.e., on the ways a traumatic past is managed *in situ*, along with other layers of historicity (e.g., Venetian, Ottoman) and the ways in which it is being made relevant to visitors' lives and interests.

The working paper is based on a comprehensive review of previous scholarly work on 'difficult heritage' or 'dissonant heritage' (see *inter alia* Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996; Macdonald, 2009; Sharpley, 2009) and on 'dark tourism' or 'thanatourism' (see indicatively Stone, 2006; Seaton, 2009; Frew & White, 2013). By combining theoretical insights from this body of literature with our archival research and ethnographic fieldwork in and around Spinalonga, we explore the concept of 'dark heritage' as a relatively new term that reflects the tensions and contradictions of heritage, which serves simultaneously as a cultural resource (i.e., a site of collective memory and cultural creativity) and an economic resource (i.e., a site for tourism consumption and



leisure). In this light, the 'dark heritage' of Spinalonga describes the inherent discord between a dark legacy of human suffering and the contemporary romanticised tourism experience, necessitating alternative ways and tools to research it and manage it with sobriety and fairness. The paper proposes a reflective approach to dark heritage sites, such as Spinalonga, elaborating on processes for exploring how different layers of difficult memories co-exist in heritage sites with diverse pasts. By viewing memory and knowledge through the prism of commons theory, we advocate for creating a critically reflective approach to the lepers' past at Spinalonga, by emplacing their stories within the landscape in a way that redirects tourist gaze away from today's prevalent romanticised/aestheticized experience and towards a more critical appreciation of a difficult heritage.



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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ACRONYM</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
<b>ICOMOS</b>	International Council of Monuments and Sites
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organisation
<b>WHS</b>	UNESCO World Heritage Sites



# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this working paper is to discuss and elaborate on processes, tools and protocols of researching areas of 'dark heritage', by drawing on our fieldwork in Spinalonga Island (Greece) and its making as a contemporary heritage site through memory, public history and popular culture representations (Figure 1). Our analysis brings together current literature in heritage and tourism studies, which explore the concepts of 'difficult heritage' (see *inter alia* Macdonald, 2009; Harrison 2012; Waterton & Watson, 2013; Macdonald, 2015; Harrison et al., 2020), 'dissonant heritage' (see among others, Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996; Bruce & O Creighton, 2006; Johnson, 2014) and 'dark tourism' (see *inter alia* Lennon & Foley, 2000; Sharpley & Stone, 2009; White & Park, 2014; Stone et al., 2018). Our work extends previous research on these strands of literature by combining its theoretical and empirical insights with our archival and ethnographic work on Spinalonga.



*Figure 1* Panoramic view of the western side of Spinalonga (Photo credit: Lekakis, 2017)

Spinalonga is a small island in the Gulf of Mirabello, in the Lasithi regional unit, in north-eastern Crete, Greece (see also Section 3.2). The island's landscape is a palimpsest of different



historic periods and each of them has left its material traces. Most notably, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Spinalonga came under the Venetian rule and was fortified as part of a larger naval fortification system, the “bastion front system” (*fronte bastionato*), which was established in Crete by the Serenissima Repubblica di Venezia. After 1715, when the island surrendered to the Ottomans, a vibrant settlement emerged on its western and southern side with intense interactions and exchanges with mainland Crete. The settlement’s remains are still preserved today to a great extent. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Spinalonga was gradually abandoned due to various hostilities during the Cretan Revolt and it was finally evacuated in 1904, when the Cretan State (1898-1913) decided to establish a leper colony on the island. The exiled lepers lived in the ruins of the Venetian and Ottoman settlements, and continued to do so, when Crete became part of Greece in 1913. For four decades, those affected by the disease were ostracised, erased from national registries, socially stigmatised and condemned to live on the small island of Spinalonga with minimum resources and medical healthcare up until 1953, when the leper colony was closed (Lekakis, 2023).

Spinalonga was officially assigned the heritage status as an archaeological site in 1976 and soon after its designation, restoration works commenced on the Venetian walls and the Ottoman settlement. These works, supervised by the local Ephorate of Antiquities of the Greek Ministry of Culture, established the contemporary ‘monumental’ character and image of Spinalonga, prominent when you visit the island today. Since its transformation to an organised archaeological site with some basic facilities for its visitors and an entrance fee in 2000, Spinalonga became the second most visited heritage site in Crete after Knossos Palace and one of the most popular nationally, attracting over 400,000 visitors per year (Hellenic Ministry of Tourism, 2024). The lepers may be gone, but the communities across continue to interact with Spinalonga, responding to tourism demand that ‘floods’ the island with tourist waves during the summer months. Contrary to the official narratives that mostly focus on the Venetian and Ottoman pasts, local actors and visitors seem also interested in the hardships of the leper colony, as accentuated in romanticised popular culture (most notably, a UK novel published in 2005), thus, maintaining a ‘dark’ layer to the narrative and the ways the site is being experienced.

As we argue in the following paragraphs, Spinalonga represents an idiosyncratic heritage site that exemplifies what we term ‘dark heritage’; namely a hybrid between a site of ‘difficult heritage’ and a ‘dark tourism’ attraction, which is neither ‘difficult’ nor ‘dark’ *per se*, but which exposes the tensions between a dark legacy of human suffering and social injustice with the romanticised and aestheticized experience of tourism consumption. This ‘dark matter’ (Lekakis, 2023) not only co-exists with other layers of the monument’s social biography (e.g., Venetian, Ottoman), but also serves as a prominent feature of its popularity and as such, it deserves to be embedded more critically into visitor experience. This calls for a different approach to heritage research and management practice, necessitating alternative ways and tools to deal with it based on fair-mindedness and sobriety. With this in mind, in this paper we propose a more reflective approach to Spinalonga, and other ‘dark heritage’ sites, elaborating



on processes for researching how different layers of (difficult) memory co-exist in heritage sites with diverse biographies. By viewing memory and knowledge through the prism of commons theory, we advocate for emplacing the lepers' experience and stories within the representations of the past of Spinalonga.

## **1.2. Contribution to other Deliverables**

This working paper forms part of GLAMMONS' Work Package 3 'Communities, commoners and trauma' and in particular, Task 3.3 titled 'Communities, cultural images and economic development; the case of Spinalonga'. As such, the work presented here is complementary to Deliverable 3.4 'Working paper on regional development and the role of collaboration among different actors'. The latter focuses on the processes of discourse production in Spinalonga (i.e., official narratives, stories 'from below', popular culture), power structures (e.g., who is entitled to speak about Spinalonga) and their interaction with tourism and economic growth. Following this analysis, in the present paper, we move a step further to discuss in greater depth the challenges for heritage researchers and managers to develop a more representative and reflective experience for the modern visitor.

## **1.3. Structure of the Document**

The working paper is organised in five main sections. Following this introduction (Section 1), Section 2 sets the frame of our analysis by reviewing the current literature on the concepts of contested heritage, difficult heritage, dissonant heritage, as well as, dark tourism/thanatourism – in effect, bringing together some key theoretical and empirical insights from the fields of critical heritage and tourism studies. The next section (Section 3) moves on to examine how these fit with the case of Spinalonga, providing us with the space to elaborate on the concept and specificities of 'dark heritage' and our methodology. Section 4 exhibits our empirical data and key themes that expose how dark layers unfold in our research in Spinalonga. Finally, Section 5 draws our conclusions and proposes potential avenues and tools that can facilitate the research and management of dark heritage sites, such as Spinalonga.



## **2. EXPLORING THE ‘DARK MATTER’ ACROSS HERITAGE AND TOURISM STUDIES**

This section sets out the framework of our analysis by bringing together some key theoretical and empirical insights from two distinct but highly associated fields of scholarly research on the topic; Heritage Studies (rooted in Arts & Humanities) and Tourism Studies (stemming from Social Sciences/Management). Such a ‘combined’ review is purposeful, since these two bodies of literature deal with similar questions approached from different angles. Such questions concern the management and experience of cultural landscapes and monuments that are imbued with multiple and often contesting values and discourses of a past, which are neither pleasant nor glorious, but rather ‘dark’, ‘dissonant’ or ‘difficult’ in some way or another. By studying both strands of relevant literature, we seek to draw on all knowledge available on the subject in order to inform future processes, tools, and protocols for researching and, by extension, managing these heritage sites towards a balanced and socially relevant approach.

### **2.1. Heritage and its ‘dark’ spectrum**

#### **2.1.1. What is heritage?**

In recent years, our understanding of ‘heritage’ has expanded at both academic and public levels. Heritage “was once largely restricted to major monuments and/or ‘inspirational’ artistic or architectural masterpieces” (Fairclough, 2019: 1151). Nevertheless, this understanding of the concept of heritage has been largely challenged within the interdisciplinary field of critical heritage studies (see for example, the recent volume by Carter et al., 2020). As seen in critical literature, in Europe and the Western world, heritage was ‘invented’ (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) by nation-states to narrate the historic deeds of our (ethnic) ancestors (among others, Waterton, 2016; Lekakis, 2020), through ‘authorised’ works and artefacts (Smith, 2006). It emerged as ‘the material embodiment of the spirit of the nation’, closely tied to broader power structures in the form of ‘the symbolic power to order knowledge, to rank, classify and arrange, and thus to give meaning to objects and things through the imposition of interpretative schemas, scholarship and the authority of connoisseurship’ (Hall, 1999: 4).

However, recent years have seen the proliferation of heritage ontologies. Against a backdrop of monumental heritage buildings and objects of ‘high art’, we have come to acknowledge that there exist multiple social groups, communities and individuals that engage in vernacular, non-monumental and non-exceptional heritage-making, through actions of remembering and forgetting, producing and adapting, practising and performing (Silverman et al., 2017; Lekakis & Dragouni, 2020). These acts of heritage-making are commonly permeated by valuing and valorisation, since there is ‘no heritage before somebody assigns significance and starts to preserve, remember, reclaim and enhance something’ (Fouseki & Cassar, 2015: 55). By this



conceptualisation, heritage shapes and reshapes people's sense of place, sense of belonging and cultural identities (Silverman et al., 2017) and is consequently shaped by them. The emergence of new sites and categories of heritage, such as 'intangible heritage', 'sub-altern' heritage, 'reactance heritage', or even heritage 'that is not necessarily uplifting', such as 'dissonant heritage', reveal how broad the blanket term of 'heritage' can be (Fairclough, 2019: 1151) and how malleable the 'monumental' landscape can be in our days.

For these reasons, a growing literature on heritage has promoted the idea that heritage can be anything and everything (Harvey, 2001; Harrison, 2012; Fouseki & Cassar, 2015) and it is everywhere (Lowenthal, 1998) as 'a constantly accumulating category' (Robinson & Silverman, 2015: 5). Above all, heritage and by extension, 'heritagisation' is a process and present-centred phenomenon (Harvey, 2001; Smith, 2006; Fairclough, 2019), whereby people 'select an inheritance from an imagined past for current use and [decide] what should be passed on to an imagined future' (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996: 6). This has gradually led to a change of paradigm towards 'a socially engaged, politically aware study of the past that regards heritage as contested' (Silverman, 2011: 5).

### **2.1.2. 'Contested' heritage**

Since the mid 1980s, the concept of 'contested' heritage, although not always articulated as such, has been present in heritage studies and in related disciplines, such as archaeology, anthropology, history, geography and tourism studies (Silverman, 2011). Heritage and conflict appear to go 'hand in hand', stimulating 'a noisy conversation' that attracts attention while promising reform and reconciliation (Hammami et al., 2022). Although contestation around heritage can emerge for various reasons, ranging from the goals and the agenda of those involved to history (traumatic or not) and economy (Solomon, 2021), contested heritage is some way or another, a result of agency, politics, power and resistance (Wilson, 2013). For instance, conflict may emerge from antagonisms between preservation and land use, the past versus the present, development of a heavy industry that could create jobs immediately as opposed to perceived tourism potential (Gordillo, 2009). Conflict may also arise when assigning the 'heritage' label from the government level instead of generating heritage locally, privileging sites that are intelligible to specific social groups based on class and ideology, engaging in value judgements of what represents heritage that is nationally or internationally significant and so on. For this, attention to contested cultural heritage is, fundamentally, our acknowledgement of identity building processes, their situational and relational aspects and their oppositional deployment (Silverman, 2011).

