WELSH MEMORIES IN A CRETAN LANDSCAPE



I am on a short visit to Crete.

Elounda, Lasithi. Out east. Past the prehistoric ruins of Malia, to where Chris (Witmore) and I drove in the Renault convertible on an impromptu photo shoot. It’s been twenty five years since.

Another visit now to liquid commingling times.

A dappled landscape

I look out over a dappled landscape. Low, rounded, dark green thorny shrubs, exposed limestone and schist, patches of bare earth and rock. Phrygana and maquis ecologies. Old olive groves. Many unmaintained stone terrace walls. A summer palette of dark-spotted pale browns and silvers.

And development. Holiday properties, white-painted. Blue pools. Clustered,

scattered.

To the north east across the bay is Spiralonga – Venetian fortress, Ottoman acquisition, one of the last leper colonies in Europe. To the south at Elounda is where once was the ancient city of Olous, its ruins now mostly only visible beneath the shallow waters on either side of the causeway that separates the mainland from the island of Kalydon.

The stark contrast between the white-painted houses, blue pools, and the sun-parched scrub might suggest a story of people working the land and the land returning to its own organic wildness.

No. One must remember that what one is amongst is a manifestation of perhaps 7,000 years of grazing, repeated cycles of burning, works of terracing and abandonment, charcoal production, olive cultivation, and intermittent construction projects. What appears “wild” is in fact a long-lived cultural milieu. The phrygana is not simply vegetation recovering from human disturbance – it is part of a dynamic equilibrium between people, animals, climate, stone, and plants.

The scrub is not merely a backdrop to human effort, but a living medium that both reveals and conceals traces. It obscures walls, softens abandoned terraces, carries the scents of thyme and sage released by the sun, and frames the experience of moving through the landscape. With the goats. The vegetation itself becomes one of the enduring agencies through which the deep past continues to be encountered.



South of Plaka, north of Elounda. Spiralonga in the distance.

Brith Gof

The dappled speckled mottled milieu brings back to me the Welsh name Mike and Cliff gave to a company of performers who worked with sites, their hosts, ghosts, and visitors – Brith Gof.

Brith Gof – “speckled memories” is a rough interpretive translation.

Brith

The Welsh adjective *brith* is a rich semantic field. Its basic meaning is: speckled, dappled, mottled, piebald, variegated, many-coloured, flecked with contrasting marks. It describes surfaces that are irregular rather than uniform: the feathers of a bird, lichens on stone, weathered rock, shifting light through leaves, woven textiles, skin marked with freckles.



Perhaps the best-known example is *bara brith*, a Welsh “speckled bread,” whose raisins and currants create the characteristic mottled appearance.

But *brith* is more than visual. Welsh literature often uses it metaphorically for things that are mixed, fragmentary, or textured by time. Rather than a smooth whole, *brith* suggests: traces, interruptions, fragments, surviving patches, incompleteness.

Figuratively, *brith* shades into mixed, impure, faint, indistinct — even morally chequered: a *bywyd brith* is a shady or eventful life.

Brith is archaeological.

Gof

Gof literally means smith, blacksmith or worker in metal.

The persona reaches back to Proto-Celtic *goben-* (“smith”). It also survives in Celtic mythology in figures such as *Goibniu* and the Welsh *Gofannon*, divine

craftsmen associated with making, transformation, and even hospitality.

The smith occupies a remarkable place in the Celtic imagination. *Gof* is not merely a fabricator. They smith transforms matter, mediates between fire and earth, reshapes, gives form through labor. The smith is synchronously an artist, engineer, and magician.

A (more-than-phenomenological) field of metaphor

There is more.

Brith gof is an established Welsh idiom – *mae gen i frith gof* means "I have a vague recollection" – that everyday sense of a memory that is partial, flickering, half-recovered. Con-fabulated (exactly the correct term for what is typically called the hallucinations of generative AI!). Note the mutation: the noun is actually *cof* (memory), softened to *gof* because in Welsh an adjective placed before its noun – a marked, poetic word order – triggers soft mutation. And that mutation opens a lovely ambiguity. *Cof* memory, and *gof* smith. Brith Gof can be misread, productively, as "speckled smith" – memory as something forged, hammered, worked at heat – a doubleness of which Cliff McLucas was so fond.

