

# The German Archaeological Institute at Athens in the Nazi Era

Alexandra Kankeleit, Berlin 2016\*

In October 1944 the German Wehrmacht troops withdrew from Greece. They left behind a country characterised by destruction, chaos and famine.

The results of the three-and-a-half year occupation were devastating:

- The loss of 10% of the population.
- Mass executions, including the murder of over 130,000 civilians, including women, children and the elderly.
- The seizure of food and fuel, leading to over 300,000 deaths from hunger and cold.
- The murder of 90% of the Jewish population (Sephardis and Romaniotes), with over 60,000 deaths.
- The destruction of over 100 localities.
- Forced loans of 476 million Reichsmark, (approximately 11 billion euros in today's money), money which was never paid back.

Through their research, the historians Hagen Fleischer and Mark Mazower have shown how the country was systematically plundered and terrorised during its occupation.<sup>1</sup> The goal was the total subjugation of the Greek population.

In Germany these events are still relatively unknown. Only recently have the massacres carried out throughout Greece become a subject of discussion.<sup>2</sup>

In Greece, on the other hand, the Second World War is still very present. Alongside serious academic literature, there's been a boom in biographies, novels and mainstream scientific papers about the Greek-Italian war, the occupation and the subsequent civil war. Numerous internet forums engage in discussion of the historical events, with documents from private archives, sometimes previously unpublished, appearing online.

One image that is engraved in the collective memory of the Greek people shows the archaeologist Walter Wrede guiding Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch round the Acropolis in April 1941. At that time Wrede was both serving director of the German Archaeological Institute at Athens (1937-44) and National Committee Leader of the Nazi Party in Greece (1935-44).<sup>3</sup>

In this historical context it's somewhat surprising that Greece's archaeological cultural property survived the war relatively unscathed. Theft and damage of antiques did take place during the occupation, but these losses were on a small scale compared to the extent of the human tragedy resulting from the war.

It was above all the protective measures undertaken by Greek archaeologists that prevented valuable objects from being stolen or seriously damaged.<sup>4</sup> However, the

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<sup>1</sup> Fleischer 2010; Mazower 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Kambas-Mitsou 2015; Králová 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Publication by Deutsche Welle: [http://www.dw.com/image/0,,16865294\\_403,00.jpg](http://www.dw.com/image/0,,16865294_403,00.jpg)

<sup>4</sup> Petrakos 1994.

German occupiers also had no interest in destroying archaeological sites. As victors and representatives of what they considered *the* leading cultural nation, they saw themselves as the true successors of the ancient Greeks and played up to this role in these ancient surroundings.

As far back as 1946 an inventory of damages and losses resulting from the occupation was presented in two reports on the protection of culture. These reports were based on the findings of Greek archaeologists, and were published by both the Greek Ministry of Religious Affairs and Education and the British Commission for the Protection of Cultural Property. These reports are available online<sup>5</sup> and remain the primary source for Greek journalists, writers and historians. A thorough investigation into the list of damages and losses from 1946 in cooperation with the former occupying powers (Germany, Italy and Bulgaria) seems increasingly unlikely, and politically there appears to be little desire for it.

The reports show that mainly smaller museums and collections were victims of theft and destruction. However, the Byzantine churches and monasteries suffered most. They were burnt down and destroyed in acts of revenge. Among the worst affected were the Meteora monasteries in Thessaly, the Hosios Loukas monastery in Stiri, the Hosios Meletios monastery on Mount Kithairon and Agia Lavra near Kalavryta.

The “human factor” plays a central role in archaeological matters of this time. German archaeologists who were partners, friends or even role models during the 1930s, suddenly appeared as the self-styled master race during the occupation, giving orders to their Greek colleagues and exploiting the situation for their own purposes. The suffering of the Greek people was simply ignored. A frequent accusation levelled by the Greeks against the German archaeologists concerns their “arrogance” and “self-centredness”, almost to the point of “academic autism”.

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<sup>5</sup> Greek report on the protection of culture 1946:  
<http://anemi.lib.uoc.gr/metadata/4/2/9/metadata-1333521439-162633-20737.tkl>;  
British report on the protection of culture 1946:  
<http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/27457454?q&versionId=33099824>.

## The German Archaeological Institute at Athens (DAI Athen)

The Athenian department of the German Archaeological Institute (Das Deutsche Archäologische Institut in Athen, DAI for short) was founded in 1874 at the behest of the German Parliament. Since 1888 the institute has been situated at Phidias Street 1 in the centre of Athens. Due to its excellent library and photo archive, the institute was of major interest to both German and Greek scientists from its early days.