Solomon (2021: 6-9) provides a thorough account of heritage-in-conflict patterns, as documented in the related literature. In particular, she suggests that some common conflictual situations manifest when:



- Legal ownership of cultural heritage is challenged by symbolic ownership, as in claims for artefacts' repatriation;
- Authoritative discourses and exclusionary management practices discriminate against social groups and values that rest outside the national 'canon';
- Epistemological approaches promote specific views of the past that raise representational critiques;
- Heritage authorities make decisions about monuments without public consultation;
- Conservation of the past overlaps with spatial management, urban planning, land uses, and by extension with economic growth (e.g., through tourism);
- Popular culture and tourism produce heritage images and representations that clash with the authority of scholarly discourses thus raising issues of authenticity;
- Cultural heritage is dramatically erased through violence and intentional destruction (as in armed conflict);
- The promotion of the cultural differences of nations, ethnic groups and localities contradicts the idea of a common, pan-European identity;
- Dealing with traumatic heritage and considering what is the most ethical way of doing so;
- Ranking heritage values and classifying monuments based on their universal, national or local significance.

As we will see later on in this working paper, the case of Spinalonga has nurtured conflict on multiple 'fronts', much of which remains unresolved today. Beyond dealing with traumatic heritage, conflictual situations extend to antagonisms between official discourses (wishing to privilege specific 'layers' of the site's biography), popular culture (taking most interest in its recent 'dark' past), and local discourses (based on lived experiences of the lepers' past on the island), pressures for balancing between protection/conservation and local economic (tourism) development, as well as, framing 'universal' significance for listing Spinalonga as a UNESCO World Heritage site. All these issues are of course closely interconnected and all relate to politics and power dynamics: Whose interests shall be prioritised? Which past shall be emphasised? Who has the right to speak about such a heritage site? Who has the authority to make decisions about its future? As all these questions have vast implications for research and professional practice, we will problematise them further in subsequent sections.



### 2.1.3 'Difficult' heritage

The legacy of painful and other troubled events and periods is documented and 'embodied' in various monuments, sites and places related among others to war conflicts, violence, imprisonment, slavery, social discrimination and forced internment at asylums and leper colonies. As in recent years, the conception of heritage and its taxonomies have been broadened (see Section 2.1.1), these places have increasingly come to be seen as 'heritage', 'a far cry from the view of heritage that prevailed a generation ago when we were almost entirely concerned with protecting the great and artful creations of the past: reflections of the creative genius of humanity rather than the reverse – the destructive and cruel side of history' (Logan & Reeves, 2009: 1). This particular type of heritage is neither celebrated nor 'comfortably acknowledged as part of a nation's or city's valued history'; it is rather 'unsettling' (Macdonald, 2009: 1).

'Difficult heritage' is distinct from the much broader concept of 'contested heritage' because it does not refer to a specific category of sites and monuments, but to a social phenomenon by which heritage 'threatens to trouble collective identities and open up social differences' (Macdonald, 2009: 4). In this sense, heritage of the past can disturb our positive self-image and remind us 'of the past that is recognised as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity' (ibid: 1). Difficult heritage is often 'troublesome' as 'it threatens to break through into the present in disruptive ways, opening up social divisions, perhaps by playing into imagined, even nightmarish, futures' (ibid: 1). Thus, 'difficult heritage' is different from all other heritage that typically focus on acts, events, triumphs and achievements that feed our sense of pride. On the contrary, this heritage type and its material remains testify to our dark history pages and would have normally been silenced or erased from collective memory and public space, yet somehow survived to present day.

According to Macdonald (2009: 3), commemoration of dark events occurs for various reasons, particularly when the heritage under consideration is recent, when victims themselves or other morally-driven social groups push for recognition, when oblivion risks historic recurrence, when scientific evidence challenges silence or even when 'a troubling history' -despite being uncomfortable- attracts tourists and raises revenue.

For Macdonald (2015), difficult heritage deserves our attention because of the problems that it potentially raises for self-identity and also because it is a relatively new development in related practice. Difficult heritage is therefore, a relatively recent and niche phenomenon in heritage-making; there is still much reluctance and unwillingness to address the aspects of a past that is unsettling and thus monuments and information that can have a negative impact on self-representation are often subject to 'containment' (Macdonald, 2015: 7) or awkward approaches in terms of management and/or presentation. It can be more useful not as another typological category of heritage but as a process; a process of 'looking at how heritage is



assembled both discursively and materially, at the various players involved, at what they may experience as awkward and problematic, and at the ways in which they negotiate this' (Macdonald, 2009: 4). Therefore, as a historical and ethnographic phenomenon (Macdonald, 2009: 4), difficult heritage calls us to look at how heritage is assembled, discursively and at the same time materially.

In this line of thinking, negotiation of difficult heritage invites us to focus on the debates, arguments and assumptions about heritage and identity, conflicts of interest and the various perspectives that may be heard or overlooked, accorded with agency or ignored of the groups and individuals involved and affected, such as, state authorities, conservation experts, artists, independent scholars, victims and their descendants, local residents, tourism entrepreneurs and others, as well as, their 'negotiating strategies - demolition, amputation, profanation, reconstruction, looking elsewhere, commemoration, art, education and moral witnessing that might be used in relation to heritage, and especially awkward heritage, of various kinds' (Macdonald, 2009: 186).

#### **2.1.4. 'Dissonant' heritage**

In a book published in 1996, Tunbridge and Ashworth introduced the concept of 'dissonant heritage' to highlight how contemporary processes of making-up the past in the present are selective and hence, inherently and universally antagonistic and controversial, involving 'a discordance or a lack of agreement and consistency' (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996: 20). Although not articulated as such directly, the authors' rationale, as laid out on the pages of the book, is organised around the idea of 'ownership' (mostly in symbolic terms) as central in the heritage-making process. As they suggest, 'all heritage is someone's heritage and therefore logically not someone else's: the original meaning of an inheritance implies the existence of disinheritance and by extension any creation of heritage from the past disinherits someone completely or partially, actively or potentially' (ibid: 21). In turn, they argue that this rivalry for symbolic 'ownership' rights over a particular past creates a lack of harmony in how this past is shaped eventually in the present.

More often than not some groups or communities may perceive a specific monument or legacy as their 'territory' and view themselves as its 'primary custodians' responsible for protecting and preserving it for future generations. This can and has led systematically to exclusionary practices of interpretation, management and/or uses of heritage, regulated by broader power structures. Still ontologically, by fully accepting the view of a dissonant heritage as a necessary condition of the heritage 'entity', we risk to transform it perceptually once and for all into a 'battlefield', where polyphony, reconciliation and other constructive social processes would be rendered impossible intrinsically and thus, futile. In this light, commons theory could help us build a more optimistic view, treating monuments and their knowledge/meanings as shared resources that can be managed through commonly-accepted rules crafted within the commons systems (see also GLAMMONS Deliverable 1.6 and Deliverable 3.4).



Although we opine that nowadays, the notion of ‘dissonant heritage’ can be restrictive for heritage research and management, we acknowledge that the idea fits well with describing commodification processes that take place in the context of tourism consumption. As Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996: 22) explain, the processing of a historical resource and its packaging into a heritage (tourism) product is imbued with ‘the dilemma between generalisation or particularization’ which is inherent in all contemporary markets. This is particularly valid for mass tourism, where the ‘tourist gaze’ is disciplined by market mechanisms that organise iconographic and sensory expectations and experiences in commonplace products that balance the familiar with the exotic (Urry, 1990; Papadopoulos, 2015). Such commodification practices extend to the field of heritage where ‘some uses of heritage strongly favour generalisation. Mass tourism in particular requires the reduction of a rich and complex past to a set of easily recognisable characteristics: the heritage product must be rapidly assimilated into the existing experience, expectations and historical understanding of a visitor with limited local knowledge and quite definite expectations of what this heritage product should contain (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996: 22). Specifically in the tourism sector, heritage and the past are among the fields where ‘tourism imaginaries’ originate from. Looking at the ways tourism imaginaries are produced, has given scholars valuable insights into the effects this process has on identity formation, place-making and the invention of culture (Salazar, 2012: 14).

These are valuable observations considering that we live in an era where heritage resources are rarely appreciated exclusively for their cultural values (e.g., educational, artistic, historic) or even their political uses, and where all these co-exist with (if not overshadowed by) aspirations for economic growth and local development through heritage-led tourism and regional regeneration. Against this background, heritage and place come to exist in a relationship of mutual becoming, as ‘the past can be used to shape the character of places, and places managed so as to shape a perception of a past’ (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996: 25), thus nurturing implicit tensions and ‘dissonances’. The idea of ‘dissonant heritage’ has exerted a major impact on research and analysis across heritage and particularly heritage tourism studies (see indicatively, Best & Phulgence, 2013; Lemelin et al., 2013; Pavlicic, 2016; Owsianowska, 2017; Battilani et al., 2018) while fertilising the ground for the emergence of ‘dark tourism’ literature.

## **2.2. Dark Tourism**

‘Dark tourism’ has been characterised as ‘an old concept in a new world’ (Stone, 2005). As Sharpley observes (2009: 4), people’s interest in painful histories is not a new phenomenon as ‘for as long as people have been able to travel, they have been drawn towards sites, attractions or events that are linked in one way or another with death, suffering, violence or disaster’. Since ‘darkness’ manifests in various forms of travel and visitation activity, in this



section, we focus on what is commonly referred to as 'dark tourism' in the related academic literature in the field of tourism studies, with the view to explore its content, relevance and limits to our analysis.

During the mid-1990s and 2000s, the concept of 'dark tourism' together with 'dissonance in heritage (tourism)' have found widespread application in related scholarly work (Hartmann, 2014). Despite some variations in labelling the phenomenon (e.g., dark tourism, thanatourism, black tourism, grief tourism), related studies commonly focus on forms of tourism to places and sites that are highly associated with death, tragedy and suffering (Sharpley, 2009). The term 'dark tourism' was first coined by Foley and Lennon (1996) in a paper on the fascination of the public towards JFK assassination and was further explored, theorised and popularised in a volume (Lennon and Foley, 2000: 198-9) to denote a type of cultural tourism which features the 'presentation and consumption of real and commodified death', taking place at 'dark' attractions offering 'sensation and spectacle'.

Today, 'dark tourism' has been crystallised as a term used to denote travel to sites associated with death and 'difficult heritage', which makes up an important part of heritage tourism and the visitor economy globally (Stone, 2018; Timothy, 2018). In nearly all parts of the world, dark experiences are produced and offered to both mainstream and special-interest visitors for varied purposes, including remembrance, education and entertainment (Morales, 2013). Within the general shift from service-based to experience-based tourism, where the focus is to provide memorable and engaging experiences to tourists (Pine and Gilmore, 1998), dark tourism gained even more significant traction. An interesting feature of 'dark tourism' attractions is that they often emerge organically or 'accidentally' (Sharpley, 2009). In many cases, 'dark' sites had not been intentionally promoted or otherwise developed as 'dark tourism' attractions by their management authorities. Contrary to mainstream tourism products (and even also to 'mainstream' monuments), which are 'deliberately brought in being for a defined purpose by specific agencies', 'dark' attractions frequently attain their 'darkness' by an externally-driven identity shift that is triggered unexpectedly in a way where management agencies do not have much control (Seaton, 2009: 89).

In fact, Lennon and Foley (2000) acknowledge the mediation of popular culture as a key trait of 'dark' places that have been developed for tourism. In this light, the so-called 'spontaneous emergence' of dark tourism is driven by media narratives (e.g., representations in novels, films, television) which assume a leading role in stimulating the public's interest in a place's dark past (Foley & Lennon, 1996; Seaton, 1996) or even, by local businesses anxiety to profit through tourism (Sharpley, 2009: 8). As Foley and Lennon (1996: 199) note, 'in many cases the development of museums and tourist attractions may systematically ignore elements of popular culture which can supply motivations for tourism and which can, in part, focus on negative or macabre aspects of human interest'. On the other hand, Seaton (2009: 90) sees the development of a new practice in heritage and destination management in more recent years, where the 'dark' layer is embedded in some 'thematization strategy', as for instance in



the form of a temporary museum exhibition by 'high-end' institutions. For Seaton (*ibid*), this dark tourism 'theming' has been adopted as a tactic for reaching new and broader audiences.