In English, "dappled memory" or "speckled remembrance" catches the surface, but the idiom really means something closer to "a dim trace of recollection." There's a resonance here with Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Pied Beauty" – his praise of "dappled things" was written by a poet steeped in Welsh and *cynghanedd* (an intricate, ancient Welsh poetic system of sound harmony, alliteration, and internal rhyme), and *brith* is precisely his pied, counter, original, spare, strange.

For a company of performers making site-specific work from the ruins and residues of (Welsh) industrial and rural memory, theatre/archaeology, the name *Brith Gof* compresses all of this: recollection as fragmentary, variegated, and – if you hear the smith in *gof* – actively forged rather than simply retrieved.

An archaeological sensibility – Welsh metaphor in eastern Crete

The phrygana hillside here in Elounda is *brith* in the most literal sense – a dappled surface where nothing is continuous: cushions of thorny burnet and cistus,

bare marl, a terrace riser slumping back into scrub, an olive gone feral among carob. But the speckling isn't decorative; it's evidential. Each patch is a varied trace of intervention — grazing pressure here, an abandoned lazy-bed there, fire, coppicing, the slow revenge of spurge on a field last ploughed in the 1950s.

The landscape around Elounda is a memory that only exists as variegation. There is no continuous text to read, no stratigraphic narrative laid out in order — just motley, the *siaced fraith* of seven millennia worn inside out. This is exactly the *brith gof* idiom: not "the past remembered" but a dim, partial, heterogeneous recollection in which the fragments don't share a color, a period, or even an ontology (a Minoan sherd, a salt-pan revetment, a goat path, an EU-funded track sit in the same visual field with equal claim).

The archaeological sensibility is precisely the disposition that takes this motley as its medium rather than its problem — attending to trace, residue, and remainder without demanding that they resolve into narrative. *Brith gof* gives that sensibility a name with two productive torsions. First, the idiom's modesty: *mae gen i frith gof* is what one says of a memory one can't quite substantiate. The dappled hills attest to inhabitation but won't testify; they offer attestation without deposition. Walking the maquis is having a *brith gof* on the landscape's behalf — recollection as an act performed in the present, in the body, moving through thorn and heat-shimmer, a snorkeled-swim in the shallows, rather than retrieved from an archive.

And then the smith. If you let *gof* ring as blacksmith — the Elounda country is a speckled forge: memory not found but worked, hammered, annealed. This is apt for a place where the "natural" landscape is an artifact through and through — phrygana is itself an anthropogenic vegetation regime, forged by browsing and burning, maintained at heat. It's doubly apt at Olous, where the sunken city under the channel is periodically re-forged by every snorkeller, every guidebook, every isthmus-crossing tourist; and at Spinalonga, where Venetian fortress, Ottoman village, and leper colony have been beaten into a single glinting object of visitation. The dapple, in other words, is not the erosion of memory but its mode of production. A *brith gof* sensibility would resist the conservator's fantasy of restoring the hillside to one colour — one period, one story — and instead work the mottle: mosaic (*brithwaith*) as method, the trout-flank shimmer of pasts surfacing and submerging as you move.