Fig. 1

The German Archaeological Institute at Athens, street scene from the 1920s  
(© DAI Athen Neg. D-DAI-ATH-Athen-Varia-0434)

In 1930 the chronicler Siegfried Mackroth noted that “valuable relationships with the archaeologists and other experts passing through [Athens]” could “help maintain a strong relationship to the Fatherland”.<sup>6</sup> Among the approximately 1,300 German-speaking foreigners living in Greece at that time, classical scholars occupied a special role. They had close networks and excellent geographical and linguistic knowledge. Some of them had married into Greek families.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Mackroth 1930 put the number of Germans living in Greece in 1924 at 563.

<sup>7</sup> Emil Kunze married Athina Drini in 1931. Roland Hampe married Eleni Dragoumi in 1937. Kurt Gebauer married the half-Greek Christina Ott (from the Kosmetatos family).

In the 1930s many people working at the DAI became involved in the Nazi Party. In 1934 Georg Karo wrote to the DAI President Theodor Wiegand that, “Among all German authorities in Athens, our institute enjoys by far the most influential position”.<sup>8</sup>

Among the most important projects carried out by the institute were the excavations at Olympia (from 1875 onwards), in the Kerameikos region (from 1913/1914 onwards) and at Heraion of Samos (from 1925 onwards).

## Structures and Organisation during the Nazi Era

Above and beyond their scientific activities, employees of the DAI were viewed as official representatives of the German Reich and were responsible for public relations and the maintenance of international contacts and networks.<sup>9</sup> Whether they were also active as spies isn't clear.

In the Weimar years the DAI was affiliated with the Foreign Office. Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann (1923-1929) made sure the institute was given financial and other forms of support. The structure and allocation of responsibilities was clearly defined. At the same time, the majority of archaeologists tended to be conservative nationalists loyal to the idea of the Kaiser.

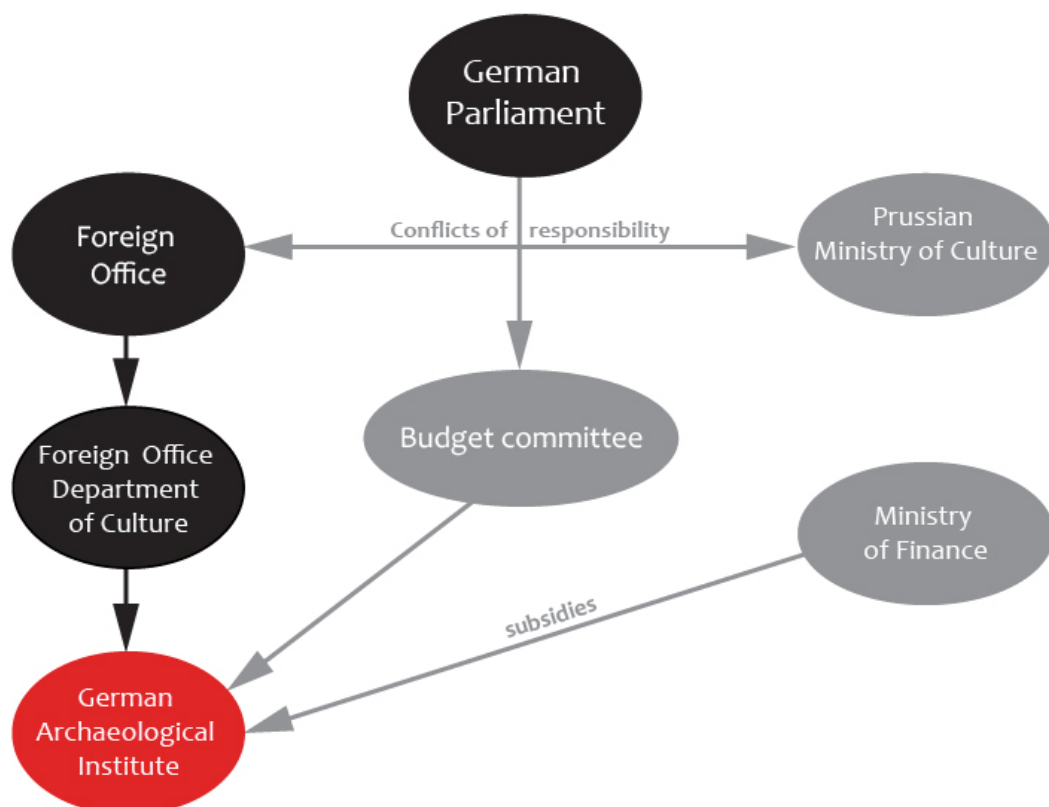


Fig. 2

Main players and power structures before 1934

The Austrian Otto Walter was married to Olga Sakkopoulou.

<sup>8</sup> Brands-Maischberger 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Vigener 2012.

A phenomenon of the Nazi era is that in all areas power structures tended to become increasingly opaque. In the field of archaeology the number of functionaries and their related organisations also increased dramatically. The competitiveness that arose from this was supposed to spur people on to better performance. In 1934 the DAI was placed under the control of the Ministry of Science, Education and National Culture, headed by Bernhard Rust. This ministry was the successor to the Ministry of Culture.