As Sharpley (2009) suggests, some common issues that emerge in dark tourism sites relate to their interpretation and management – i.e., how they are presented, what messages they communicate to audiences and how much these are grounded upon understanding and respect for the victims and the community. For Timothy (2018: 172), it is 'the sensitive nature' of what these attractions demarcate or commemorate, that calls for 'unique management approaches' which can ensure that the site's 'interpretation, presentation, and marketing are done cautiously'. Similarly, in research and scholarly work, dark tourism needs to be positioned within a wide context of morality, emotion and historical responsibility (Stone, 2009; Hanna et al., 2018). Thus, a key concern is the blurring of boundaries between historical/political messages and commercialisation as tourism products (Foley & Lennon, 1996). Parallel but closely tied to dissonance among functions and purposes, also lies the management of dark places' polysemy, often requiring from researchers and management experts to deal with and negotiate with contradiction and conflict across collective and popular memory, material embodiments of communal mythology and those versions of history that a community wishes to include in a site's discursive representation (Seaton, 2009: 97). As Hanna et al. (2018: 402) put it eloquently, although dark tourism 'clearly runs the risk of commodifying and trivialising atrocity, it also carries with it a capacity for historical education and even commemorative justice for those traditionally marginalised in dominant heritage tourism narratives'. A key motivation for engaging in dark tourism is learning and a desire to better understand the reasons behind a tragic history (Isaac, 2018). The challenge—as always—is to figure out ways to balance between different interests and expectations.

Yet, research on dark tourism across the field of tourism studies has paid most attention to understanding visitors' drivers and motivations, their experiences of consuming dark tourism products, the organisation of dark tourism industry and its impact on destinations in terms of place identity (see indicatively, the edited volumes of Sharpley & Stone, 2009; White & Frew, 2013; Stone et al., 2018). Admittedly, this literature is wide-ranging and rich, offering valuable theoretical insights on the subject, although there are still some critical questions to be addressed regarding effective ways for researching and interpreting these dark places from a heritage/community perspective. In this respect, interdisciplinary research approaches to the topic can be particularly useful, drawing further on theory and practice across related disciplinary areas, such as heritage studies, critical heritage management, museology and social anthropology to explore in greater depth and width issues regarding curation and landscape management of monuments with multiple layers of history and memory.

### **2.3. Why does 'dark' matter?**

In the previous paragraphs we reviewed the concepts of heritage and its 'dark' expressions and manifestations, giving rise to 'contested', 'difficult' and 'dissonant' heritage as well as



feeding experiences of 'dark tourism' within the expanding economy of experience tourism. There is significant overlap and cross-cutting in these discursive concepts and disciplinary fields. In this subsection, we will delve deeper into the quite emotive term 'dark' to explore its multiple nuances in the heritage sector. Philip Stone in his paper "A Dark Tourism Spectrum: towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions" (2006) develops a spectrum that ranges from sites directly associated with death (such as battlefields and execution sites) to those that are more tangentially related (such as museums with exhibits on historical tragedies). This spectrum helps in identifying the variety of ways that 'dark matter' is represented and experienced in tourism. In Stone's typology, there are three types of dark tourism: (a) sites of death: locations where significant historical deaths occurred, such as memorials or concentration camps, (b) exhibitions of death: museums, exhibitions (and to add on Stone's thinking, heritage sites too) that display artefacts related to death and disaster and (c) fictional representations: attractions that use death and macabre themes in fictional contexts, such as horror-themed entertainment, or as in our case of Spinalonga, historical fiction novels.

Representations of 'dark matter' are of great interest—either in on-site representations, in museums and exhibitions or in any form of fiction. Although in a totally different historical, political and social context, current analysis on narratives of the Holocaust provides a useful theoretical framework to think and understand various different cases of dark and difficult pasts (such as Spinalonga's leper's colony) or even presents (such as the refugee camps in Lesbos and other Greek islands). Rhetorics of the Holocaust in the present are used in contemporary discussions about peace and human rights, and shape public memory and discourse. Other narratives emphasise stories of triumph over oppression, stories of heroism and resilience of the oppressed. Others focus on innocent suffering, stigmatisation and victimisation of innocent people suggesting that humans are morally obliged to prevent future human rights abuses.

Levy and Sznajder (2006: 2) introduce the idea of 'cosmopolitan memory' which transcends the national boundaries and surpasses local 'cultural buffers'. They argue that processes of cosmopolitanisation bring issues of global concern into everyday local experiences, as various political and moral points of reference directly or indirectly inform local experiences. As Beck (2000) argues, the interplay between universal values and local cultures creates new forms of localism which are responsive to contemporary concerns. In this way, the production of cultural heritage and its experiences are transcendental and align with new cross-national narratives that help us address current issues and questions through our engagement with the past, as for instance, the leprosy-related stigma and exclusion which is still present in our globalised world (see among others, Erving, 1963; Staples, 2007).

However, official national and transnational heritage management institutions, such as ICOMOS, UNESCO and culture ministries, are often insufficiently responsive to these developments, especially when heritage issues and questions are vested with shades of 'darkness'. UNESCO in particular has been critiqued for failing to fulfil its promise of promoting



a universal understanding of heritage and broadening its definition beyond the comfortable (Carter et al., 2020). UNESCO channels maintain largely their authority in heritage-making by inscribing a particular set of monumental material sites to the World Heritage List (Di Giovine, 2009), whereas governments that are keen to achieve a nomination often take little consideration of the needs and desires of affected communities (Silverman, 2017). As eloquently put by Carter et al. (2020: 1), in practice, the UNESCO agenda ‘fails to account for the complex, dynamic and situated relationships’ that produce heritage through human and non-human interactions, sticking instead to a ‘rationalised, post-Enlightenment view of culture, which treats heritage as a ‘thing’; an object to be preserved, classified and presented, by experts, to the public’ (ibid).

We argue here that the variety of different forms of darkness around heritage creates a fertile ground for social research and opens up new space for engaging with the past that deserves further exploration and methodological elaboration. Towards this direction, we will now move on to researching Spinalonga (Figure 2) and its dark heritage.



*Figure 2 Spinalonga Island, Crete (photo credit: Lekakis, 2017)*



### 3. RESEARCHING SPINALONGA AND ITS DARK HERITAGE

Researching, interpreting and managing the ‘contested’, ‘difficult’, ‘dissonant’ or otherwise ‘dark’ heritage can be a great challenge, involving ‘an unsettling process’ that requires us to confront historical silences and longing for the inclusion of memories that have been kept out of the public sphere (Macdonald, 2009; Stefanou & Antoniadou, 2021). In this chapter, we present our research concept and methodology for studying the ‘dark heritage’ across palimpsestic monumental landscapes, such as Spinalonga Island (Figure 3).



*Figure 3 Spinalonga's disinfection room (source: [Ephorate of Antiquities of Lasithi, 2023](#))*

To delve into the ways Spinalonga has been produced as a ‘dark’ tourist attraction since 1957, when the leper colony ceased its operation and through the last decades, we went on to examine relevant material from the Historical Archive of the Greek Archaeological Service, the General State Archives and the Archives of the Historical Museum of Crete. Archival research was aimed at unfolding the processes through which Spinalonga has been ‘archaeologised’, i.e., the series of changes, actions, and steps performed in order to produce Spinalonga as a



site of archaeological significance. At the same time, archive-oriented research focused on the ways Spinalonga 'emerged' as a 'difficult' memory site upon which leper's descendants applied meanings as well as potential for ensuring fair treatment of their past and advocating for broader social change towards de-stigmatisation of leprosy.

Archival research gave us a rich set of information about the production of the past of Spinalonga both as an archaeological site and as a site of exile. Yet, research concerned with the ways in which dark heritage can be treated methodologically cannot fulfil its mission without drawing on methods, practices, and tools from multiple fields, such as anthropology, history, and cultural studies, to enrich our understanding and provide a more comprehensive analysis. Our intensive ethnographic fieldwork on and around Spinalonga provided us with valuable insights into the lived experiences, memories, and narratives of the local community and leper descendants. It allowed us to uncover the nuanced ways in which the site is remembered, contested, and symbolised, deepening our understanding of its role in both personal and collective memory. A series of lengthy and detailed interviews with key-representatives of the local and state authorities (i.e., the local Archaeological Service, the Municipality of Agios Nikolaos, journalists, tour guides, tourism sector representatives) provided us with the knowledge that is necessary to trace the 'dark matter' of Spinalonga through time.

With a particular focus on how, when, by whom and why the dark side of Spinalonga's past emerged within the various developmental shifts of the Lasithi region, we turned into the diverse discursive interpretations of the site as can be found in literature, cinema, contemporary art and other creative practices. This field of research proved to be a rich source of knowledge as it opened up our research to new ways of knowing Spinalonga, ones that go beyond what can be represented through academic texts and writing, incorporating embodied experiences, visual narratives, and oral histories (for further analysis of the methods and practices of research see - Section 3.3).

### **3.1. Researching heritage on the islandscape**

Since our case study concerns the small island of Spinalonga and its 'dark' past as a leper colony, it would be purposeful to examine here some similar cases to inform our analysis. We have chosen to focus in particular on (a) small islands that were used as fortresses with settlements developed inside them and (b) places related to the displacement of social groups due to illness or other social and political factors.

#### **3.1.1 Fortified islands used as places of exile**

Comparable to Spinalonga are islands that share similar characteristics of a fortress and/or the confinement of displaced social groups. Interestingly, many of these have been ascribed to the UNESCO World Heritage list of monuments. However, we observe that despite their



designation as historical sites of international significance, there is a lack of systematic research and conservation process with the view to highlight the breadth of their historical palimpsests, the significance of their historical remains and the use of their space as places of isolation. In addition to that, no easy comparisons can be made for the interpretation of the sites in question, as the end result of the *in situ* panels, exhibitions and management choices depend on the periods of the site highlighted by the authorities and also the local and national politics surrounding them.

Some of the island sites are traced across the coasts of Africa and associated with the slave trade, hosting facilities and memories of human suffering and racial discrimination. One characteristic example is *Robben Island* in South Africa, a fortified former prison-hospital for outcast groups - including some leper colony infrastructure, from the late 17th century until 1996, after the end of apartheid<sup>1</sup>. Similar to Spinalonga, the island's geography has been employed as a means of spatial and social exclusion whereas today, the significant increase in visitors and carrying capacity pressures could provide an interesting comparative example for the sustainable management of 'dark tourism'.

Another two interesting examples are *Gorée Island* in Senegal and *Kunta Kinteh Island* in Gambia. Gorée was used as a hub for slave trade between the 15th and 19th centuries and today stands as an important monument of the African Diaspora and a symbol of one of the greatest tragedies in human history. On Gorée Island, the preserved facilities for the imprisonment of slaves and the accommodation of slave traders are relatively limited although in good condition while recent reconstructions have raised questions about the integrity of the site<sup>2</sup>. In addition, *Kunta Kinteh* is a fortified river island with a history of intense slave trade between the 16th and 19th centuries. Despite its inscription to UNESCO World Heritage List, the site's research and management has been relatively poor, suffering from heavy erosion that has left approximately 1/6 of its original size<sup>3</sup>.

Between the Indian and Pacific oceans, the 11 penal islands around Australia, also known as *Australian Convict Sites* represent a slightly different case spatially but very similar in terms of use<sup>4</sup>. The islands host facilities that served for the confinement of convicts under British rule during 1787-1868. Traces of confinement and human suffering are documented architecturally and embodied in the relevant buildings and fortifications that are preserved today in relatively good condition. Yet, one notable difference here compared to Spinalonga is the absence of a monumental palimpsest, stemming from the limited time span of the islands' use.

Regarding the use of islands as leper colonies and quarantine stations, some notable

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/916/> (last access 27 August 2024).

<sup>2</sup> See <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/26> (last access 27 August 2024).

<sup>3</sup> See <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/761/> (last access 27 August 2024).

<sup>4</sup> See <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1306/> (last access 27 August 2024).



examples from Europe and beyond include *the Lazareto de Mahon* on the Menorcan coast in Spain, the quarantine hospital on *Manoel Island* in Malta, the *Lazzaretto Vecchio* in Italy, *Chacachacare* (Trinidad & Tobago), *Sorok* (South Korea), *Fantome* (Australia), *Quail* (New Zealand) and *Culion* (Philippines). Although some of these have been developed into places of cultural tourism interest, they generally preserve limited traces that relate to their traumatic pasts, overshadowed by contemporary infrastructure. For instance, Lazareto de Mahon had been remodelled to host international conferences and meetings with no intention of preserving the place as a monument of human suffering.

