The ancient Diolkos: Statement of Significance

Διόλκος : αρχέων 1960 Προσωπικό Αρχείο Βεβάν Βερβελή

Andreas Hadjiloucas

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Introduction

A statement of significance aims to the evaluation of the significance of an archaeological site. The case study I have chosen to show is the ancient Diolkos in Greece. The process of the assessment is very challenging, because the site is novel in every aspect, abandoned though and exposed under great risk. Personally, I am witness of the monument's condition, after a visit in situ in March of 2007. The involving and responsible for its protection parties have done nothing and they have not reached so far to an entire assessment of the monument. On the other hand, people, especially concerned citizens are interested and they are mobilized for its protection and promotion. By assessing the cultural values and detecting the criteria, which the Diolkos covers, I will try to indicate its significance and to reveal the aspects of this relatively unknown monument.

The history of the Diolkos

The ancient Diolkos was neither an inhabited settlement nor a sacred place, but a trackway close to the ancient Corinth, one of the most prominent and powerful state-cities in ancient Greece, possessing an outstanding strategic position (Cook 1979; Lewis 2001; MacDonald 1986; Werner 1997). The Diolkos was situated exactly in the Isthmus of Corinth, the narrow neck of land, which unites Peloponnesus peninsula with the rest part of Greek mainland **(Figures 1-2)**. In the ancient times merchant and war ships sailing from West towards East and reversely were obliged to travel around whole Peloponnesus in order to reach their destination. Thus, a kind of railway was constructed at the end of the 7th or at the beginning of the 6th century BC, during the years when Periandros was the tyrant of Corinth (Verdelis 1957, 526; Cook 1979, 152; Reapsaet & Tolley 1993, 256; Lewis 2001, 11) in order to facilitate the communication between the Gulf of Corinth and Saronic Gulf, the two seas surrounding the Isthmus. Its name, Diolkos, derives from the words "διά" and "ολκός", which mean "across" and "portage" respectively (Stamatakos 1949, 275). It seems to remain in use until the 1st century AD, when the ancient literature stops to make any reference (Lewis 2001, 11), and probably was reused for a short time within the 9th and the 12th century AD, according to some references (Cook 1979, 152; Lewis 2001, 12; Werner 1997, 114).

We are not completely aware of its length and its exact course. Its total length is estimated from 6 to 8.5 km depending on the number of supposed bends taken into account (Lewis 2001, 10; Reapsaet & Tolley 1993, 246; Werner 1997, 109). The Diolkos runs across the narrowest part of Isthmus, which is rough topographically and therefore its course is curved in order to avoid the steeper gradients (Werner 1997, 109), while in some parts, the Diolkos

follows the course of the modern canal (Reapsaet & Tolley 1993, 238). Approximately, 1.1 km has been archaeologically traced mostly in its western end close to the bay of Corinth, where the mooring place is (Werner 1997, 109). There, a section of the known trackway was destroyed by the works for the modern canal in the 19th century (Lewis 2001, 10). Its eastern end is near the village of Kalamaki, the ancient Schoinos, at the Saronic Gulf (Werner 1997, 109) **(Figures 3-4).**

In addition, we also lack substantial information about its exact service, since the ancient references are not sufficiently elucidating. It has been suggested that through the Diolkos merchant ships and warships were transported from the one gulf to the other. Some scholars argue that only warships were transported because they were lighter (Cook 1979, 153; MacDonald 1986, 192). Furthermore, this argument is extended, supporting the transportation of cargoes, instead of merchant ships, including raw material such as marble, stones, timber and metals (Cook 1979, 152; Reapsaet & Tolley 1993, 235). Nevertheless, the presence of the grooves, which were cut deliberately in the hard limestone pavement of the Diolkos, especially those at the eastern section, indicates that they functioned as tracks and they guided cart wheels, where cargoes or ships and boats could have been transferred (Reapsaet & Tolley 1993, 259-261), despite the technical difficulties (Werner 1997, 109). In any case, either the transportation of heavy ships was technically possible or not, it has not much importance for the scope of this research, but it is noteworthy and helpful in order to understand the use of the construction, which fairly has been named the first railway of the world (Lewis 2001, 8, 15).