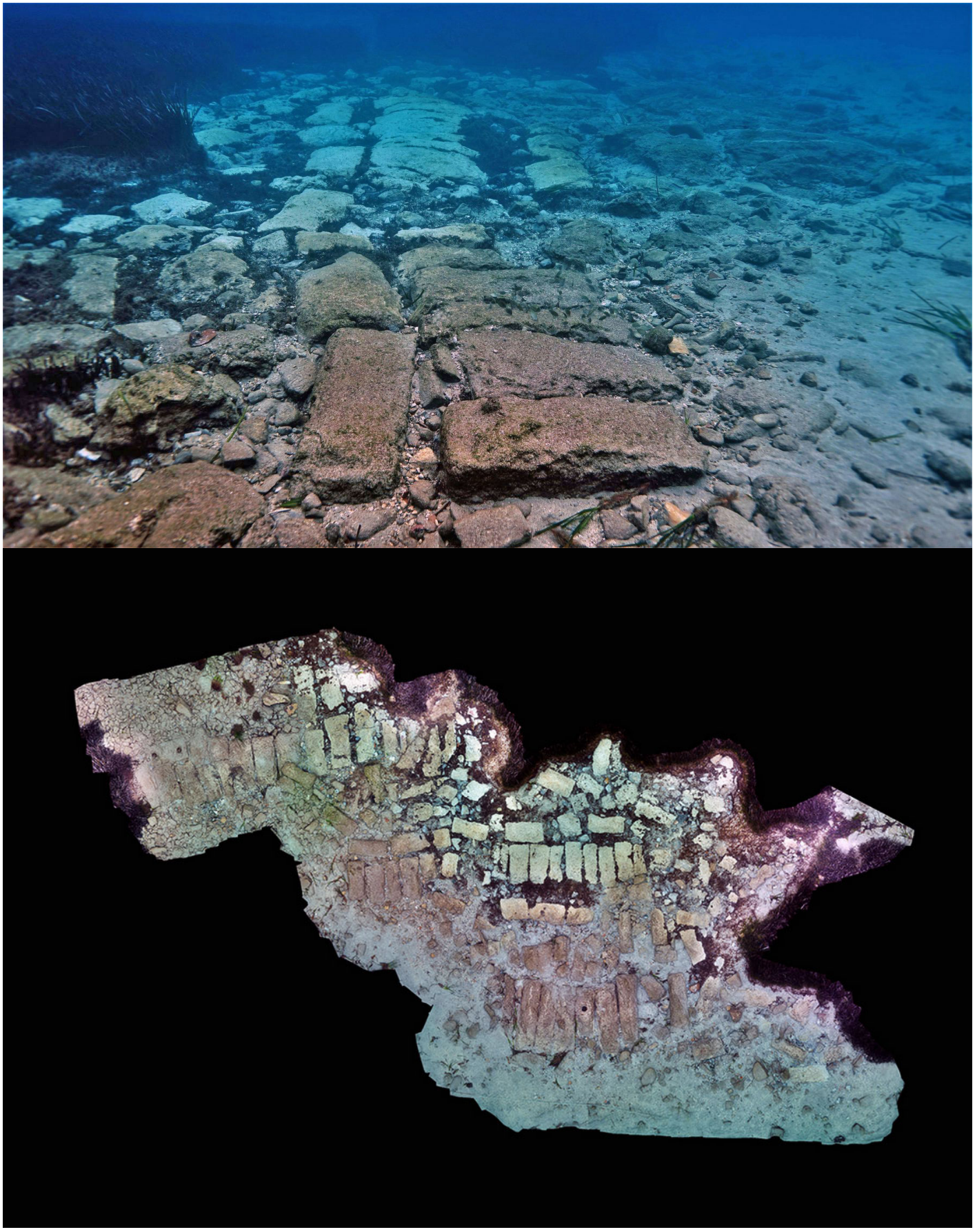
There’s a last and critical resonance worth pushing to the fore: *brith* shading into the morally chequered, the *bywyd brith*. These hills are not innocent dapple — enclosure, maritime colonial enterprise, depopulation, quarantine, the extractive salt monopolies, now the enclave hotels along the gulf. A speckled memory of Elounda that stayed picturesque would be Hopkins without the counter and the strange. The forge is still hot.

Hosts, visitors, ghosts

Eva, the boat captain who took us to the ruins, commented that not much is made of the historical heritage of the region around Elounda and Spiralonga. She says few people ask about the ruins. A visit to Spinalonga is a visit to an unstoried ruin — you need to do serious homework to figure out its well-preserved remains. She doesn’t visit Spiralonga to show her four children. But she knew exactly where to look for the city beneath the sea.



Over the city beneath the sea — south western extension of the island of Kalydon



Underwater images from

https://www.archaeology.wiki/blog/2021/03/09/underwater-research-of-ancient-olous/

The interesting thing isn't that heritage effort is absent here — it's that it's been directed almost entirely at fabric and at a single narrative, leaving the deep and variegated currents of archaeology and history essentially uninterpreted.

Take the money and attention first, because they're not lacking. Spinalonga sits on Greece's UNESCO tentative list, with a formal nomination assembled from 2018–19 by the Ministry of Culture, the Lasithi Ephorate and the Municipality of Agios Nikolaos. Spiralonga receives something over 300,000 visitors a year — Crete's second-busiest archaeological site after Knossos. Successive EU-funded phases (the 2019 round alone was around €900,000) have gone into it. So the region is not neglected in the budgetary sense. But look at where that effort lands: the stated priority has been making the Venetian and leper-colony buildings structurally safe, and secondarily preserving their architectural character. That's conservation of the material, not interpretation of the meaning — and the two are routinely confused in heritage practice, where "we spent millions on the site" is offered as if it answered the question "what does the site tell a visitor?"