### 3.1.2 Islands used as places of exile in Greece

Regarding islands that served as places of exile and isolation in Greece, the politics of repression and their traumatic legacy has been mostly connected to political imprisonment and rehabilitation of citizens and soldiers of left-wing and communist beliefs<sup>5</sup>.

A very distinguished example is the Lazaretto islet (Saint Demetrius) close to Corfu which, towards the end of the 16th century, hosted the first quarantine station in the Ionian Sea. The facilities were used as a military hospital by the Turkish fleet during the Russo-Turkish wars, by the British in 1814, and by the Greek state after the union of the Ionian Islands with mainland Greece in 1864. During World War II, the site was used as a concentration camp for resistance fighters under Italian administration and as a prison during the Greek Civil War. In 1992, it was listed as a historical site by the Greek Ministry of Culture. Lazaretto exhibits common characteristics with Spinalonga, particularly those of isolation and being a place of suffering in different phases of its historical use, albeit over a shorter time span. The site also carries strong memories from World War II and hosts an annual memorial service for those executed during the Axis Occupation and the Greek Civil War, but it does not serve as a tourist destination or a place for public visits. It therefore lacks systematic interpretation *in situ*.

Still, as implied earlier, most prominent in the case of Greece are islands of political exile and imprisonment. Several islands, mainly in the Aegean Sea, served as places of exile during a lengthy period of war conflict and political oppression. Although the mechanism of 'exile' existed since the 19th century, it came to be used extensively after the enactment of Law 4229/1929, known as the 'idionymon'. The latter was one of the first measures against the Greek Communist Party and opponents of the Left and Leftist ideas, which established the penalty of exile for anyone "who attempt[ed] to apply ideas that ha[d] as an obvious target the violent overthrow of the current social system, or who act[ed] in propagandising their application". The Metaxas dictatorship (1936-1941) extended the brutal persecution of communists and socialist to island exile camps whereas the number of political exiles grew

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance, Makronisos Digital Museum available at <https://www.makronissos.org> (last access 27 August 2024).



even further during the Greek Civil War and early post-Civil War years. During the Junta (1967-1974), the measure was revived and re-used to a great extent.

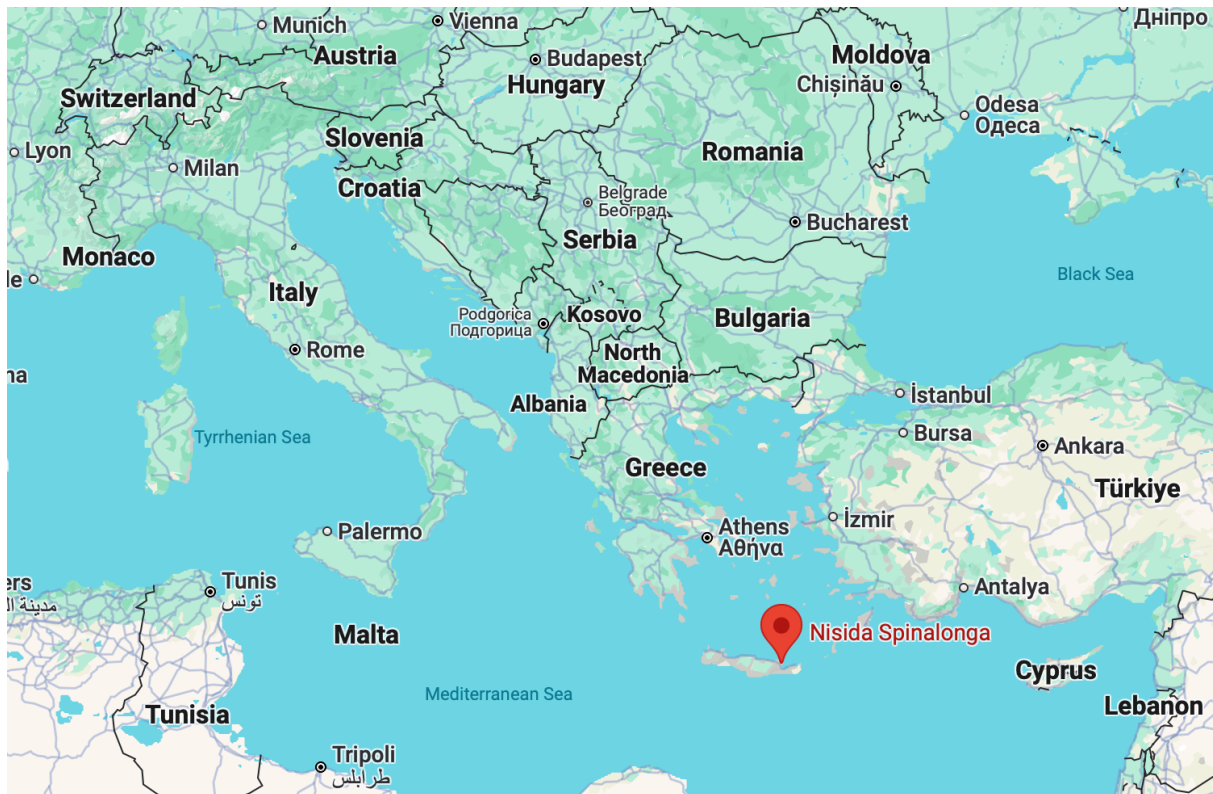
One of the most notable places of exile was the island of Makronisos, which presents some common features with the modern history of Lazareto. With the exemptions of the remnants of metallurgical activity from the Classical period and the 17th-century church of St. George, all other monuments at Makronisos document the island's dark history as a place of exile and imprisonment: prisoners from the First Balkan War (1912-13), refugees from the Asia Minor Catastrophe (quarantine station), and post-Civil War dissidents (camp and prison). In 1989, by decision of the Ministry of Culture, Makronisos was declared a historic site, with all the buildings of the island's camps preserved. Yet, the problematic state of preservation, combined with the very limited access to the island, do not allow for direct comparisons with Spinalonga. Other Greek islands that hosted a very large number of political exiles were Gyáros, Agios Efstratios, Anafi (Kenna, 1993; 2001) and Ikaria (Mamoulaki, 2016), where we observe similar characteristics and issues with that of Makronisos.

Islandness, insularity and the various island localities are globally and diachronically invested with meanings of remoteness and they are thought of as 'being on the edge, being out of sight and so out of mind' (Baldacchino, 2006: 6). Nevertheless, scholarly work of the last two decades, especially on the field of island studies, is challenging this view by reversing the ways we perceive the notion of insularity and highlighting connectivity versus isolation, dependence versus autonomy and so on (Horden & Purcell, 2000). Taking these into account, allows us to develop a more historically grounded reading of insularity in our case study of Spinalonga, focused to uncover the multifaceted dynamics that have shaped its history and contemporary significance.

## **3.2. The case study of Spinalonga**

### **3.2.1. The islet and its chronicle**

Spinalonga, situated at the entrance of Elounda's natural harbour in Lasithi Prefecture in Crete (Figure 4), is a barren, rocky islet spanning 85,000 sq. m. (UNESCO Tentative List, 2014). It was fortified in ancient times, but its past before the Venetian period remains quite enigmatic, with most recent research dating fortification to the Byzantine era (Hellenic Ministry of Culture & Ephorate of Antiquities of Lasithi, 2023). In the late 16th century, the Venetians, as part of their extensive fortification efforts to defend Crete, constructed one of the Mediterranean's key bastion-type sea fortresses on Spinalonga (UNESCO Tentative List, 2014). Under Venetian control, Spinalonga operated initially as a military camp and eventually as a self-sufficient settlement, consisting of Christian refugees and migrants (c. 600). During the refugees' stay on the island, the still preserved churches of St. George (1661) and St. Panteleimon (1709) were constructed (Hellenic Ministry of Culture & Ephorate of Antiquities of Lasithi, 2023).



**Figure 4** Geographic location of Spinalonga Island (Nisida Spinalonga) (source: [Google Maps](#))

The islet remained under Venetian control until it was surrendered to the Ottomans in 1715, following a siege. This resulted in the departure of the Venetian garrison, the capture of its inhabitants and a shift of local population to Muslims. The newcomers built their homes on the remnants of Venetian structures, creating a village that prospered from the mid-19th century, becoming the largest Muslim commercial centre in Mirabello Bay, reaching a population of 1,112 individuals by 1881 (UNESCO Tentative list, 2014). By the late 19th century, Spinalonga had around 200 residencies and 25 shops or workshops. Today, many well-preserved two-story houses and shops remain, reflecting local and Balkan architectural traditions.

The revolutionary activity of the Christians of Crete changed conditions on the island considerably as battles between local rebels and the Ottoman forces stationed at Spinalonga (Hellenic Ministry of Culture & Ephorate of Antiquities of Lasithi, 2023). The end of the 19th century saw Spinalonga under the rule of a newly formed autonomous Cretan State (1898-1913) until its unification with Greece. It is at that time and in particular, between 1904 and 1957, that Spinalonga's palimpsest acquired a thick dark layer by functioning as a designated leper colony. For about half a century, hundreds of people were forced to live confined on the islet, away from their loved ones, marking the island's biography as 'a place of suffering' (Region of Crete, 2014: 3). After the colony's closure, the islet was abandoned and remained



uninhabited, while its ruinous landscape was systematically despoiled (see GLAMMONS Deliverable 3.4, Section 3.2). Eventually, in 1976 Spinalonga was declared an archaeological site (Figure 5), today attracting hundreds of thousands of annual visitors.



**Figure 5** Map of Spinalonga heritage site as of today; the yellow colour signifies the modern structures of the leper colony (source: [Ephorate of Antiquities of Lasithi, 2023](#))

### 3.2.2. Spinalonga as a place of exile and a leper colony

Leprosy is a chronic infectious illness that affects the peripheral nervous system, the skin, the upper respiratory and eyes, causing skin lesions, deformations, nerve damages and other serious physical impairments (WHO, n.d.). An ancient disease, curable only since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, had been long imbued with social and moral stigma, especially since the rise of Christianity (Covey, 2001). In mediaeval times, the lepers were marginalised, living in separate settlements but they were not explicitly banished from the public sphere. In Crete, lepers were outcasted in settlements outside of the villages and towns, called ‘meskinies’ (<meskin in arabic: desolate, dispossessed) (Savvakis, 2008). During modernity, Western imperialism and the rise of state polities saw the lepers as a ‘public threat’, advancing repressive and disciplinary isolation as the primary mode of treatment for those affected (Lekakis, 2023).

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Cretan State (1898-1913), in line with the rise of urban modernity and colonialist viewpoints of the time, decided to address the spread of leprosy in its territory by imposing the lepers’ mandatory relocation to Spinalonga (Ministry of Culture & Ephorate of Antiquities of Lasithi, 2023), following the advice of the Danish dermatologist



Edvard Ehlers (1863-1937), a proponent of the theory of complete isolation as the solution to eradicating towns and villages from the epidemiological burden (Born 2015; Lekakis, 2023: 36). In turn, under the Law 463/1903, Crete's authorities killed two birds with one stone; the double displacement of the Muslims that still inhabited Spinalonga since the Ottoman era and the ostracisation of 251 individuals suffering from leprosy (ibid).



*Figure 6 Spinalonga's infirmary (source: [Ephorate of Antiquities of Lasithi. 2023](#))*

In this discriminatory process of involuntary population exchange, the law omitted to stipulate for reimbursement, social state provisions or even a basic healthcare plan. When the first lepers arrived on the islet (1904), there were no caring facilities or infrastructure other than the Ottoman houses that their former dwellers had been forced to abandon. The lepers had been left to survive in appalling conditions with minimum standards of medical care, food and housing, dependent on sourcing building material from the more affluent ottoman lodgings. In what seems like a tragic fallacy, penal criminals sentenced to life imprisonment in the Izzeddin fortress prison of Chania had been transferred to the islet to guard the diseased and prevent them from escaping (Born, 2011).



As Lekakis (2023: 37) suggests, 'displacement in Spinalonga apart from the pain of separation, also bore the social stigma of being publicly arrested, sentenced to life exile while condemning their families to live forever in the social margins'. In fact, quite tragically, as Remoundakis (2012), a prominent figure of the exiled leper community, documented in his autobiography, the lepers were erased from official citizen registries upon their arrival to Spinalonga; the state did not simply consider them 'dead' but it stripped them of their existence whatsoever.