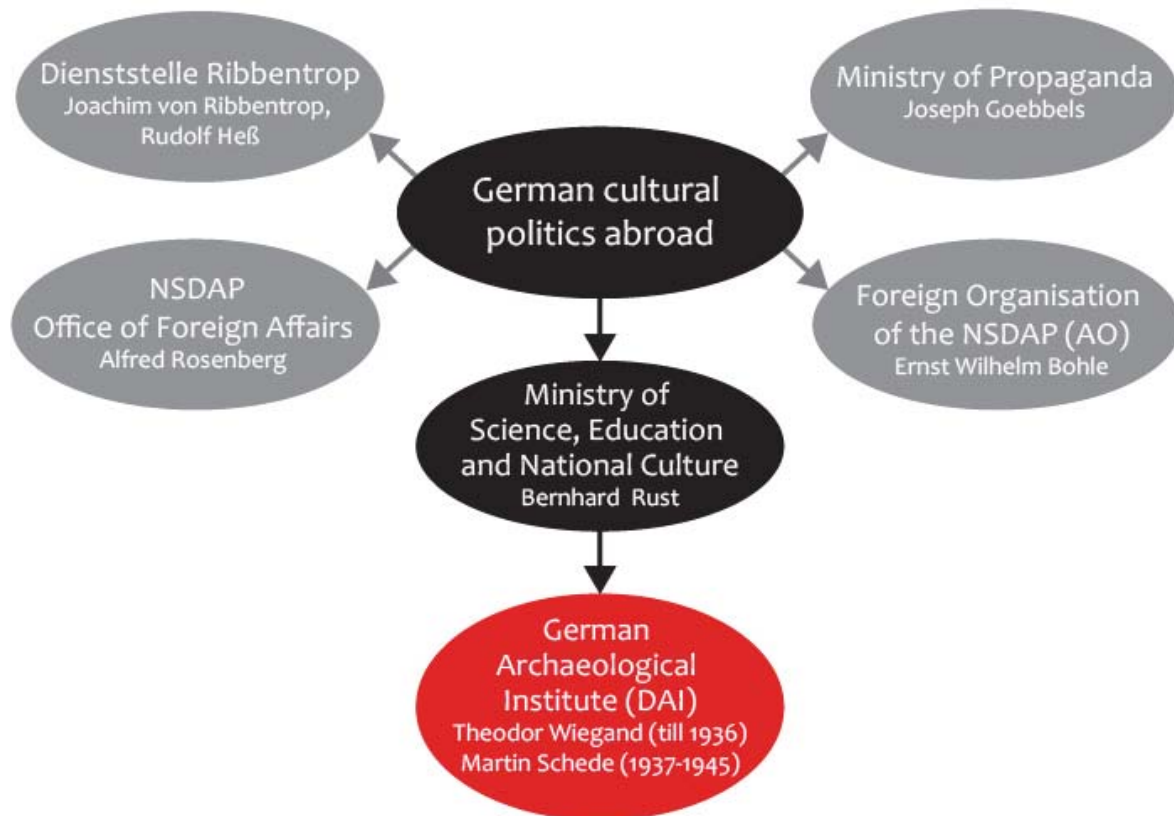


Fig. 3

Main players and power structures after 1934

This restructuring had no major effect on the work of the department in Athens. Of far greater import was the outbreak of war between the Greeks and Italians and the Wehrmacht invasion of Greece that followed.

In June 1940 a halt to excavations was ordered. Cultural treasures from over 19 museums were stored away for protection, either kept in boxes or buried on-site.<sup>10</sup>

### The Wehrmacht invasion in April 1941

In 1940 Italy made clear its territorial claims against the Greeks through verbal provocation and sporadic attacks. On 28th October Mussolini demanded that his troops be allowed to march freely through Greece as well as establish bases there. The Greek dictator Metaxas responded with his famous „OXI“ (No). War between Greek and Italian armed forces followed. Battles took place under terrible conditions in the mountainous region of Epirus. The Italians were poorly prepared, made bad

<sup>10</sup> Petrakos 1994; Petrakos 2013; Tiverios 2013.

decisions and were routed by the Greek army. In April 1941 they were pushed right back to their starting point in Albanian territory.

The consequence of this Italian defeat was that Germany had to come to the aid of its Axis-partner. On 1st March 1941 Bulgaria joined the Tripartite Pact and permitted the Germans to position troops on its territory. On 6th April 1941 the Balkan Campaign began ("Operation Marita"). German troops broke through the so-called Metaxas-line on 9th April 1941. The weakened Greek army could do nothing against the power of the Wehrmacht. On 27th April Athens was captured and the swastika flag was raised over the Acropolis. After heavy fighting Crete fell at the end of May ("Operation Merkur").