The historical development of the place – The excavations

The landscape surrounding the Diolkos did not change significantly through the centuries. The Diolkos fell in nonuse and it was buried by the passing of the time. People forgot its existence. The fact which brought a dramatic change in the area of Isthmus was the construction of the canal in the end of the 19th century (Kathimerini 2008, ¶4). As it has been mentioned above, the works destroyed a section of the trackway (Lewis 2001, 10). Before the canal's construction the chief engineer conducted a research for the topography of the area, but he did not detected the Diolkos (Reapsaet & Tolley 1993, 235). Fowler was the first who discovered some parts of the western quay in 1932 (Werner & Walter 1997, 98), while Nicolaos Verdelis undertook the systematic excavations between the 1956 and 1962, when more or less continuous stretch of 800 m were uncovered (Lewis 2001, 10). However, his unfinished publication left many questions opened regarding the nature of the trackway.

(Lewis 2001, 10; Reapsaet & Tolley 1993, 239). Today the area close to the western end of the Diolkos, which is the most explored and excavated of the traced course (Lewis 2001, 10) is not inhabited. There the course is intermitted by the canal in Peloponnesus side and it continuous mostly within a military zone to the mainland side (Lewis 2001, 12) **(Figures 5-6)**.

Statutory protection - Ownership

According to a cabinet decision of 1965 the Diolkos has been declared archaeological site. A buffer zone of 30 m around the trackway established in order to protect the site (Hellenic Ministry of Culture 2008, ¶2). The western end of Diolkos is property of the Canal's Company (Loverdou 2007b), which was under the ownership of the state until the 2001 (Loverdou 2007a). However, since the time of the excavations the archaeological site has been lacking essential protection and management. The military zone is a property of the state.

The involving parties, the bureaucracy and the remissness

The Canal's company took the obligation to undertake a project for the conservation of the monument. After 5 years, in 1985, while the erosion, which was caused by the waterway, had started to affect the Diolkos, the Ministry of Culture released the company from this commitment (Loverdou 2007a ¶2). In the meanwhile, concerned citizens started to be mobilized for the protection of Diolkos (Loverdou 2007a ¶3). In 1999 subscriptions were collected demanding its salvation but none from the relevant authorities took this act into consideration (Loverdou 2007a ¶4). In the parliament it was clarified that the company had undertook the project, but in a short time it refused to implement it (Loverdou 2007a ¶4). In 2003 the regional archaeological service, in which the Diolkos is included, spoke for its initiative to undertake a project for the anastylosis of the monument, but, as it was proved later on, it did not possess even the substantial elements regarding the Diolkos, in order to plan this project (Loverdou 2007a ¶5). Furthermore, the local authorities did nothing all that time for the solution of the problem (Loverdou 2007a ¶5). The only rescue operation, which took place, was the installation of two metal stays in March of 2007, in order to support some ramshackle slabs **(Figure 7)**! Finally, after the deterioration of the monument, in September of 2007 the Central Archaeological Council approved a master plan for the Diolkos compiled by the Directorate for the Restoration of Ancient Monuments, but so far no operations have been undertaken.

The current condition

Today the ancient Diolkos is an abandoned place under a miserable condition. In March of 2007 I have the chance to visit the site as a representative of the Hellenic Society for the Protection of the Environment and the Cultural Heritage, the biggest NGO regarding cultural heritage in Greece, where I was working voluntarily that time, in order to ascertain the problems and the threats, which the ancient trackway faces. There I met the journalist Sofia Loverdou who guided me in the western end of the Diolkos, the most important but the most threatened section. Sofia Loverdou is the coordinator of the initiative of the local people and every concerned citizen, including some archaeologists, who wish the protection and the conservation of the site. She is also the organizer of the petition regarding the Diolkos through the internet and the author of many articles, which aim to the promotion of the issue.