After Crete became part of Modern Greece (1913), the leper colony grew as patients began to arrive from all over the country. In their majority, the confined were poor peasants, some illiterate, and ill-equipped to defend themselves against institutional violence (Born, 2011). As the doctor paid visits to the colony sporadically, health personnel were limited and medical supplies were scarce, the lepers resorted to pre-modern modes of treatment, such as herb remedies (Savvakis, 2008: 107; Grivel, 2011). Yet, gradually, Spinalonga developed into a village with a population of 367 exiles in 1940 (Savvakis, 2008: 81), organised by the principles of solidarity and mutual aid, mitigating to some degree the hardship caused by the state's methodical neglect. The Greek sociologist Manos Savvakis who provided one of the most detailed and thorough studies of Spinalonga's past as a leper colony, analysed the institutional and state decisions made towards the management of leprosy on Crete as a public health issue. He argues that even though the official rhetorics as described in the regulatory framework documents (decrees, laws, etc.) are concerned with the establishment of the appropriate social institutions that would treat lepers and deal with the public health issue in Crete, in practice health conditions of the lepers, as well as their living, housing, and nutrition conditions, appeared to be extremely degraded (ibid: 91). These terrible conditions led to community unrest and a series of sixteen mutinies over the course of the first thirty years, pushing for and achieving some correction decrees that slightly improved life on Spinalonga (Savvakis, 2008: 108; Lekakis, 2023).

In particular, the community's unionisation in the 1940s was catalyst to the attainment of more substantial social state provisions along with an increased allowance, granted after the collective demands of the 'brotherhood' for better living conditions and the supply of basic 'civilization means that would alleviate despair and withering' (Grivel, 2011: 64)<sup>6</sup>. These allowed the leper community to do some house maintenance, install basic sanitary infrastructure and limited power supply, plant trees and build a system of cobblestone alleys across the islet, converging on the 'avenue of pain', as they named the cemented main peripheral path that was opened by demolishing parts of the Venetian walls (Savakis, 2008: 27).

In the same way, as Lekakis (2023) observes, despite the politics of isolation and the physical border of the sea, the heterotopic condition of the lepers broke through the Venetian and institutional walls and reached social and economic life across the islet. The meagre allowance

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<sup>6</sup> "Spinalonga Patient Brotherhood, Agios Panteleimon" (Αδελφότητα Ασθενών Σπιναλόγκας, Άγιος Παντελεήμων) was the name of the first union in Spinalonga.



that was provided to the exiles (Law 166/1903) gradually increased and became an important source of income for the communities of Plaka, Elounda and other nearby settlements, which were selling supplies and services (of medium or poor quality) to the displaced (see also GLAMMONS Deliverable 3.4 - Section 3.1).

Most importantly, the union cherished the sense of a community between the exiled lepers and took measures to protect them against exploitation by local merchants while also securing their right to marry and have children (Born, 2011: 7 reports 100 births of healthy babies during that time). It also created vital community spaces for social gathering, including a school, two *kafeneia* (traditional Greek cafés) and a barber shop (Lekakis, 2023) and built on resources such as wooden boats for fishing, which were also used for fleeing the islet (Savvakis, 2008: 108).

The cure for leprosy became possible in 1941, but the new drugs did not arrive in Spinalonga earlier than 1948 (Hellenic Ministry of Culture & Ephorate of Antiquities of Lasithi, 2023). In 1952, when the Greek state initiated the gradual closure of leper hospitals (e.g., in Samos and Chios islands) and the transfer of patients to a central treatment facility, Spinalonga was exempted and continued to operate, despite the lepers' effective treatment and struggles (including a hunger strike in 1953). According to Born (2011), the reason for postponing the closure of the colony was its role in sustaining economic activity in the broader area; an act of exploitation and political opportunism, as well as, reluctance of their families to welcome them back (Born, 2011).

When the colony was eventually evacuated in 1957, the last thirty '*Spinalogites*' moved to the Hansenic Wing of 'Agia Varvara' Hospital in Athens, where they recreated their island: a small settlement of whitewashed houses with a garden. Today, lepers held in Spinalonga have all passed away. Even the people that were born in Spinalonga in the last days of its operation as a leper colony are almost gone. Then who is there to speak about the leper's past of Spinalonga? To whom is this 'difficult past' of relevance?

Although leprosy has been curable for some decades now, it still holds the power to stigmatise people around the globe according to WHO (2024). If we take into account the goals set out by WHO and other pertinent organisations towards leprosy elimination and the social and psychological aspects of the disease, the answer to the question 'to whom the lepers' past of Spinalonga is of relevance' is made clearer. The descendants of those who lived on Spinalonga seek to ensure that their ancestors' suffering is acknowledged and remembered with dignity, international organisations such as WHO focus on eradicating the stigma still associated with leprosy, while society at large could benefit greatly from grappling with the lessons learned from past treatment of marginalised communities. Meanwhile, we - as researchers, archaeologists, cultural heritage managers and anthropologists, could draw on the broader social and medical history of leprosy in order to understand the case of Spinalonga and figure out ways of research-informed management within the realm of commons theory



and practice.

### **3.3. Ethnographic processes and challenges in heritage analysis**

When looking on to this dark layer of Spinalonga's palimpsest, some key questions emerge: how could we gain an understanding of such a contested past? What do people understand of the leper colony today? And ultimately, what process should we follow to illuminate and promote it in an equitable, honest and sober way? As Alderman & Campbell (2008: 338) argue, 'the unearthing of difficult and long suppressed (or repressed) historical narratives can only happen through memory work, the construction and representation of the past'; described metaphorically, as an on-going process of 'symbolic excavation'. The aim of such memory work, that is being fed by various individuals and social groups (e.g., intellectuals, artists, politicians and surrounding communities), is to recover what has been forgotten or more accurately, what has temporarily fallen to a state of oblivion in the process of making the past (Till, 2005). Moreover, considering our theoretical framing of Spinalonga as a heritage landscape and its locomotion across the 'dark spectrum' of contested-difficult-dissonant heritage (tourism), we need to enquire into how the past of leprosy is emplaced within Spinalonga's landscape, how it is positioned in relation to other narratives and parts of the monument's biography and how tourists' experiences are organised discursively and spatially (Hanna et al., 2018).

To do so, we employ a qualitative, multi-sited ethnographic mode of study in Spinalonga and beyond. Ethnography brings together a 'family of methods', including participant observation, interviewing of key informants, as well as, analysis of textual and visual resources (Willis and Trondman, 2000: 5). Research conducted as part of GLAMMONS had taken root from our earlier engagement with Spinalonga and the Mirabello Gulf as Stelios Lekakis firstly engaged with the island through his involvement in the preparation of Spinalonga nomination to the UNESCO World Heritage List and his subsequent independent research (see Lekakis, 2017; 2023). Katerina Konstantinou had also conducted ethnographic fieldwork regarding the landscapes of the Mirabello Gulf in 2019 and 2020 as a research fellow of the Institute for Mediterranean Studies - Foundation for Research & Technology Hellas (IMS-FORTH). Building on this previous knowledge and the relationships we had established with local communities and representatives, intensive, thematically focused fieldwork in Crete was carried out during the Spring of 2024, as part of GLAMMONS. Fieldwork, as mentioned earlier, included a series of in-depth interviews with members of the local community, the tourism sector and the Archaeological Service. This included current and former heritage experts working on the site, culture professionals and individuals holding local public office.

As Jones et al. (2017) observe, a major response to the changes in our understanding of 'heritage' during the past decades (see Section 2), had been the integration of ethnographic methodologies into heritage studies, pushing analysis towards 'greater reflexivity, attention to the relationship between contemporary ethical and political issues and heritage practices, and



acknowledgement of the diverse and active construction of heritage by non-expert actors' (ibid: 2). Heritage ethnography approaches heritage as social experience beyond hegemonic visions, exploring relationships between the views from the top and the views from the bottom and by extension, 'mutual engagement between the official state and the sometimes disruptive popular practices' (Herzfeld, 2004: 5). Popular accounts of history, as the ones found in literary and cultural texts, can be seen as indicators of a wider interest in the past (Sommer, 2009: 115). Delving into creative works and their aesthetic contextualisation of Spinalonga is of critical importance here, considering that the arts had disturbed archaeology's privileged position to form public perceptions and discourses of heritage (Lekakis, 2017; see also our analysis in GLAMMONS deliverable 3.4). Furthermore, when it comes to tourism consumption images, the lens of social anthropology can serve well our research scope and interest into 'how meaning is made through tourism' (Palmer, 2009: 124).

However, some areas of researching Spinalonga are still shady and fraught with difficulties. As Maurice Born had already indicated, an elite group of Cretans in the late 19th century envisioned ways to rid urban centres and rural areas of the leper's presence (Born, 2011). Later, in the early 20th century, there were several claims by the lepers of Spinalonga regarding the adjacent land of Kolokytha, which could be cultivated, become a valuable resource and improve their life conditions. However, these claims were denied due to Mirabello Gulf locals' resistance to give away not only the resource of the cultivated land of Kolokytha, but also the profit they made by selling goods they produced to the lepers. In this way, throughout the first half of the 20th century, lepers of Spinalonga remained under the control and will of the locals that lived on the other side of the Mirabello Gulf. Their lives were largely dictated by the decisions and will of these external communities, which often shaped their living conditions in order to benefit from the subsidies the lepers received by the state. Although this is a well-known issue among both contemporary locals and researchers, addressing it remains challenging. In this sense, the core of the 'dark matter' of Spinalonga's history and heritage lies in the presence of perpetrators—those individuals or groups who exploited and marginalised the lepers for their own gain. This exploitation reveals the underlying power dynamics and social injustices that have shaped the narrative of Spinalonga, highlighting the complex and often troubling aspects of its past. But who is willing to talk about this issue? On what purpose should a research project like ours could look into perpetrators? These questions deserve further exploration as our role in investigating heritage making processes involves posing such unsettling questions that are nested in the dark spectrum (contested, difficult, dissonant) heritage and the relevant tourism phenomenon it induces.



## 4. IN THE DARK SIDE OF THE ISLAND

“[...] islands have haunted humanity since the dawn of history”

David Lowenthal, 2007. *Islands, Lovers, and Others*.

### 4.1 Interplays between tourism and the “dark” past of Spinalonga

David Lowenthal in his inspiring essay on islands and islandness describes the paradox of ‘being insular’, which is commonly sensed as being ‘out of touch’, yet islands are attractive destinations—around the globe—for this exact reason, i.e. for being ‘out of touch’. Spinalonga applies to this paradox in an illuminating way that helps us throw light on a variety of dark shades of its history and heritage. On the one hand, the islet of Spinalonga is today one of the most visited sites in Crete and in Greece. It is appreciated for its scenic view and its archaeological and historical significance. The fact that one can only approach Spinalonga by boat, significantly adds on the island experience as this is imagined by tourists and is offered by tourist service providers. The boat trip, even though it takes only a five-minute trip to cover the 700 metres distance from Plaka to Spinalonga, is presented as an outstanding part of the experience of the visit offered by service providers in the tourism sector. A tour guide, who has been working for almost 20 years in the touring sector described the reasons of the popularity of the site as follows:

*Generally, Spinalonga is considered [...] one of the best-selling excursions. [...] Why? The monument is beautiful and easy. [...] it's not an archaeological site that requires a background and knowledge to understand [...] It's more recent, better preserved, and more familiar to the general public [...] And I'm not talking only about the lepers [...], I'm talking even about the Venetian period, which is more understandable, you see it, it's more accessible and recognizable. Moreover, the place is very beautiful. All the paths are nice because it also offers a boat trip, you have to go by boat, so it includes that as well. And then it is the way it's done, whether there's a barbecue on the boats or free time for the visitors to swim where the seas around are wonderful, whether it's in Plaka or behind of Kolokytha, or for those staying in the hotels in Elounda and Plaka, which are also many [...] So, overall it attracts a lot (of people) as an excursion for all these reasons. [Interview 6-2-2024]*

In her words, the boat is offered as a part of the experience that adds to the sense of insularity, as if the island is being practised through this key performance of the boat trip (about the island as a practice see Vannini & Taggart, 2012). Therefore, the boat trip makes the island a ‘deeply visceral lived experience’ (2012: 227) and not just a mere construct of imagination. Tourism sector and service providers, including boatmen and tour guides, have been exploiting the islandness of Spinalonga offering an ‘escape’ from inlands Crete through boat. Islandness of



Spinalonga is also celebrated in cartes postales printed and distributed all around Crete in souvenir stores, bookstores and many more. Mainstream depictions of Spinalonga in cartes postales, represent the island in its beautiful environments, highlighting its geomorphology as clearly distinct from the coasts of the Mirabello Gulf and surrounded by sea (Figure 7).