Greece was divided into three zones of occupation. Bulgaria ruled the north-east, including Macedonia and Thrace. Italy was primarily responsible for central Greece, the Ionian Islands and the Peloponnes. The two largest cities, Athens and Thessaloniki, several Aegean Islands and more than half of Crete fell into German hands.



Fig. 4

The division of Greece into three zones of occupation  
(© Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Triple\\_Occupation\\_of\\_Greece.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Triple_Occupation_of_Greece.png) )

The Kerameikos excavation in Athens was in the German zone of occupation. The two other major excavation sites of Olympia und Samos were situated in the Italian zone.

On 8th September 1943 power relations in Greece changed once again. In the "Armistice of Cassibile" Italy officially capitulated to the Allies and left its alliance with the German Reich. This led to the breakup of the Italian zone of occupation, which now came under the control of the Germans.



### The situation during the occupation (27.04.1941 - 12.10.1944)

Up to this point, the DAI, as an official representative of the German Reich, had enjoyed supreme control of German archaeological activities in Greece. But now other interested parties appeared, among whom could be counted equally distinguished classical scholars, as well as colleagues and other former partners. They represented various organisations: the Kunstschutz (a branch of the Wehrmacht supposedly responsible for the protection of art), the Cultural Department of the Foreign Office in Athens, and Reichsleiter Rosenberg Taskforce “ERR” (a Nazi Party organisation dedicated to appropriating cultural property during the war). The Ahnenerbe (“Ancestral Heritage”) was also present in Greece for a short time. Furthermore, certain members of the Wehrmacht wanted to make a name for themselves or profit financially by means of excavations or plunder. It’s quite possible that the absence of clear power structures in combination with ambivalent, complex relationships among the various parties led to tension and hostile power struggles.

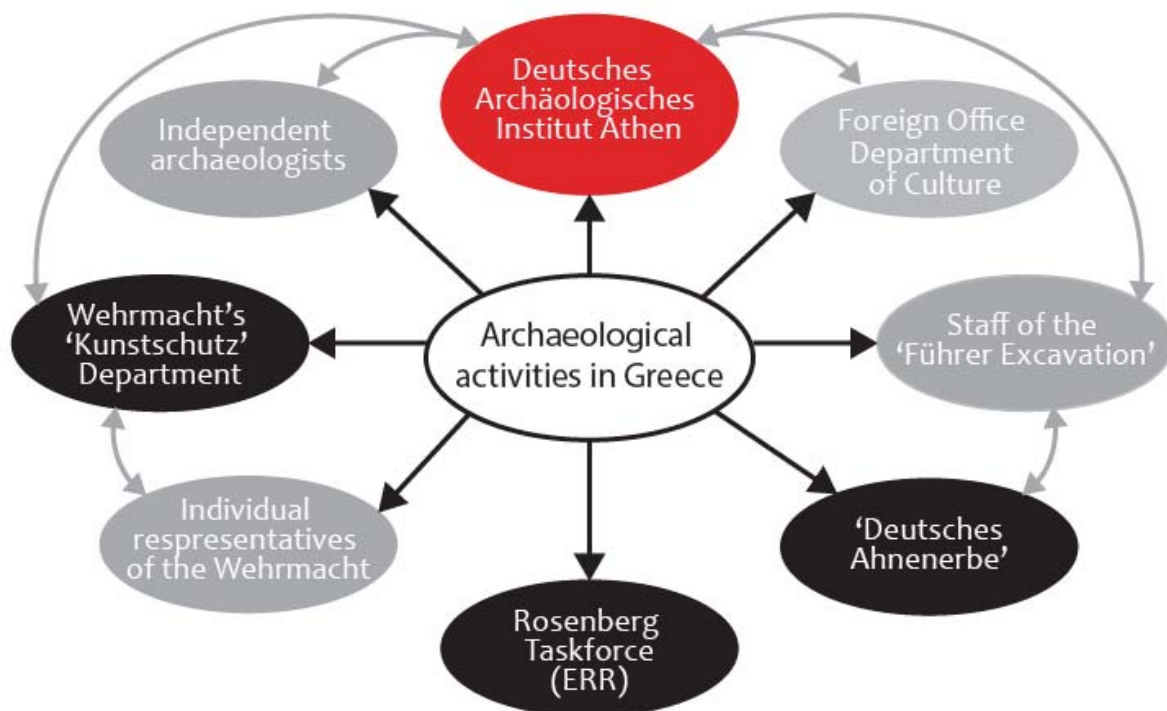


Fig. 5

Active archaeological organisations during the occupation of Greece

Petrakos and Hiller von Gaertringen were the first to explore these conflicts in detail.<sup>11</sup> In the following section the situation at the DAI will be examined.