In situ, because the Diolkos is intermitted by the waterway **(Figure 8)** and it is drenched by the ships' wake, it faces erosion in a tremendous scale in the Peloponnesus side. The erosion effect is getting worse due to the negligence of the responsible bodies, which never implemented a conservation or a restoration plan (Loverdou 2007a). A part of the trackway has been already sank under the water, while some ancient slabs are collapsing and are falling either down to the water level of to the water itself. Therefore, a matter of stratigraphic perturbation is raised additionally to the erosion **(Figures 9-20)**. The site seems completely unguarded, without entrance or exit and without recognizable boundaries **(Figures 21-25)**. Moreover the place is being polluted by litter **(Figure 26)**. The site must be immediately restored and a composed management plan must be drawn up as soon as possible. By contrast, the section which is included to the military zone does not face threats due to the seawater erosion at least at present (Loverdou 2007a).

The condition of the monument led to the writing of several press reports throughout the internet, in local and in international basis emphasising on the damages and the negligence on behalf of the Ministry of Culture:

> "It is a monument of first-class importance for the history of technology, and the Greek achievement generally …The deterioration of the monument continues to as the erosion attacks the shrinking 'sane' part of the monument and further damage is done to the sections already lying in the water or buried under the sand." (Loverdou 2007b)

> "More than 1,600 signatures from almost 51 countries have now persuaded the Government in Athens that its reputation for caring for its past is in danger, and the Diolkos case could be an embarrassment when the Greeks are trying to persuade world opinion that the Elgin Marbles would be safe in their hands." (Times 2007)

Assessing the values…

The today's condition of the place is not the only reason of the necessity the Diolkos archaeological site to receive the appropriate conservation, protection and management. First of all, Diolkos is an outstanding monument of the ancient greek civilization. Bellow I will try to assess those values which cover the Diolkos so as the extent of its significance to be clarified.

Historic value

The Diolkos is an ancient monument, which is dated between the late 7th and the early 6th century BC, a period of flourish for the ancient Greece. We have ancient sources in our possession, which tell that the Corinthian trackway was associated to some very well known naval enterprises, like the passing of the Spartans across Diolkos twice in order to move against the Athenians and their allies during the Peloponnesian War (Thucydides, 3.15.1, 8.7-8), the passing of a Macedonian fleet consisted of 38 vessels against Philip V (Polybius, 5.101.4) and the utilization of Diolkos on behalf of Octavian against Marc Antony after the victory of the former at Actium in 31 BC (Werner & Walter 1997, 113). Besides these references, the operation of Diolkos for many centuries highlights even more its role during the ancient times.

Scientific value

The Diolkos is very important structure, speaking in scientific terms, because it is the first instance of a railway in the world (Lewis 2001, 15) and it comprises a technological achievement, if we take into consideration the means of that time. So the researches and the archaeologists have many significant elements and conclusions to extract thanks to its presence. They will probably have the chance to understand many things about the transportation and the means, which were used by the ancient Greeks for its development. Therefore, the Diolkos is an excellent field for study.

Social value

The Diolkos is relatively unknown in Greece and the world mainly because it is overshadowed by the great monuments of Greek antiquity, especially the classical ones, and due to its "simple" and practical role. However, the local people are proud of it because it is an unprecedented technological achievement for Greece and the world. Generally, all Greeks who are aware of Diolkos, especially those who have a special interest like the archaeologists, feel proud also for this construction of their ancestors. Thus, the social value can be explained in the context of a local or regional feeling, which is extended to a national dimension.

Cultural value

Probably the Diolkos can not be evaluated as a major cultural contributor in the context of the ancient Greek civilization, but it can be considered as one of the components of this, which helped some of its fundamental elements to be formed, such as the trade and the war. Especially, if the several suggestions made regarding the transportation of marble across the trackway towards destinations throughout Greece are valid, then the Diolkos could be considered as an indirect cultural contributor, since famous statues were made and superb temples and buildings were constructed by this material that time. The pits of Penteli and Paros were the sources of the marble, while Diolkos was one of the means for its transport.

Economic value

The assessment of economic value it is a complex and difficult task, but concededly very challenging. While the account of the budget for the conservation, the restoration and the broad management process are the most outstanding steps in these cases, sometimes additional and unpredictable issues rise, which overbalance the whole plan. In the case of the Diolkos this process is extremely difficult and costly. On the other hand, this cost could be balanced by the tourist development, when the place will be ready to be presented to the public. Consequently, the tourist development could lead to further economic development increasing the income of the region and creating relevant jobs.