*Figure 7 Cartes postales depicting Spinalonga in clear form (photo credit: Konstantinou, 2024)*

Yet, this exact geomorphology is what made Spinalonga in the past an adequate place of exile. The Greek state, not only could isolate people affected by leprosy there, but also control them by having them continuously 'on sight'. The islet's natural water boundaries served to enhance surveillance and control. In such proximity to the coast, Spinalonga can be seen as a form of 'panopticon' (Foucault, 1977) with the settlement of Plaka being the central observation point of view.

Reversing the meanings from an exile place to a highly sought-after tourist attraction, imposed, yet another shift on the values and uses of Spinalonga from a place of human suffering to a scenic setting where tourists can take photos. In a much telling description on an advertising



pamphlet of a local touring company, under the rather telling title 'B.B.Q. & SPINALONGA' we read:

*The tour takes you to the island of Spinalonga which was the last leper colony in Europe, where you can also see the Venetian fortress. This trip is a fully guided tour in English, [...] giving you the time to listen to historical facts of this famous island and to take some photos.*

In this advertisement, Spinalonga is presented primarily as 'the last leper colony in Europe'. The Venetian fortress is just a supplementary asset that visitors may 'also see'. A significant part of the experience of the islet involves taking pictures as part of a leisure consumption activity. Tourism, after all, invests in the recent growth of new media and communication means, as well as in the demand for leisure time activities (Harrison & Schofield, 2010).

Tourism commodification, place and heritage making processes intersect in the ways Spinalonga is presented by different actors, but also in the ways it is being managed, perceived and consumed as a 'dark' heritage site by various agents. 'Dark' motivations and expectations of tourists seem to be produced—to a great extent—by the ways tourism service providers are presenting Spinalonga as the 'last leper colony of Europe'. Nevertheless the 'negatives' of the past and history of Spinalonga are not to focus on, as a tour guide explained to us:

*Well, the story begins with the acropolis, of which unfortunately almost nothing remains visible except for a small section of the wall that predates the Venetian period, dating back to the period of ancient Elounda, the 4th-5th century B.C. [...]. So, let's say the story is placed in that time, but we don't focus on that as much as on what we can see because generally, it's good to tell the visitor about this and explain what they are seeing.*

*[...] We don't focus on the negatives. [To present] the broader historical context within the time you have now, this happens in about ten minutes. Because you have many other things to say as time passes and also because people don't like to stay still in one place for too long, they get bored after a while, they want to move on, to see around, to take photos. [Interview 6-2-2024]*

So, it is as if Spinalonga can be produced as a heritage site of human suffering and presented within the tourism sector as such (Figure 8). And in this way shape the imagination of tourists and tourism service providers alike. But it cannot be easily consumed as such. This is what Noel Salazar terms 'seductive imaginary', i.e., a complex set of presumptions and expectations that drive tourists and shape their practices and fantasies (2012: 3). Yet, 'an imaginal engagement with, and descent into, the vale of suffering presents an opportunity, however unwelcome, however much dread and resistance there is for such journey' (Bishop, 2008: 40).



*Figure 8 A leper's face shown to a tourist group during a guided tour (source: [nataliatravel.com](http://nataliatravel.com))*

Another point made by the tour guide is of interest here as it presents the conflicting ways perceptions and expectations interrelate. Tourists, she says, expect to see what the tour guide talks about. So, Spinalonga's distant historic past which is unrecognisable to the unskilled eye of a tourist is not to be commented upon in detail. Whereas, the Venetian and the Ottoman, with their material traces not only above the ground but also easily recognisable, are being presented by the tour guide thoroughly. The understandability of the past is definitely a key feature of the heritage-making processes. Easily understandable material evidence of the past is always more likely to become someone's heritage than others that demand skills and expert's knowledge to grasp. In this way, lepers' past has left an easily comprehensible material heritage on the island. Houses, dormitories, a hospital and a cemetery are today, modern ruins of a difficult past that troubles tourist service providers. Although easily understandable relics of the past are also seductive as they make Spinalonga tempting and appealing to visitors, at the same time they trouble tour guides as they are directly posing 'negative' stories and memories. However, tourists, as another much older tour guide described in our interview, don't want to be 'shocked' by horrific stories and terrible details:

*It's about interaction; you don't talk the same way to everyone [...]. A guide must also be a good psychologist, to see who they have in front of them. Certainly, what I don't*



*emphasize much now are the details, such as the dates. [...] (b)ecause I see they don't interest them. But I also don't focus on the painful aspects of Spinalonga. For instance, some of my colleagues show photos of the disfigured people. I can't do that, okay. I prefer to describe or convey an emotion rather than being so blunt. Isn't that right? There's no need. [...] I don't want to shock. And I want to present it that way. Yes, historically, but also humanely, and beautifully. [Interview 8-4-2024]*

It is often noted, in the field of critical heritage studies, that the 'heritage industry' tends to aestheticize ruins of the past through preservation and restoration. Commodification of heritage in the realm of tourism and aestheticization, not only seem to be inseparable procedures but they also have implications on the ways a heritage site is conceived, presented and perceived, in often conflicting manners. The above excerpt is indicative of the tendency between the 'aesthetically pleasing heritage' (Smith, 2006: 1) and, what Stelios Lekakis termed, the 'dark matter' of Spinalonga (2023). Tourists who arrive in Crete for holidays are visiting Spinalonga with certain preconceptions that are socially constructed through a variety of agents that disseminate images and discourses about the islet. Yet, they also carry expectations for mental peace and positive emotions that are more often than not the main motivation for travelling. Thus, to the tour guides' experience, it seems that the difficult past of the leper colony on Spinalonga, is not something that tourists can emotionally afford. So, guided tours and other offered services, like the boat trips around Spinalonga have to adapt to these expectations by 'humanely' and 'beautifully' presenting even the 'darker' side of the island's history.

## **4.2 Fear of the past or the past of the fear**

Presenting Spinalonga in a visually appealing and romanticised way is not limited to the tourism industry and the tourism service providers. Archaeologists, in the first years of their involvement with the preservation and the management of the site, prioritised the Venetian and the Ottoman past over the more recent and perhaps stigmatised past of the leper colony. In the decades of 1970 and 1980, most of the buildings and cement structures of the lepers' infrastructure were demolished to open up the way for an uninterrupted restoration of the Venetian fortress, for which Spinalonga had been designated the archaeological site status by the Greek state. This can be seen as an attempt to purify Spinalonga from its 'infectious' past in a time where local communities of the Mirabello Gulf and beyond, still remembered and responded to leprosy with fear and misunderstanding. A local man, born in 1958—a year after the closure of the leper colony—, explained how people in Elounda and the surrounding villages made sense of Spinalonga at the time:

*Spinalonga had a bad reputation, as its name became associated with the disease of leprosy. In this way, Spinalonga was considered a great curse. There was even a saying. "To see you in Spinalonga" was really in use. If you wanted to curse someone... [Interview, 9-4-2024]*



Significant efforts were to be made to dispel the 'curse' of Spinalonga and to transform it into a friendly and welcoming heritage site. In 'breaking the curse' of Spinalonga, time played a significant role, as it provided the necessary distance from a contagious disease (Figure 8). A local elderly woman of an affluent background, described the pervasive fear that surrounded the area of Mirabello when the islet of Spinalonga still hosted lepers.

*I have memories of my father and mother not letting me touch anything because the lepers were around. We had to wash [our hands] very thoroughly before touching anything. [...] We went to Plaka, we went to Elounda, and they didn't let us touch anything because the lepers were across [...]. They had crossed over to go inside (she means on the island). That fear... [Interview 8-4-2024]*

Before 1957, locals with limited financial resources and modest living conditions in Elounda and the surrounding villages depended on the regular allowances and subsidies received by the Spinalonga's lepers. Spinalonga offered a significant source of income back then; thus, taking care of the lepers was a primary economic activity for the locals, who delivered the needed supplies and services to the leper colony (see also Lekakis, 2023: 38). The fear of being infected by leprosy, although it has had a lasting impact on society, was not an option for the poor communities of the Mirabello Gulf. Members of these small communities, who were characterised by low economic self-sufficiency, made their living by serving the needs of the lepers' community on the island. Ami Harbin (2023) provokes us to think of fear as relational practice, as if fearing is a significant part of how we develop relationships with each other. Fearing, she suggests, is something that we do better when we do it together. For the neighbouring villagers, fearing the 'dark matter' of Spinalonga had become a practice of togetherness, a practice of moral repair rather than a practice of moral failure. And this was something understood by the Spinalogites that were systematically assuming the role of the godparent for the newborns from the surrounding communities, to aid spiritually and mainly financially the children throughout their lives, according to the Greek Orthodox tradition, but also secure more social bonds with the people 'outside', the communities of the 'healthy'. Remoundakis (2012) mentions that each leper in Spinalonga had at least five of those godchildren.

In a totally different narration from that of a well-educated and upper class local, another local woman, researcher and journalist, described one of the most horrific stories her informants shared with her:

*In such an area that was very poor. For them, Spinalonga... they envied the inhabitants of Spinalonga. It's unbelievable. One of my informants told me a story about the wife of a local [that had been exiled on the islet]. Anyway, she follows him inside [she means on the island] as a laundress because a permit was given in the early years. [...] He describes her [...] trying to contract the disease from her husband so she could receive the allowance, which was double the salary she was earning as a laundress. And she joined her hands, her blood with his blood. They slept*



*together, had children, they had three children. And yet she never contracted the disease. [Interview, 8-4-2024]<sup>7</sup>*

The harsh realities faced by the lower class, for who economic survival often overshadowed concerns for personal health, contrasts with the perspective of the upper-class local. This contrast speaks volumes about the socioeconomic disparities of the time and the ways in which such divisions of society shaped their experiences and how they made sense of Spinalonga. What is of interest to our study of Spinalonga is how these past views, perceptions and experiences are explanatory of the decisions made concerning the materiality of the island after the leper colony closure. As fear is 'inherently future-oriented' (Bordini & Torrenco, 2022: 357), fear of the lepers of Spinalonga left a mark on the site that needed time and distance from the past to resolve.

### **4.3 'Breaking the curse' to make profit**

In our discussions at the old 'kafeneio' of Elounda during fieldwork, many locals insisted that to understand how people from the Mirabello Gulf interacted and made sense of the leper's community of Spinalonga, we should take into account the region's conditions of extreme poverty. The perception of Spinalonga as a significant source of income for the mainland residents of Plaka and Elounda adds a positive spin to their stories. Although, we cannot argue that this spin makes the stories of human suffering less 'difficult' or less 'dark', it is indeed a different perspective in the multi-layered history of Spinalonga. Yet, it is indeed fair to note here that treating Spinalonga as a source of income was deeply unfair. The exploitation of the lepers' situation for financial gain by those on the mainland not only exacerbated their suffering but also added another layer of injustice to an already tragic chapter in history. It is also true that this chapter in the history of Spinalonga is so unsettling for the local communities that is yet to be written<sup>8</sup>.

Concerning the use of Spinalonga as source for profit for more than half a century marked public discussions and concerns about the island's future uses and potential after the leper colony ceased its operation in 1957. Diachronically seen as a source of income for the local communities, Spinalonga has been in the forefront of local development plans in the last decades (for a detailed analysis on the heritagisation processes that followed 1957, see Glammons Deliverable 3.4 on regional development and the role of collaboration among different actors). The massive turn to the tourism development of the region of eastern Crete in the last decades of the 20th century marked the decisions made about Spinalonga as a heritage site.

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<sup>7</sup> A similar case is also described by Born (2015), where a person attempted to contract the disease unsuccessfully by placing used bandages to her open wounds.

<sup>8</sup> It is common knowledge in Elounda that immediately after the closure of the leper colony, Spinalonga was looted by locals that collected everything from movable furniture to building material, such as railings and door/window frames along with the infirmary's archive, parts of which still survives in private collections (Born 2015).



