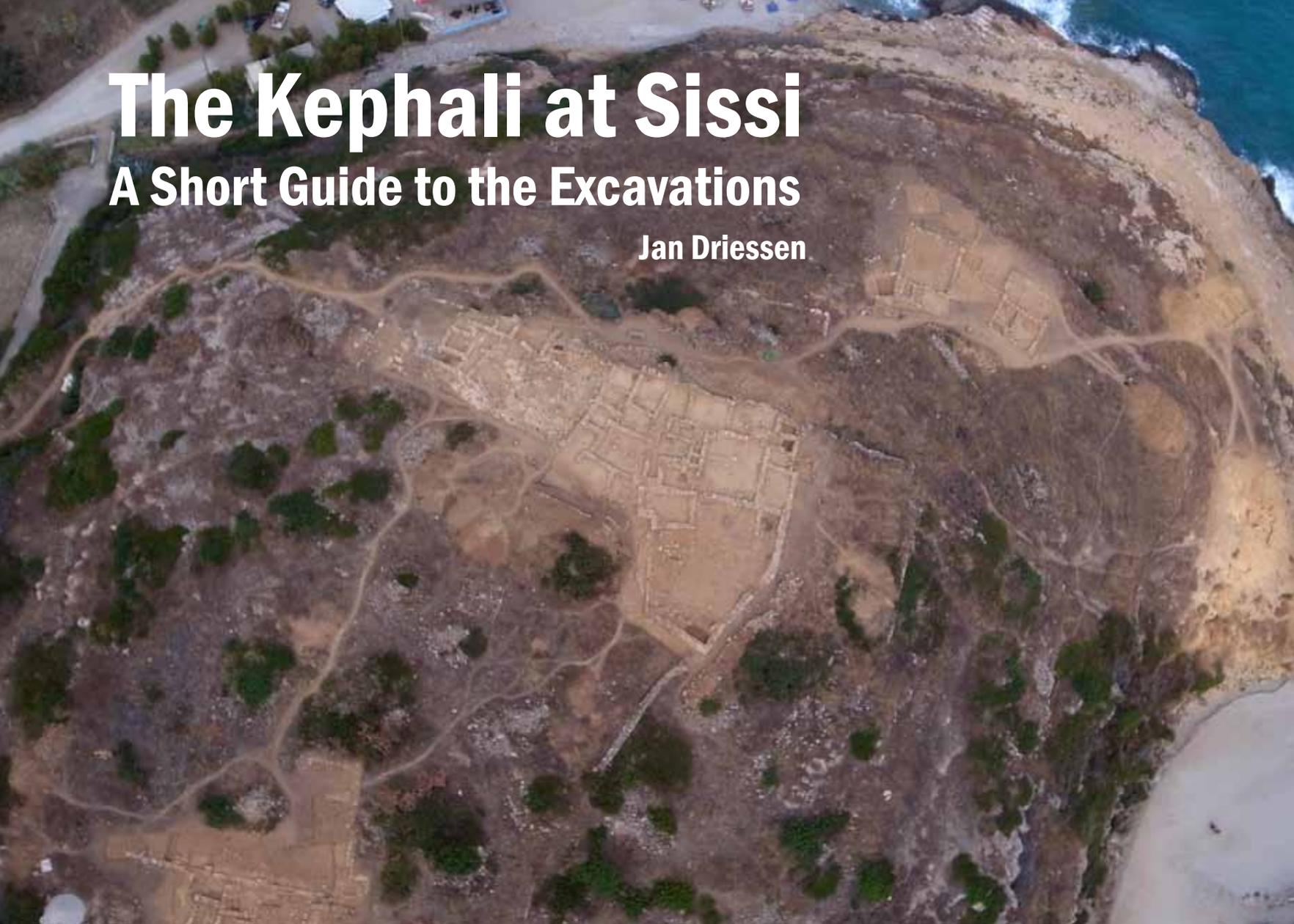


The Kephali at Sissi

A Short Guide to the Excavations

Jan Driessen



Acknowledgements

For our financing, the Sissi Archaeological Project (SARPedon) is largely dependent on grants, bursaries and sponsorship. We therefore would like to express our sincere gratitude to the following companies, organizations, institutes and individuals who have made our work possible