<sup>11</sup> Petrakos 1994; Hiller 1995; see also [www.kankeleit.de/katochi.php](http://www.kankeleit.de/katochi.php)

## Employees at the German Archaeological Institute at Athens from 1933-1944

In 1986 Ulf Jantzen put together an overview of archaeologists who worked at the DAI. As First Secretary at the institute from 1967 to 1974, he published this overview in the anniversary publication “One Hundred Years of the Athenian Institute 1874-1974”.<sup>12</sup>

Georg Karo led the institute from 1930 to 1936. He was able to keep his post for a long time despite his Jewish roots. His representative was Walther Wrede. Among his assistants were Wilhelm Kraiker, Emil Kunze and Roland Hampe.

Management and Staff from 1930-1936	
<b>First Secretary</b>	
Karo, Georg	1930-1936
<b>Second Secretary</b>	
Wrede, Walther	until 1937
<b>Assistants</b>	
Kraiker, Wilhelm	until 1931
Kunze, Emil	until 1933
Johannes, Heinz	1931-1937
Schefold, Karl	1933-1935
Eilmann, Richard	1933-1934
Crome, Friedrich	1934-1936
Hampe, Roland	1935-1937
Homann-Wedeking, Ernst	from 1936
Gebauer, Kurt	1936
Grundmann, Kimon	from 1930

In 1937 Walther Wrede took over the post of First Secretary. His representative was Karl Kübler, the man responsible for the Kerameikos excavation, and in 1939 he was joined by Otto Walter, the original Director of the Austrian Archaeological Institute at Athens (ÖAI). Edmund Weigand's Byzantine Department only existed “on paper”, and thus is of no relevance. A new addition to the assistants was Ulf Jantzen, who took over Roland Hampe's post in 1937.

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<sup>12</sup> Jantzen 1986



<b>Management and Staff 1937-1944</b>	
<b>First Secretary</b>	
Wrede, Walther	1937-1944
<b>Second Secretary</b>	
Kübler, Karl	1937-1944
<b>Second Secretary</b>	
Walter, Otto	1939-1944
<b>Secretary of the Byzantine Department</b>	
Weigand, Edmund	1942
<b>Assistants</b>	
Jantzen, Ulf	1937-1939
Homann-Wedeking, Ernst	until 1938
Brommer, Frank	1938-1940
Gebauer, Kurt	1939-1942
Riemann, Hans	1937
Peek, Werner	1940-1941
Buttlar, Herbert von	1940
Pfeiff, Karl Arno	1942-1943
Grundmann, Kimon	1941-1944

Missing from the list are Emil Kunze, Hans Schleif, Roland Hampe, Friedrich Matz and Gabriel Welter. They were also active as archaeologists in Greece, though it remains unclear what their functions or positions were.<sup>13</sup>

In the 20s and 30s, archaeologists living in Greece could avail of close networks. Georg Karo enjoyed a cordial relationship with both the King and the Greek dictator Ioannis Metaxas. As late as summer 1939 he was present at a birthday celebration for the British archaeologist Alan Wace (1879-1957) in Mycenae.<sup>14</sup>

Walther Wrede was active as a teacher and then as head of German schools in Athens and Thessaloniki from 1921 to 1926. In 1933 his dissertation on the ancient city walls of Attica was published. In 1934 he joined the Nazi Party and got involved in the newly founded Greek National Committee. In 1935 he rose to the head of the organisation, thus attaining the highest rank of the Nazi Party in Greece.

<sup>13</sup> For information on the biographies of individual staff members see: Brands-Maischberger 2012; Fittschen 1995; Fittschen 1998; Fittschen 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Jack L. Davis, A Preamble to the Nazi Holocaust in Greece: Two Micro-Histories from the American School of Classical Studies at Athens: <http://nataliavogeikoff.com/2014/11/01/a-preamble-to-the-nazi-holocaust-in-greece-two-micro-histories-from-the-american-school-of-classical-studies-at-athens/>

## The “Führer Excavation” at Olympia

Without a doubt, among the most important projects of the DAI were the excavations at Olympia.

The Olympic Games of 1936 led to an intensification of the relationship between Germany and Greece on all levels: political, cultural, economic and military. Greek politicians and military staff made use of their visit to the games in Berlin to seal agreements on closer economic and military cooperation.

The sports administrator Carl Diem helped raise awareness of Greek culture among the German public. He initiated the Olympic torch relay, with images of the Greek Konstantin Kondylis carrying the torch in 1936 going around the world. German travel literature about Greece became popular. Tourists travelled through the country, visiting ancient sites like Athens, Delphi, Delos and Olympia. The popularity of Greece had reached a peak.<sup>15</sup>

In 1936 Leni Riefenstahl made her film “Olympia”. In Greece she was advised by Walther Wrede. For the realisation of this film she received a total of 1.5 million Reichsmark (400,000 of which were her payment for the project).