...And the clues

By analyzing the values, we conclude that the monument of Diolkos accomplishes the criterion of *rarity* because of its worldwide uniqueness and its age. Moving a step forward

and taking into account its *uniqueness* and *originality*, it can be suggested that the Diolkos represents some *endangered* aspects and elements of the history of the trade, the transportation and the war enterprises in ancient Greece in the context of a long, certain though *chronological period.* Even though the trackway is in a bad condition in a large scale, it can represent its former meaning due to the nature of its construction. It can contribute to the future *research* and it can be used for *teaching* and *understanding*. It is not a ruined building or temple totally destroyed, which could not express its old aim and sense. In addition, the *representativeness* is enhanced by the uniqueness and originality.

Therefore, the Diolkos constitutes an *innovation*, a *technical achievement* and an *unprecedented creative design* for the time it was constructed. Especially, if according to Lewis the Diolkos was used as a railway not exclusively for ships and commodities, but additionally for public transportation, then it comprises the first real railway, a phenomenon that does not reappear until the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century (Lewis 2001, 15).

Moreover, the Diolkos is associated with *important events* of Greek history, like the naval enterprises during the Peloponnesian War in the second half of the 5th century BC and with *significant personalities*, like Periandros and Octavian.

The monument does not bear any spiritual dimension neither it was connected to religious activities, whereas it is significant for the **local people** and for all **Greeks** broadly. On the other hand, as it has been aforementioned, the Diolkos is indirectly associated to the **ancient Greek culture**, playing a practical role. Thus, it was not necessary the trackway to fulfill any aesthetic criterion.

Suggestions – Possible actions

- The involving parties must communicate and consult with the concerned people and the archaeologists who are interested about the Diolkos, and to define its significance.

- They must specify the budget of the management plan and therefore, the relevant services of the Ministry of Culture they must cooperate with the Canal's Company and to coordinate the following steps.

- It should be proper to separate their management plan in three parts in order to achieve better results:

1. A short-term plan aiming to the interception of the erosion and to the immediate conservation of the most endangered parts of the monument.

2. A medium-term plan aiming to the total conservation and restoration. The damages must be minimized.

3. A long-term plan aiming to the sustainable protection and to the development of the site within its predefined boundaries. Actions must be taken, such as the beautification, guarding, making the boundaries recognizable, the interpretation and the appropriate presentation of the site to the public. Additionally, future threats must be provisioned in order to avoid further risks. It must also be taken in to consideration the conservation of the rest part of the Diolkos which lies in the military zone.

- Promotion of the Diolkos in a global basis to attract more interest and gain benefits because of its significance.

- In a future stage, and only if the management plan be implemented, the incorporation of the whole Diolkos to and integrated archaeological site could be examined as well as the possibility of undertaking or not further excavations to the uncovered parts of the Diolkos.

Conclusion

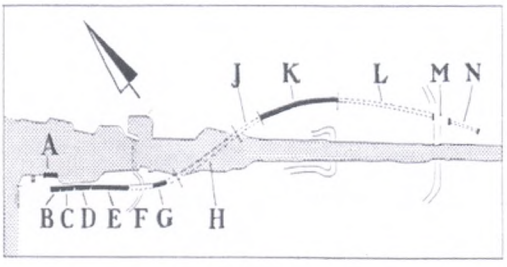
As it has been shown through the values which bears, the Diolkos it is a monument of special significance in a national and international level. Its specific features comprise a unique and pioneer technical achievement for that time. The minor weaknesses regarding some cultural criteria are fulfilled by its strong advantages. However, the parties and the services which are charged to protect the monument have shown no interest for it. Especially, the Ministry of Culture seems to be interested exclusively to the monumental past of Greece, which is expressed by the temples, the theatres, the places of cult and the great public buildings, instead of balancing its priorities. On the contrary, concerned people from all the range of the society, who are aware of the importance of the Diolkos, demand the mobilization of the responsible parties and they make efforts in order to achieve this. The solution can be found