The 24th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities; The Vrachasi Village community; The Dimos of Ayios Nikolaos; The Institute for Aegean Prehistory; The Belgian School at Athens; Couderé Geo Services; Université catholique de Louvain; KU Leuven; Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique; Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek; Loterie Nationale; Compagnie du Bois Sauvage; Ministère de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (Recherche scientifique); CIACO Louvain-la-Neuve; Axa Bank & Insurance; Mr. & Mrs. T.F. Cunningham; Mr. M. Conreur; Mr. & Mrs. H. Davis; Langohr Assurances; Panasonic Toughbook; Mr. G. Markakis; Family Kress-Stoffel; Dr. P. Bovens; Mrs. Langohr-Stassen; Prof. Dr. R. Lebrun; Prof. Dr. C.J. Knappett; Mrs. J. Macq; Prof. Dr. J. Bretschneider; Prof. Dr. P.M. Vermeersch; Mr. H. Fiasse; Mrs. A. De Broux; Mr. J. Germain; Family Driessen-Gaignerot; Family Driessen-Van Hove; Family De Hollander-Driessen; M. F. Ghouse; M. G. Drappier; Mr. and Mrs. G. McGuire; Mr. F. Isaac-Castiau; Mr. & Mrs. L. Drappier.

Since many donations are one-off, the project is always on the lookout for companies and individuals with a special interest for archaeology in general or this project in particular. Hence, donations and sponsorship proposals are very welcome. Additional information about the archaeological research project at Sissi can always be found online at www.sarpedon.be.

Donations are welcome and can be wired to account number 271-0366366-29 (Fortis); IBAN: 26.2719.3663.6629; BIC (Swift): GEBABEBB6, mentioning “ARKE1351 Sissi”. Donations of €40 and more are tax-deductible. Donors will receive an attestation at the end of the fiscal year.

For US donors, please send a check in US\$ made out to INSTAP (the **Institute for Aegean Prehistory**, 2133 Arch St., Suite 300, Philadelphia, PA 19103, USA) to the attention of Karen B. Vellucci, Director of Grant Programs, accompanied by a letter indicating that this is a gift for the Sissi project. You will receive a letter acknowledging the gift which can be used for tax purposes.

Minoan Crete



Map of Crete with main Minoan settlements

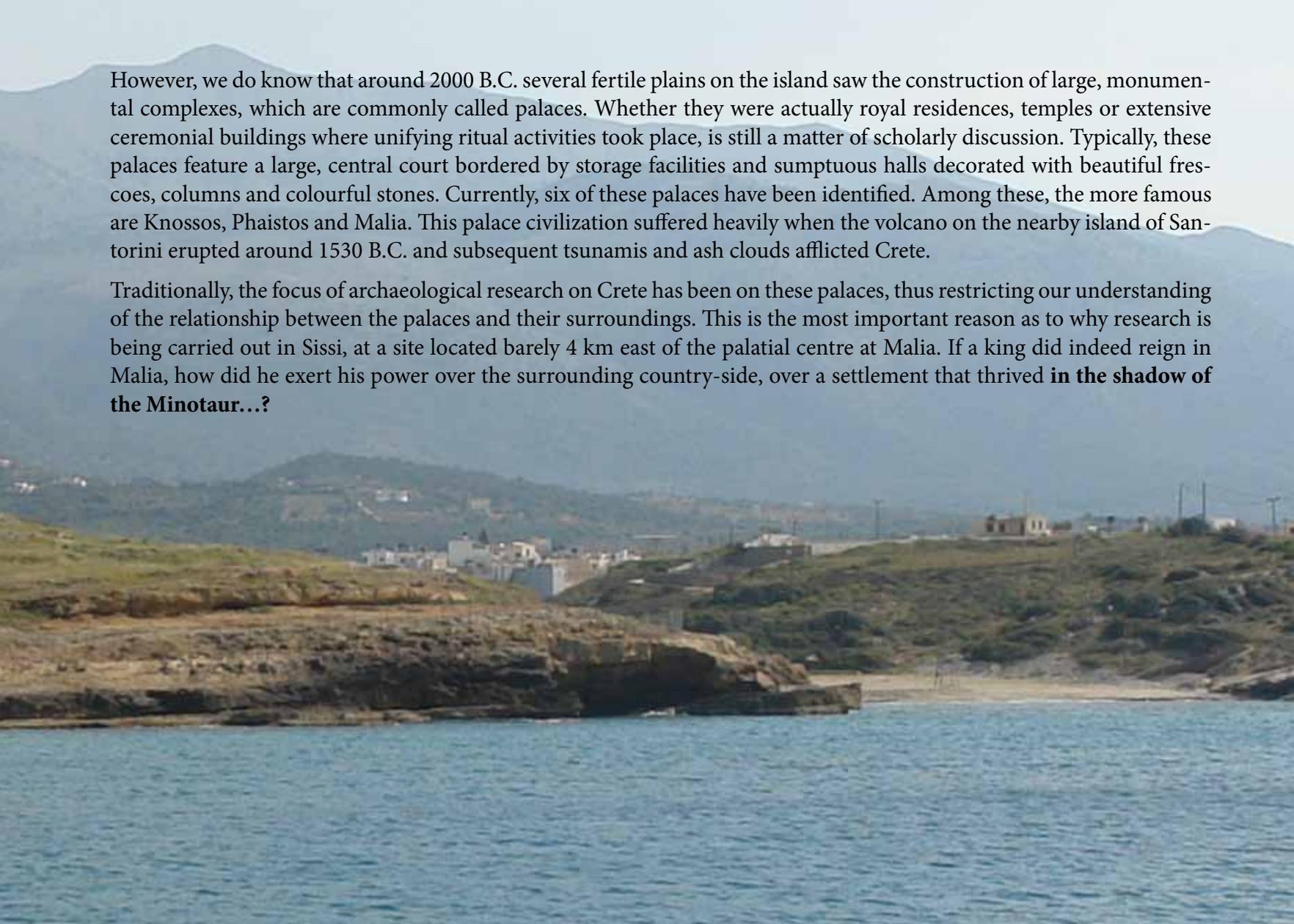
Out in the middle of the wine-dark sea there is a land called Crete, a rich and lovely land, washed by the sea on every side; and in it are many peoples and ninety cities. There, one language mingles with another. In it are Achaeans, great-hearted native Cretans, Kydonians and Dorians in three tribes and noble Pelasgians. Among these cities is Knossos, a great city; and there Minos was nine years king, the boon companion of mighty Zeus.