The DAI also profited from the enthusiasm for all things Greek in Germany. The Olympic Games inspired the large-scale excavations at Olympia. These were described as the “Führer Excavation (Führergrabung)” and were personally financed by Hitler from the proceeds of his book “Mein Kampf” (50,000 Reichsmark a year from 1938 onwards).

This prestigious project received extensive coverage in the German press. Archaeological research occupied the limelight as seldom before and enjoyed great esteem among the German public.

The first official excavations during the Nazi era took place in spring 1937 under the guidance of Roland Hampe and Ulf Jantzen.

In October 1937 Emil Kunze and Hans Schleif took over the reins, though the reasons for this change in personnel haven't yet been established. Perhaps it was because the somewhat more senior pairing of Kunze and Schleif had more experience of excavations and better contacts in Greece. Schleif was responsible for technological and architectural history, while Kunze took care of the archaeological side of things. Both were subordinate to DAI First Secretary Walther Wrede, though because of their expertise were free to carry out their work and publish their findings independently.

The excavations were focused on the periphery of the sacred area of Olympia: the stadium as well as the Roman sites at Leonidaion and Kladeos. Schleif also got to work on publication of his book “Das Philippeion”.

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<sup>15</sup> Wiskott 1936; Diem 1937; Meid 2011.

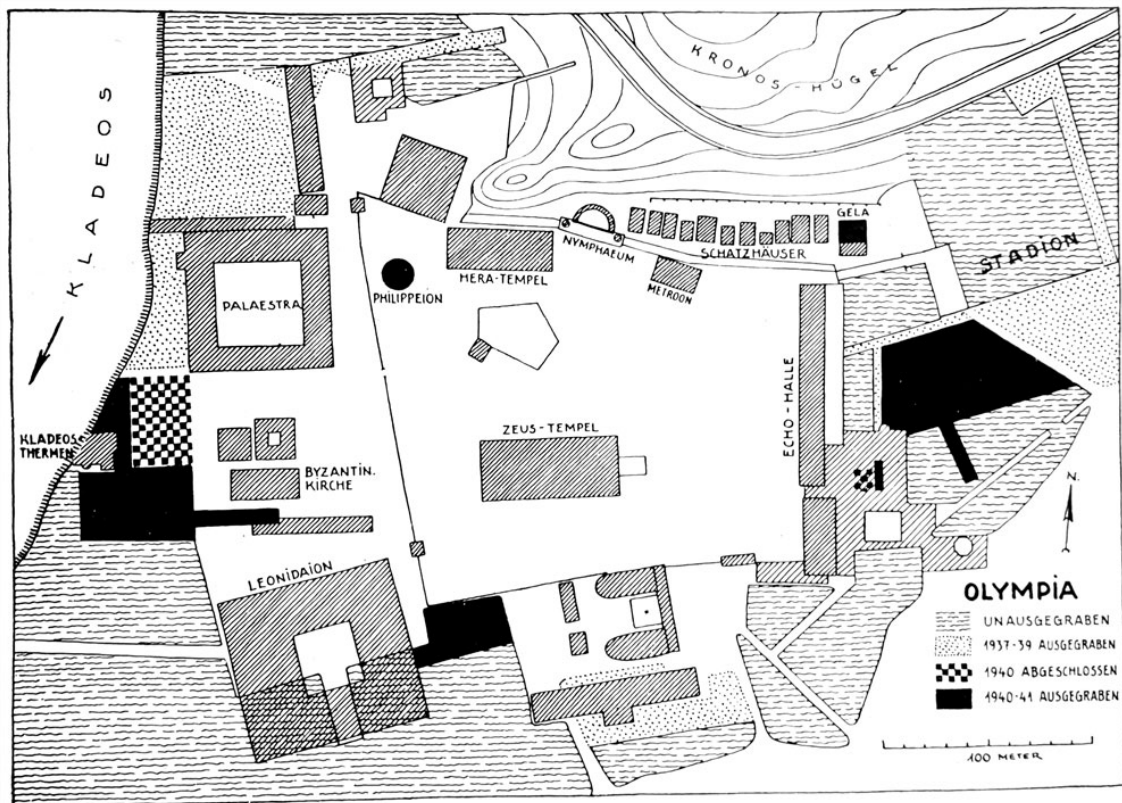


Fig. 6

Map of the Olympia excavation site by Hans Schleif  
(Kunze-Schleif 1944)

During the Greco-Italian War, excavations at Olympia were put on hold for approximately 8 months, then immediately resumed following the Wehrmacht invasion in April 1941. The situation had its benefits for the DAI, for example when in November 1941 a Wehrmacht land survey team put together a new map of the area.<sup>16</sup>

A series of publications makes clear that archaeological work at Olympia otherwise proceeded without interruption before, during and after the occupation. The period following 1944, when the institute was closed, was used to complete reports on the work carried out.

<sup>16</sup> Hiller 1995.