Yet, to turn a former leper colony into an appealing heritage site for tourists required a careful treatment of the islet's 'dark' past—especially during the early years of tourism development in the Lasithi region in the 1960s and 1970s, while the social prejudice against leprosy was still vivid and the fear of the past was palpable (see Section 4.2). Difficult decisions over which past remnants should be preserved and which should be demolished were to be taken at that time by archaeologists of the local Ephorate of Antiquities. Of course, Spinalonga is no exception to the selective processes of heritage-making. As Thomas Carter suggests, the impression of the past that remains after the application of these selective processes of (top-down) heritagisation is always disingenuous (Carter et al., 2019: 229). It challenges us to think of what we left in the dark, what we forgot, what passed on the other side of the past that will not be remembered. If we engage in this line of thinking, we probably cannot avoid considering what we know about the past of Spinalonga, and subsequently what we do not know or even what we pretend not to know.

The experience of Maurice Born (1943-2020), a Swiss architect and ethnographer who first visited Spinalonga as a researcher in 1967 and devoted his life in investigating the most difficult and well-hidden past of the islet and its people, has a lot to reveal on the ways in which locals of Plaka and the surrounding villages of the Mirabello Gulf tried to forget or the ways in which they pretended not to remember or even know. Invited in a local TV discussion panel, in 2017, Maurice Born in his disarming honesty described his first encounters with locals in Mirabello as a researcher:

*In the beginning (referring to the research), during the early years, they only told lies [...]. Those fifty years, everyone wanted to forget about it, no one wanted to talk about it. So, when I came with my questions, they gave me abstract answers. Nothing specific, they didn't want to delve into the subject. That's how it was. [...] We need to understand that even regarding the disease, what the people in the area were saying had nothing to do with what the doctors were saying about leprosy. Medicine said then and still says today, that leprosy is contagious and not hereditary. Everyone in the surrounding area believed that leprosy was hereditary and not contagious. [Maurice Born, 2017<sup>9</sup>]*

Born, through his persistent involvement with Spinalonga's research, contributed significantly to understanding the guilt and shame as feelings shaped by specific historical contexts that are evolving and impacting individual and collective identities. Nevertheless, no matter how difficult, the impact of these sentiments and misunderstandings in the heritagisation of Spinalonga need to be further examined and analysed, as they are still evident in locals' perceptions of the islet as well as on their beliefs about leprosy. To refer to only one of many such expressions of the misunderstandings about leprosy, here is an excerpt of an interview with a local man in this late 1960s:

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<sup>9</sup> Interview to Lena Papadaki available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjWj4tc\\_gxQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjWj4tc_gxQ) [Last visited 3-8-2024]



*To a large extent, people believed that no one contracted the disease because they thought it was contagious. Without evidence, they assumed the disease was transmissible and took all precautionary measures. That's why they wouldn't let you go to Spinalonga and why they were so unwilling to have you there. You had to go through disinfection procedures when you left. There was a disinfection chamber for money and letters. I was a postal worker and still remember the stamp "DISINFECTED" on the correspondence [...] [Interview, 9-4-2024]<sup>10</sup>*

With Maurice Born being one of the most significant exceptions (along with Savvakis & Tzanakis, 2004; Savvakis 2008; Bardel, 2017; Lekakis, 2023), most of the narrations of Spinalonga's leper past focus on the ways the leper's island community coped with life and difficulties, while they leave aside their dense interactions with people outside of the island. This approach to the Spinalonga leper community as a 'primitive' island community or as mere dwellers that shared the same small island and had to figure out ways of surviving is fundamentally problematic for two significant reasons.

First and foremost, it is based on the theory of social evolution according to which culture develops through various stages in a unilinear way from what has been termed, primitiveness, savagery or even barbarism, to civilization. Although this way of understanding communities and their cultural practices has been criticised and abandoned already from the days of the pioneer anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942), it can still be found in the narrations of the history of Spinalonga's leper community as one that developed through time to higher standards of civilization.

Literature, as we will see again later on, played a significant role in forming the leper past of Spinalonga as a series of subsequent stages of evolution. It wouldn't be an unnecessary excess of words to refer to the novel of Galatia Kazantzaki "A diseased city. Romance" published in 1914 in Alexandria, Egypt under the pseudonym Petroula Psiloriti. This romantic novel narrates a story of a young, well-educated woman, who arrived in Spinalonga after she was diagnosed with leprosy. Her initial determination to live and her optimism led her to set up a school for the children of Spinalonga. In the first-person narration of the young woman, Spinalonga is described as 'a swamp with stagnant waters, where not even a single white flower blooms on its surface' (1914: 14). In this context, she believes that children's education would make 'flowers blossom' again. Soon, her optimistic stance diminishes as the society of Spinalonga remains—to her perception—without rules and basic standards of behaviour. She describes Spinalongites, not only as primitive but also as vulgar, and sinful. Indirectly contributing to the narrative of an evolving society, the young woman throughout the novel expresses her firm belief that education would help people of Spinalonga out of their shameful and pitiful position and would 'elevate' their community into a civilised society.

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<sup>10</sup> The disinfection process also sided with the panopticon strategy described above by censoring information leaving Spinalonga (Born, 2015).



Secondly, this simplified narrative of Spinalonga's past is problematic because it fails to grasp the intense interactions of the lepers and the local communities of mainland Crete and especially of the Mirabello Gulf villages. Islands of all sorts, have been traditionally seen and researched as 'self-contained units' (Olwig, 2007: 261). Yet, a shift in island studies during the 1980s and 1990s made it clear that islands are part of a dense and intensive network of relationships with the wider world (see, among others, Baldacchino, 2006). Spinalonga, although an exile island, has been the epicentre of intensive economic interactions and economic concerns of the coastal villages. Yet, our case is slightly different from other island communities that are dependent upon remittances received from emigrants. Spinalonga in the days of the leper colony received a relatively significant sum of money from the state to support the needs of the lepers amid a climate of poverty. Communities of the coastal villages of Mirabello responded to this financial resource by providing supplies from their small-scale farming and fishing activities. At the same time, it seems that they maintained their 'market' by keeping control of the farming resources. For example, leper's request for some farming land on the adjacent Kolokytha peninsula was rejected again and again by the local communities<sup>11</sup> of Mirabello in order to sustain this interdependence. Leper's reliance on the coastal communities for goods, services, and all kinds of resources made Spinalonga an important source of income, if not the only one.

The financial dependency on the leper's subsidies holds an important part in the way locals from the Mirabello Gulf still narrate the story of Spinalonga today. Often their stories are an expression of gratitude, highlighting the importance of Spinalonga as a financial resource then and now. To refer to only one excerpt from our interviews, of an elderly local man who recalls the last days of the leper colony:

*The children were going to sing Christmas carols [to the lepers] because, as we were saying, those sick people had an income as they received a stipend. Here, things were poor. There weren't the modern conveniences, tourism, money, and prosperity that we have today [...]. So, they waited for someone to sell a few seasonal fruits, like apricots [...] or some potatoes. We're talking about small quantities. But they were going to sell them there. Some milk. Whatever they had. They were getting some money. They could buy something else and bring it home [...]. Because there, they had the stipend and an economic comfort that the people outside did not have. Nor the cash that exists today. And so, Spinalonga was an economic centre at that time. It may be the same even now. If you consider the proportions, just like now, so many people go, 2,000 people a day, how many boats and how many employees work there? [...] And what income it provides to the people and how much promotion for our place. From the tickets that 'archaeology' (means the Archaeological Service) gets to the boats, the snack bars, the buses. [...] (A) All these things are part of the cycle. [Interview, 9-4-2024]*

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<sup>11</sup> Born, Maurice 2011. Οι λεπροί της Σπιναλόγκας: Μια σφετερισμένη μνήμη [The Lepers of Spinalonga: An Usurped Memory]. Printed conference announcement with handwritten notes by M. Born. Maurice Born Archive, Historical Museum of Crete. BOX Spina 6/7. File 23/33. Conference Neapolis



This raises several questions on the ways in which narratives/narrative of Spinalonga are/is being formed through class differentials, imposed through institutional work and consolidated through tourism. The politics of public memorialising and recollections regarding the islet of Spinalonga becomes even more complicated if we consider it as a heritage site within the living memory of people (mainly local communities of the neighbouring villages of Mirabello, descendants of the lepers isolated there).

#### **4.4 Pop culture representations: Transcending institutional boundaries**

In the museum sector, already since the 1980s, we have seen a shift in museum displays from broad social categories to individual memories, experiences and responses (Macdonald, 2008: 4). Accordingly, in the heritage sector, much effort is put in eliciting small social groups' stories, experiences and interpretations (see for example Hamilakis & Anagnostopoulos, 2009; Sutton & Stroulia, 2010). In Spinalonga, even though the intention of the Archaeological Service in the last decades of managing the site was clearly to find ways to deal with the leper's past in how the island's history is presented in situ, this needed much effort, skills and deep understanding of this unsettling past. However, bringing the leper's past in focus meant that archaeologists, as the main managing actors of the heritage islet, had to deal with the stigma surrounding leprosy. It was with no surprise though, that they were met with a level of discomfort towards leprosy. To dismantle the stigma demanded a deep understanding. And to deeply understand this complex scheme of the monumental ruins of the Venetian and Ottoman Spinalonga and the stigma-bearing remnants of the leper colony demands a multidisciplinary research approach. Archaeological Service as being staffed—almost exclusively—by archaeologists, often lacks the capacity and skills to harness social research methods and practices or even the knowledge and experience in exhibition curation. Yet, the archaeological team of Spinalonga that led the conservation and research programme for the decades of 2000s and 2010s, was one of an interdisciplinary background that shared an increased sensitivity on social issues regarding stigma of leprosy and the right to remember and commemorate a difficult past. Gradually, since the 2000s, archaeologists of Spinalonga relied on researchers outside their institutional domain for understanding the lepers' past of the islet. An archaeologist explained their limited expertise in the historical past.

*When I started, we officially knew nothing about lepers, meaning there were no relevant studies. We were still reading Kornaros and Kazantzakis, and that was all we had in writing. Later on, much later, Savvakis conducted a study, but it was a sociological one. More directly relevant to us and what we were trying to understand in Spinalonga was Born. We were asking for their consultation of course. We cannot know everything. [Interview 8-4-2024]*



However, strict and rigid institutional boundaries of the Greek Ministry of Culture and the Archaeological Service makes it often hard to invite collaborations, participation and engagement of others than archaeologists.



*Figure 9 Still from the Greek TV series 'The Island' (source: [greekreporter.com](http://greekreporter.com))*

In parallel to all 'archaeologisation' processes of Spinalonga, some public commemoration ceremonies and rituals emerged to commemorate leper's past and pay justice to the once unvoiced residents of Spinalonga. The annual gathering on the occasion of the Ayios Panteleimonas (Saint Panteleimon) on the Saint's feast day on the 27th of July on Spinalonga has been one of the most known and popular commemorative rituals among locals and leper's descendants. This church service is organised independently by the local church outside institutional archaeology—yet, with archaeologists' consent. Other independent and deinstitutionalized commemorative actions include visits, lighting candles in the churches of Spinalonga, and paying respects at the burial sites of former residents. These personal gestures help keep the memory of the leper community alive, offering a more intimate form of remembrance. At the same time, 'privatisation and deinstitutionalization of rituals refract a crisis of legitimacy of public institutions, order and reason' (Seremetakis, 2019: 44). In the case of Spinalonga, Archaeological Service's role as the main institution that manages the site is being challenged through public commemorations activities, public history initiatives and representations of the past of the islet and mainly so of the leper colony period which lasted for a little more than half a century.



This is made even more obvious if one turns into popular representations of Spinalonga's past in literature and TV series (Figure 9).

Literature has played a key role in the place making of Spinalonga as a former leper colony. Diachronically, leprosy has consistently attracted the interest of authors and has been a recurring theme in literature (Daskala, 2011). The 20th century witnessed a significant peak of this interest during the 1930s (Savvakis, 2008: 104-6), and yet another peak in the first decades of the 21st century. Spinalonga, in the literary representations of the first decades of the 20th century, is portrayed as a place of torment, a hellish realm, a place for the living-dead and the cursed (see for example Psiloreiti, 1914; Kornaros, 1933). These literary representations echoed the public perceptions of the time about leprosy, the lepers and their lives in Spinalonga. In the late 1930s, a shift in the ways Spinalonga is being portrayed coincided — not accidentally — with the gradual improvement of life and daily conditions on the island<sup>12</sup>. In 2005, the best-seller novel 'The island' by the British author Victoria Hislop renewed the interest towards the lepers' life and living conditions in Spinalonga (Figure 10).