Then there's the narrative monoculture. Spinalonga's fame is overwhelmingly driven by the story of the island becoming a leper colony, amplified by Victoria Hislop's *The Island* and its Greek television adaptation. The island has been framed as a "topos" of isolation and suffering — even commissioning an original musical work by Xydakis and Kapsalis around exactly that theme. It's a genuinely powerful story and it sells the boat tickets, but it flattens everything underneath it. The Venetian bastion engineering, the Ottoman settlement phase, and above all the ancient stratum — Olous, the sunken polis, the Hellenistic harbour, the early-Christian basilicas — are narratively crowded out. Eva's clients arrive for lepers and leave with lepers. The 3,000 years before 1903 are, interpretively, a rounding error.

The structural reasons are worth naming, because they're not local laziness. Greek heritage governance is highly centralized and object-and-fabric-focused; the Ephorate model grew out of excavation and conservation, where institutional prestige and funding have historically sat, and public interpretation has been a downstream afterthought. Compounding that, the portable meaning of Olous has been physically removed from the isthmus — the votive material, the inscriptions, the coins that have been found are dispersed to the museums at Agios Nikolaos and

Heraklion. The site is curated as emptied stone while its content lives in vitrines elsewhere.

This is a fairly exact instance of what Laurajane Smith calls authorized heritage discourse: the expert institution conserves the fabric and relocates the meaning, and the place itself is left mute. And the underwater dimension makes it worse — submerged, fragile, weather-dependent, genuinely hard and expensive to present, and only recently surveyed (the FORTH/Ephorate work is still being processed and has never been turned outward into public-facing interpretation).

The interpretation isn't missing. It's just not *authorized*. Eva is the interpretation — a boat captain narrating the ruins over the side of her vessel is doing precisely the embodied, oral, situated meaning-making that the agencies aren't. That vernacular layer is real and, in some ways, better: it's responsive, it's performed, it's tied to the actual encounter with the water and the wall-tops rather than to a laminated panel. The lack of official mediation is exactly what leaves the site open to being read directly — snorkelled over, puzzled out, narrated by whoever knows it. For a visitor with an archaeological sensibility that under-determination is a gift; the place hasn't been pre-digested. The problem is that this is a privilege of the equipped visitor. For the general public, "no authorized interpretation" doesn't mean liberating openness — it means the deep history is simply invisible, and they default to the one story that has been told for them.

So Eva is right that authorized, on-site, deep-time interpretation is thin to absent, and she's right to notice it — but the situation isn't under-investment, it's mis-direction, toward fabric over meaning and toward one legible narrative over a layered one. And the more provocative point is that the gap she's identifying is being quietly filled by exactly the kind of vernacular, performative, distributed knowledge that authorized heritage tends not to count as interpretation at all. The captain narrating the sunken city is the region's actual interpretation infrastructure. Whether that's a failure to be corrected or a condition to be cultivated is, I think, the genuinely open question — and not one the Ephorate is currently framed to ask.



A Welsh bread – Bara Brith

Post Script – city beneath the sea

Deep temporal processes. Geology as agent in a post-phenomenological ecology.

Tectonic setting and why Olous is under water.

Geologically, Crete is the emergent crest of the Hellenic forearc, riding above the African plate as it subducts beneath the Aegean, and the island as a whole has been

rising over the long term — net uplift rates on the order of 2.5–3 mm/yr, though that average hides alternating episodes of uplift and subsidence over 10,000-year timescales. Crucially, the movement is not uniform. In the great earthquake of AD 365 the western tip of Crete was thrown up by as much as 9 m and the whole block tilted, while central and eastern Crete subsided along a tectonic boundary corresponding to the Spili graben. Western harbours like Phalasarna were left stranded high and dry; the northeast coast around Mirabello sat on the down-tilted side and has experienced relative submergence, which is why Olous — along with Chersonisos and Mochlos — has drowned Hellenistic and Roman shorelines.

Olous did not sink beneth the sea in a single disastrous event. Instead it was a long-lived, episodic tectonic submergence of a down-warped coast, very possibly with coseismic steps, rather than a single event. The nuance is that over much longer timescales eastern Crete does show net uplift too, recorded in raised marine terraces with a northward tilt — the historical-period signal on this particular coast is submergence, superimposed on slower long-term rise.