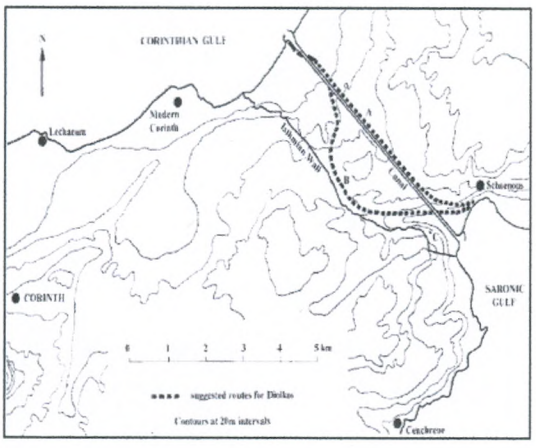
by the implementation of a proper management plan, aiming primarily to ensure the substantial protection, and after the consultation of the stakeholders. There is a lot of potential for the development of the archaeological site. Its significance can bring not only local or national interest, but also international interest and benefits to the local society and mostly to the monument itself.

Figures

Figure 1: The strategic location of the Isthmus of Corinth (source: Wikipedia 2008).

Figure 2: Aerophotograph of the Isthmus of Corinth (source: Wikipedia 2008).





Figures 3 – 4: Plans of the Diolkos course (source: Lewis 2001).

Figures 5 - 6: The section of the Diolkos within the military zone (source: Loverdou 2007a).

Figure 7: The 'rescue' operation (source: personal photo).

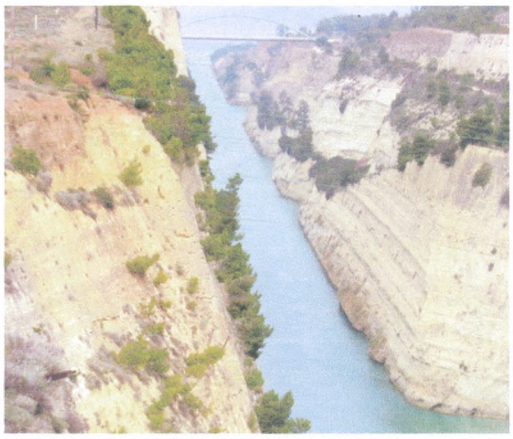
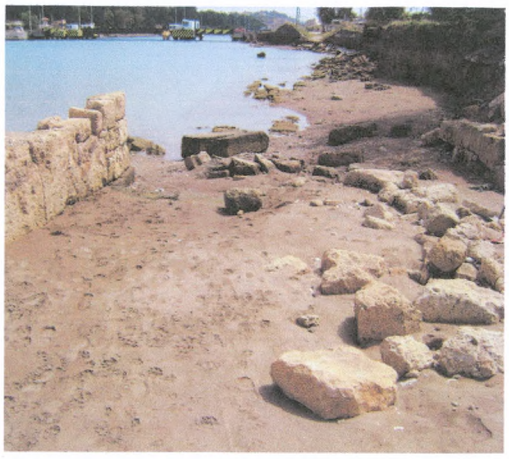


Figure 8: The Canal of Corinth. The Diolkos lies at the very end (source: personal photo).



Figures 9 - 16: The erosion's effect and the subsequent damages (source: personal photos).

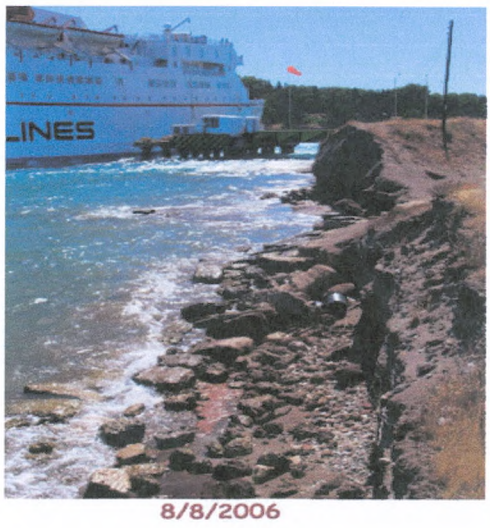


Figure 17: The ship's wake is hurting the monument (source: Loverdou 2007a).