Homer, *Odyssey* 19, 173-179

With these winged words Homer introduced the island of Crete around 750 B.C., although it would not take its prominent position in archaeological studies until after 1900 AD, following the spectacular discoveries by Sir Arthur Evans at Knossos. Around 3000 B.C., Crete saw the rise of the **mysterious Minoan civilisation**, named after legendary King Minos and made famous by numerous myths and sagas such as that of the Labyrinth, the Minotaur, Daedalos, Europa, etc. Even though the Minoans had developed their own script, Linear A, it is yet to be deciphered. This is why we remain uncertain about the exact social and political structure of this cradle of European civilisation.



The Kephali/Bouffo hill at Sissi as seen from the sea

A scenic view of a coastal town in Crete, Greece. The foreground shows a calm, blue sea. In the middle ground, a small town with white buildings is built on a hillside overlooking the water. The background features a range of hazy, blue mountains under a clear sky.

However, we do know that around 2000 B.C. several fertile plains on the island saw the construction of large, monumental complexes, which are commonly called palaces. Whether they were actually royal residences, temples or extensive ceremonial buildings where unifying ritual activities took place, is still a matter of scholarly discussion. Typically, these palaces feature a large, central court bordered by storage facilities and sumptuous halls decorated with beautiful frescoes, columns and colourful stones. Currently, six of these palaces have been identified. Among these, the more famous are Knossos, Phaistos and Malia. This palace civilization suffered heavily when the volcano on the nearby island of Santorini erupted around 1530 B.C. and subsequent tsunamis and ash clouds afflicted Crete.