## Collaboration with the Wehrmacht's Kunstschutz

There was a fluid boundary between official employees at the DAI and staff at the Wehrmacht's Kunstschutz department. This department, supposedly responsible for the protection of art, was basically an elite group of troops that served as the military wing of the DAI. The institute's president, Martin Schede, thanks to his contacts in Berlin, had a direct influence on who was chosen to take responsibility for the cultural artefacts in Greece. Ulf Jantzen and Wilhelm Kraiker were well known to the institute as former colleagues. Other representatives of the department included Hans-Ulrich von Schoenebeck, Ernst Kirsten and Ludger Alscher.

During work at Crete, there was close cooperation between DAI staff, Kunstschutz representatives and other Wehrmacht members.<sup>17</sup> Roland Hampe, who served as an interpreter for the Wehrmacht during the occupation, had close contact with both organisations. Two publications dating from the 50s make clear his insider position and knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

The Kunstschutz oversaw the publication of the "Leaflets for the German Soldier at Greece's historical sites". Almost 500,000 copies were printed, of which only a few have survived, due to the poor quality of the paper.

The leaflets contained descriptions of the ancient sites. They were intended to have an educational function, and contained guidelines for the behaviour of German soldiers, such as:

"Greek art and culture are made accessible and brought to life through the vigour and spirit of German men"

or

"Urinating on marble columns ruins the marble, leads to damage of art works and is a breach of discipline."

Materials collected by the Kunstschutz (photos, illustrations and texts) were used for further research and publications after the war, including in the book "A Guide for the German Tourist in Greece" by Kirsten and Kraiker, which appeared in the 50s and became a standard reference work. In the introduction one searches in vain for any indication as to the conditions under which the contents were made possible.<sup>19</sup>

During the occupation, an extensive archive of aerial photographs was put together. The institute received over 10,000 photos from the Luftwaffe, mostly consisting of series of images of Athens and Attica.

The prints at the institute still await proper academic analysis. They are of interest today not least because the topography has changed considerably in the last 70 years.

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<sup>17</sup> Hiller 1995; Jantzen 1995; Matz 1951.

<sup>18</sup> Hampe 1950; Hampe 1955.

<sup>19</sup> Kirsten-Kraiker 1955.