Figure 18: The chronological comparison of the damages (source: Loverdou 2007a).

Figure 19: The chronological comparison of the damages (source: Loverdou 2007a).

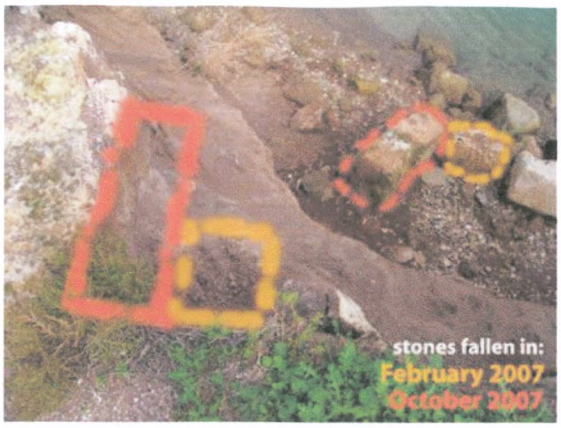
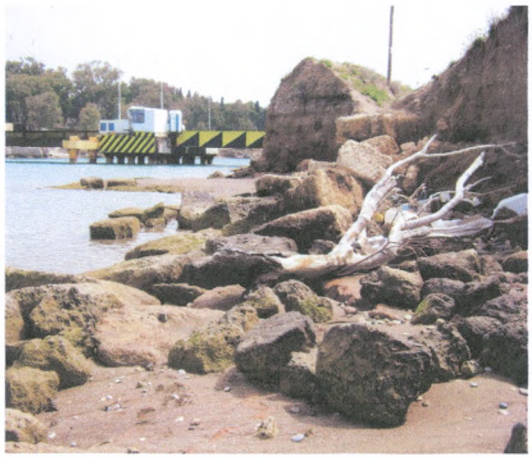


Figure 20: Collapsing slabs (source: Loverdou 2007a).



Figures 21 - 26: A completely abandoned place without recognizable boundaries (source: personal photos).

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Wikipedia, 2008. *Diolkos.* Retrieved on 24 April 2008 from World Wide Web: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diolkos (**figures**).

ΕΠΙΤΑΧΥΝΣΗ ΤΩΝ ΔΙΑΔΙΚΑΣΙΩΝ ΥΠΟΣΧΕΤΑΙ ΤΟ ΥΠΠΟ
Ο Δίολκος και οι συναρμόδιες ευθύνες

Οι αλλαγές ηγεσίας στο Υπουργείο Πολιτισμού δεν αντιπροσωπεύουν κατ' ανάγκη κοσμοϊστορικές μεταβολές σε ό,τι αφορά τον Δίολκο. Όχι μόνο διότι κάποια από τα πρόσωπα που έχουν παρελάσει, τουλάχιστον τα τελευταία χρόνια, δεν έδιναν την αίσθηση ότι θα άλλαζαν σημαντικά τα πράγματα στο ΥΠΠΟ – αλλά και διότι, ανεξάρτητα από το ποιος είναι Υπουργός, οι ευθύνες για τη μέχρι τώρα διάλυση του μνημείου παραμένουν βαρύτατες – είτε τις βλέπει είτε δεν τις βλέπει κάποιος εισαγγελέας (κι αν ο εισαγγελέας ΔΕΝ τις βλέπει, τότε απλά είναι συνυπεύθυνος).

Η πρόσφατη απάντηση του κου Παύλου Γερουλάνου στην ερώτηση που κατέθεσαν στις 23/11/2009 οι κκ. Αθανάσιος Πλεύρης και Σπυρίδων – Άδωνις Γεωργιάδης του Λαϊκού Ορθόδοξου Συναγερμού, περιέχει πάντως ένα νέο στοιχείο.