The significant difference is that this renewed interest was describing a past and not something that was ongoing (whereas, in the cases of Kazantzaki and Kornaros, what was being described in their novels was actually happening when they wrote). On the contrary, when Hislop wrote her novel, she reconstructed the lepers' past by putting together all kinds of information about the people and their lives on the island. Keli Daskala (2011) in her critical analysis on the ways the lepers' identity has been formed by literature sums up Hislop's novel as follows:

*Hislop writes something akin to a manual of kindness, a love story set against the backdrop of the German occupation, portraying the Germans as a greater evil compared to the disease and confinement. The lepers are depicted as experiencing freedom and prosperity in the microcosm of Spinalonga, while the healthy are suffering the hardships of war. Scenes of horror are almost absent. The novel not only condemns the practices of exclusion but primarily offers an optimistic and easily digestible model to bridge the gap between the healthy and the sick. In the end, the leper protagonist is cured and marries the doctor, the "Saint of Spinalonga."* (Daskala, 2011: 248)

The bipolar divide between the sick and the healthy has been a conceptual schema that previously defined the relationship between those 'inside' the island and those outside, giving to the relation a geographical dimension (see for example, the use of the word 'inside' in the two excerpts on page 41).

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<sup>12</sup> As we mention in 3.2.2, in 1936, Epameinondas Remountakis, a law school student affected by leprosy arrived in Spinalonga. His presence and persistent efforts succeeded in radically improving the subsidies and infrastructure on the islet of Spinalonga. Almost a decade later in 1947, curing methods and medicines for leprosy first occurred. Yet, it took another ten years to close down the leper colony and free the affected people.



*Figure 10 Hislop's novel 'The island' on a book stand in Elounda (Photo credit: Konstantinou, 2024)*

After the closure of the leper colony, it continued to influence how people perceived Spinalonga, separating the past of the lepers from the present of the healthy. In the decades following the closure of the leper colony in 1957, a clear separation emerged between the lepers' past and a 'healthy' present for Spinalonga. People tried to forget and move on. Maurice Born in 1968, as a young researcher from Paris came to Spinalonga to conduct a study on confinement and was faced with the reluctance of locals to speak about the lepers' colony:

*Back then, no one was talking about the leprosy hospital, it was an unpleasant incident that the locals wished to forget... they used to give me some acceptable short version of the story just to get rid of me (Born, 2011: 11).*

This process can be described as 'symbolic annihilation', realised through representational strategies and tactics (Eichstedt & Small, 2002). Adapting the work of Eichstedt and Small (2002) on slavery, we could see how state management during the first decades of 'purification' (material and symbolic) applies the tactics of deflection by focusing on other layers of Spinalonga's past; such as the Venetian and Ottoman, or how more recent 'official' readings



of Spinalonga's dark heritage, both in situ and ex situ, tend to be euphemistic or omittable. For example, the description of Spinalonga in UNESCO's WHS tentative list (2014) makes the following mention:

*In 1904, during the period of the Cretan State, Spinalonga was chosen as the site of a Leper Hospital. Sufferers who were sent to live on the island survived on State funding and charitable donations. Their hard, wretched life did not weaken their will to live. They organised their home, fell in love, married, had children. [Source: whc.unesco.org]*

In this excerpt, we cannot fail to notice how the ostracised and strictly confined lepers are reduced to 'sufferers', who uninterruptedly carry on their lives on the island, even 'falling in love'. Authors of the above excerpt of the WHS tentative list about Spinalonga, following the 20th century literature representations of the lepers, portray them as survivors or as heroes of their time that 'were sent' to Spinalonga by an unmentioned agency. This well-established perception of the lepers, fails to overturn the stigma, as Keli Daskala notes (2011: 249). Current literature production on Spinalonga, including Hislop's best seller novel 'The island', denounce social racism and discrimination, stress the importance of education, and urge both the state and citizens to take responsibility. Therefore, beyond the critiquing on the romanticisation of the lepers' past, these contemporary representations (i.e., the novel and the TV series 'The island') efficiently challenged the stereotypes and reduced stigma.

The unexpected impact of the novel and the TV series opened a new era for the leper past of Spinalonga. The positive and perhaps even optimistic way of narrating the hard and difficult history of the leper colony through romanticised individual stories amidst the WWII proved to be the key for many people to open up. To refer only to one of the few such incidents, this a story that an archaeologist shared with us:

*I had a friend. A close friend. We have known each other since we were school students. And she knew that I was working for Spinalonga. It was only when the TV series 'The island' was broadcasted in Mega Channel that she came to me and told me that her grandmother was in Spinalonga and that her mother was born there. After all these years, it was the TV series that made her speak. [Interview 8-4-2024]*

A vibrant and engaging public discussion was galvanised through the intervention of the novel, within the local communities of Mirabello and beyond. Even though much can be said about the romantic way in which the novel and the TV series treated the difficult past of the leper colony, it is also true that these forms of representations acted as catalyst to radically reform the perceptions of Spinalonga to this day, thus moving from forgetting to negotiating with the dark past. Looking into the social impact an artistic practice, like this of writing a popular romance novel or producing a TV series, may have on the ways history is being narrated and heritage is being made, challenges us to think of what is there to learn from other forms of engaging with the past. How can artistic practices contribute to the creation of a knowledge commons that democratises heritage management? How can a heritage site activate and



emphasise shared access to knowledge and cultural resources. In what ways do popular narratives, like novels and TV series, serve as shared cultural texts that allow diverse communities to engage with and contribute to the collective memory of a place such as Spinalonga? Considering the knowledge commons framework, how can we ensure that the narratives and interpretations of history are not solely controlled by a few but are instead co-created by the broader public? As we think about heritage management, how can the knowledge commons help in recognising and integrating the voices of communities that have been overlooked or silenced in traditional historical narratives?



## 5. RESEARCHING AREAS OF 'DARK HERITAGE': CONCLUDING REMARKS

Spinalonga represents a complex and idiosyncratic site of 'dark heritage' produced by the traumatic memories of human suffering, discrimination and social injustice, contemporary tourism consumption and romanticised, although well-intended, imagery. Our study is premised on the belief that **researching and understanding these dynamics better is critical for managing the polysemy of heritage sites towards a balanced and socially relevant approach**, by developing a representative and reflective experience for the modern visitor. As analysed in Section 2 of this working paper, our process of researching areas of 'dark heritage' is theoretically underpinned by the idea of heritage not as a 'noun' but as a dynamic act of 'doing'. In this light, **'heritagisation' describes heritage 'as a form of cultural production and communication; a making and remaking of meaning and an ongoing negotiation between memory, identity and space'** (Carter et al., 2020: 2). At the same time, the 'dark matter' of Spinalonga does not serve as a typological category but is also viewed as **a process - as a historical and ethnographic phenomenon that invites us to explore how heritage is assembled discursively and how the actors involved negotiate with it** (Macdonald, 2009).

To do so, our enquiry set off from **archival research**, aiming to discover how Spinalonga was 'archaeologised' since the 1970s and how it emerged as a dark heritage/heritage tourism site. This was followed by **a mixed-methods multi-disciplinary approach to field research** that drew on notions, practices and tools from anthropology, history, cultural and heritage studies to explore **lived experiences, memories and oral narratives** of the local community and its descendants. In addition, our research was informed by the diverse **discursive and visual interpretations** of Spinalonga that have been produced in **literature and the arts**, as well as, other **creative media** (e.g., cartes postales), enriching our lenses for viewing and knowing the site. This whole process of **exploring the manifold constructions and representations of the past resemble a kind of 'symbolic excavation'** (Alderman & Campbell, 2008).

Spinalonga's heritagisation shows eloquently how **the past cannot always be disciplined to fit into a singular representation**. Similar to other 'dark' sites (Seaton, 2009), Spinalonga had not been promoted deliberately as a 'dark tourism' attraction by official management but rather **tourism and the mediation of popular culture** (Lennon & Foley, 2000) **had been catalyst to stimulating the public's interest**. However, mass tourism experiences often demand the reduction of a complex past to a digestible experience (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996) and in the case of Spinalonga, evidently the engagement with the leper's past passes through romanticised/aestheticized filters. This challenges us to go beyond a passive critique of current management practices on the islet and come up with protocols and tools that can broaden its interpretation and encourage modes of public engagement that transcend the 'comfortable'. Otherwise, we risk to confine the treatment of Spinalonga's heritage to the



provision of nostalgic, aestheticized, romanticised, politically-washed narratives that fit well with a tourism-centred notion of monuments as enriching features of leisure experience.

We hold that the variety of different forms of darkness around heritage creates a fertile ground for social research while opening up new invigorating paths for the sector to mobilise heritage as a resource for sustainable, resilient and participatory practices. Building further on the analysis of this working paper, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations inherent in the traditional institutions' responsiveness towards the 'dark' side of Spinalonga. Whereas on the other hand, local institutions such the local Ephorate are keener to addressing the multifaceted nature of the site. Yet, they lack resources and flexibility to deal with other than the archaeological past (i.e., according to the Greek Archaeological Law, monuments of the 'archaeological past' can be objects with artistic and cultural significance that predates 1830). **To connect management practices and policy with the complex and layered meanings that Spinalonga embodies**, we need to think of tools, and processes that transcend the disciplinary and institutional boundaries.

Moving beyond the institutional boundaries and its rigid framework enables us to foster more inclusive approaches to heritage-making and implement dynamic and participatory practices to management, as well as public engagement in history-making that would contribute to **the ongoing negotiation of meaning, memory and identity** of Spinalonga. Some attempts to change institutional culture and methods of heritage-making towards greater participation and inclusion are evident in the case of Spinalonga by the multiple ways various researchers and artists were involved in its heritagisation processes over time. Such developments remain at the discretion of the state archaeologists in charge, who have limited freedom to make decisions autonomously. **Tracking the process by which certain narratives and meanings of Spinalonga's leper past became established within society** (i.e., related local communities, the tourism sector, as well as, state archaeology) fostered our understanding of **how shifts in societal attitudes may change or affect institutional practices and strategies 'from below'**.

What we suggest is that changes in societal attitudes towards Spinalonga, its archaeological past, as well as, its more recent leper past, should inform its management and interpretation. To adapt to heritage as a dynamic field, **we need to abolish the understanding of heritage as something set, stable and unchangeable**. Furthermore, **to embrace change we need to develop flexible management practices that accommodate new insights, alternative responses and shifting attitudes related to the monument**. Moving away from a static, monolithic view of heritage, we can foster a more inclusive and participatory approach that allows for **a broader range of voices and experiences to shape the interpretation and management of Spinalonga**. This means creating platforms for dialogue, encouraging community involvement, and being open to revisiting and revising the narratives associated with Spinalonga as new historical understandings or cultural needs emerge.



Applying some commoning practices in the management of the heritage site of Spinalonga (e.g., co-creation, engagement; see also GLAMMONS Deliverable 1.6) would play a significant role in creating a platform for dialogue and encouraging community involvement in the interpretation of the site. To move to more democratic, inclusive and transparent management practices necessitates a shift away from current centralised, top-down approaches. To consider a pathway towards this shift means to consider the decentralisation of archaeological heritage management, a wider distribution of decision-making power and new modalities of community involvement, co-creation, co-curation, public engagement and sharing of authority and responsibility. Reducing the rigid control of archaeological heritage authorities in Greece would be a challenging process. Yet, it holds great potential for fostering a more inclusive and dynamic approach to heritage management that aligns with the needs and values of local communities and broader society.

**Our enquiry in ‘commonising’ the GLAM sector promotes a paradigm shift with the view to democratise the management and interpretation of cultural resources, including monuments and sites such as Spinalonga.** Our research presented here reveals that some traditional modes of managing the past are already being challenged by popular culture, the literature (e.g., ‘The island’ by V. Hislop) and mass media (e.g., ‘The island’ Greek TV series based on Hislop’s novel). We believe that there are a lot to **learn from these alternative processes of heritage-making and to do so, we need to adapt our methodologies and tools to further investigate them.** These representations, even though romanticised, provide **effective ways to bridge large and diverse audiences** with complex historical narratives. Popular portrayals of Spinalonga made a strong impact on collective memory, i.e., the ways in which Spinalonga as a leper colony is being remembered. **Rather than dismissing these romanticized approaches as mere fiction or distortions, it is crucial to acknowledge their role as historical experiences** (Palmié & Stewart, 2019) **in shaping public perceptions and form public history narratives about heritage.**



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