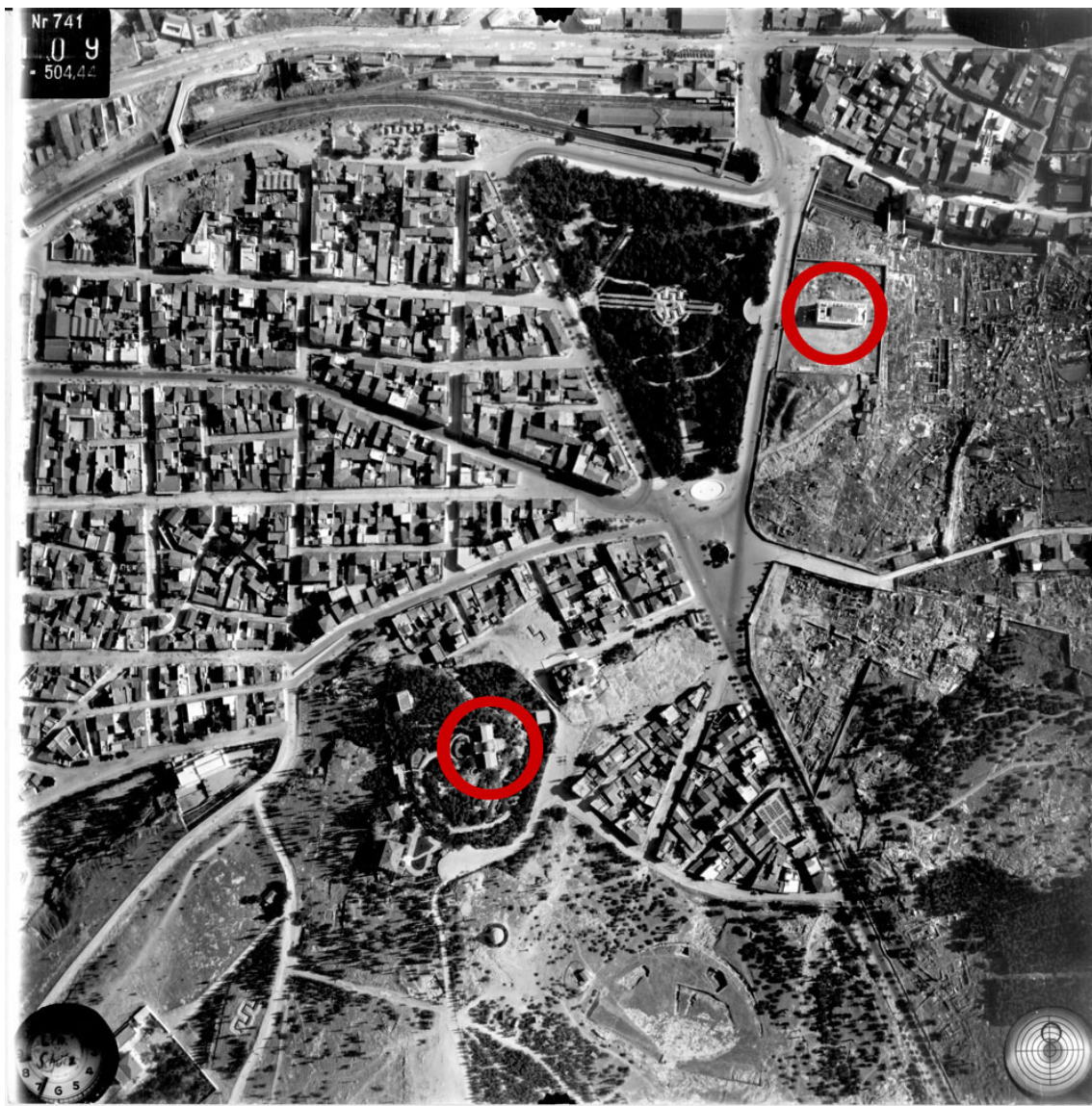


Fig. 7

1941 aerial photograph of the Ancient Agora of Athens with Theseion  
(Temple of Hephaestus) and Observatory  
(© DAI Athen Neg. RLM12448)





**Fig. 8**

Aerial photograph of the Agora in 2013, showing the changed layout, with new squares and footpaths, conservation-led alterations, and tourist areas  
(© google earth)

The propagandistic use of ancient sites also played a major role at this time. Politicians and representatives of the Wehrmacht liked to appear amongst the ancient backdrops, firstly to stake a claim to the Greek legacy, but also to assert German cultural superiority. Plenty of written and visual material testifies to this “appropriation” of cultural heritage.<sup>20</sup> During such visits by prominent figures to ancient sites, archaeologists from the DAI or Kunstschutz frequently offered their services.

<sup>20</sup> Mathiopoulos 1982; Petrakos 1994; Tiverios 2013.



## Summary and outlook

It's important to point out that during the occupation there was no systematic plunder nor orders from above to destroy ancient artefacts.

Acts of revenge tended rather to affect the Orthodox Church and its cultural treasures. The Byzantine culture clearly didn't have the same value in the occupiers' eyes as ancient Greek culture. The reasons behind this should be explored in future academic work.

The churches were a central hub of contemporary culture in Greece. Natives often sought comfort and refuge there. The destruction of religious edifices was thus a direct attack on the Greek population. It was also an act of punishment towards priests, who were often active in the resistance against the occupiers.

The excavation sites, in contrast, with their lavish set up, were spared, precisely because the Germans claimed *for themselves* the role of legitimate guardians and administrators of ancient Greek culture. Thus modern Greeks were effectively denied any claim to their own cultural heritage.

On the one hand, this helped preserve the ancient cultural relics, but at the same time this "appropriation" on the part of the occupiers was perceived by the Greek population as a terrible violation.

German archaeologists active in Greece were representatives of an educated, upper middle class social strata with strong Philhellenic leanings. They profited from the Nazi ideology, which sought to establish their "intellectual and cultural superiority" over other peoples. With state support they were able to concentrate on their archaeological activities while ignoring all the crimes taking place around them. This sense of belonging to an intellectual elite and sharing no responsibility in the suffering of the Greek people is especially clear in the published memoirs of Hampe and Jantzen.

The arrogance and ignorance displayed during the occupation didn't just affect Greek colleagues, but also the living culture of the country that hosted them.

After 1945, the archaeologists in question showed no inclination towards self-criticism or a more reflective analysis of the events that took place during the war. Their personal roles and responsibilities during the occupation – be it as scientists and academics, party members, members of the Wehrmacht or representatives of the Foreign Office – is still to some degree taboo.

Here is an excerpt from a letter that the Austrian archaeologist Otto Walter wrote to the well known greek archeological couple Karouzos on 17.11.1946:  
"It's such a pity that so few people have the courage to confess to their former attitudes and where appropriate admit that they made mistakes, and then face the consequences. (...) The human race could cause a man to lose his reason – especially when he previously overestimated it."

A critical analysis of the occupation in Greece is vital in terms of pointing the way forward when it comes to European cooperation. The German Archaeological Institute at Athens has made an important step towards improved dialogue and exchange of knowledge with its current projects on the organisation's Nazi history. Such undertakings go some way to promoting reflection on the responsibilities of scientists in society, and will hopefully prove instructive in the way we deal with future crises.

*\* The above text is an abbreviated version of a lecture that was held at various places in Germany and Greece in 2015 and 2016.*

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