«Αναγνωρίζοντας τη σημασία του μνημείου, αλλά και την πολυπλοκότητα του ζητήματος το Υπουργείο Πολιτισμού και Τουρισμού έχει ήδη δώσει οδηγίες για την επιτάχυνση των διαδικασιών», γράφει ο κ. Γερουλάνος στις 11/12/2009. Ας το ελπίσουμε διότι, πέρα από την προσωρινή προστασία δύο μετώπων διάβρωσης την άνοιξη του 2009, το μνημείο υφίσταται συνεχή φθορά και καταπονήσεις. Κι αυτό παρά το γεγονός ότι η ίδια η γνωμοδότηση του ΚΑΣ, την οποία το ΥΠΠΟ υποτίθεται ότι ακολουθεί, και στην οποία επίσης αναφέρεται ο κ. Γερουλάνος, μιλούσε το 2007 για ΑΜΕΣΑ μέτρα προστασίας.

Τα άμεσα μέτρα και άλλες προβλέψεις για μόνιμη προστασία και αποκατάσταση του Δίολκου, είχε αναφέρει και ο κ. Λιάπης απαντώντας στην βουλευτή του Συνασπισμού κ Άννα Φιλίνη, στις 15/11/2007 – όμως όλα προχώρησαν, τουλάχιστον επί της προηγούμενης κυβέρνησης, με βήματα ανάπηρης χελώνας.

«Το θέμα της διασφάλισης του μνημείου είναι σύνθετο και δεν είναι αποκλειστική αρμοδιότητα του Υπουργείου Πολιτισμού και Τουρισμού», αναφέρει επίσης ο κ. Γερουλάνος. «Αυτό προϋποθέτει την έκδοση Κοινής Υπουργικής Απόφασης».

Πάμε έξι χρόνια πίσω; Για «έργα που απαιτούν τη συμμετοχή και τις εγκρίσεις άλλων εμπλεκόμενων φορέων, την ενεργοποίηση και συνεργασία των οποίων επιδιώκει επίμονα το ΥΠΠΟ», έγραφε στις 8/12/2003 ο κ. Ευάγγελος Βενιζέλος, απαντώντας σε ερώτηση του κ. Αναστάση Παπαληγούρα για τον Δίολκο.

Με δεδομένη τη συνεχιζόμενη ανετοιμότητα του ΥΠΠΟ, αναρωτιέμαι τι διαχωρίζει την κενότητα της φράσης του κ. Βενιζέλου από την άλλη ανοησία, περί ρευματολογικής μελέτης που είχε δήθεν ζητηθεί από την ΑΕΔΙΚ, με την οποία είχε απαντήσει το 1999 σε άλλη ερώτηση των κκ. Παπαληγούρα και Δήμα η τότε «υπεύθυνη» Υπουργός κα. Ελισάβετ Παπαζώη.

Οι συναρμοδιότητες για την περιοχή του Δίολκου δεν είναι όμως τίποτα καινούριο. Υπάρχουν από πάντα – ή έστω από το 1960 που ολοκληρώθηκε η ανασκαφή – πενήντα χρόνια τώρα. Μαζί τους, υπάρχουν και οι ΣΥΝΥΠΕΥΘΥΝΟΤΗΤΕΣ.

Ας μην ξεχνάμε ότι το 1985, με το μνημείο ήδη σοβαρά τραυματισμένο και με Υπουργό τη Μελίνα Μερκούρη, το ΥΠΠΟ είχε «συνεννοηθεί» με την ΑΕΔΙΚ -τον ενεργητικό καταστροφέα του μνημείου με επικεφαλής άλλο σημαίνον στέλεχος του τότε ΠΑΣΟΚ- ώστε να παρακαμφθεί όρος του Υπουργείου που απαιτούσε (θα έλεγα επίσης δήθεν) από την ΚΡΑΤΙΚΗ εταιρία της Διώρυγας να κάνει μελέτη για το μνημείο.

Αν λοιπόν ο νέος Υπουργός Πολιτισμού αλλά και ο νέος Πρωθυπουργός θέλουν να κάνουν κάτι πραγματικά σημαντικό, ας καταπολεμήσουν και τη διαχρονική υποκρισία, τη διαχρονική ανοησία, τη διαχρονική ηθική και επιχειρησιακή αναπηρία του ΥΠΠΟ.

Σοφία Λοβέρδου