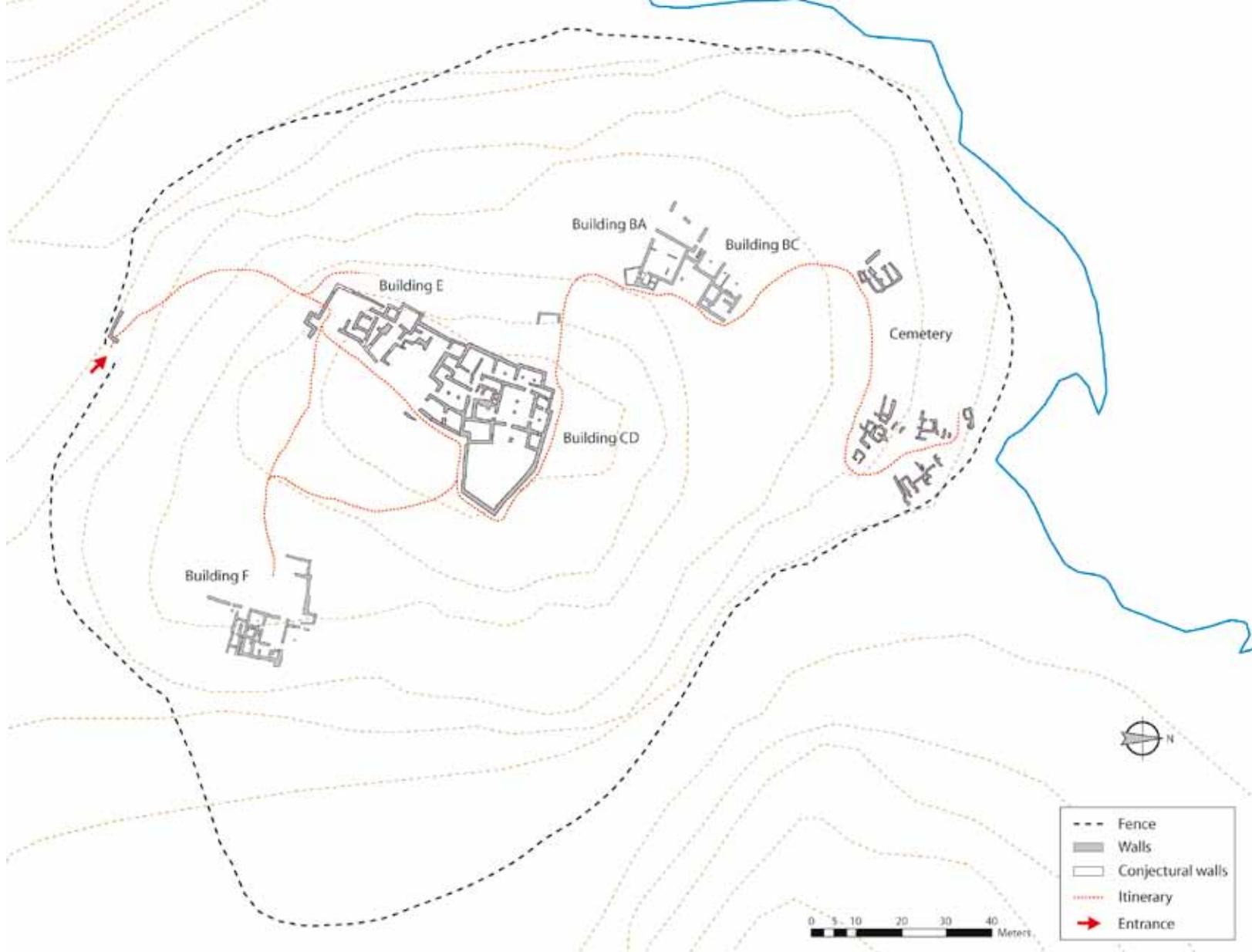
Traditionally, the focus of archaeological research on Crete has been on these palaces, thus restricting our understanding of the relationship between the palaces and their surroundings. This is the most important reason as to why research is being carried out in Sissi, at a site located barely 4 km east of the palatial centre at Malia. If a king did indeed reign in Malia, how did he exert his power over the surrounding country-side, over a settlement that thrived **in the shadow of the Minotaur...?**

The Kephali Hill at Sissi

The village of Sissi, part of the community of Vrachasi and the municipality of Ayios Nikolaos, is located on the north coast of Crete, a half-an-hour drive east from Crete's capital Iraklion and at some 4 km distance from the renowned palace complex at Malia. On the Kephali Hill, locally known as the Buffo, just east of the coastal village, the remains of a 3500-year-old settlement and cemetery have been identified. Originally explored in the 1960s by Kostis Davaras and subsequently expropriated by the Greek Archaeological Service, the site suffered from erosion and encroaching tourism. This is why, since 2007, it is under examination by the Belgian School at Athens and especially the Université catholique de Louvain, in collaboration with the KU Leuven. We are trying to find an answer to the question of how Minoan society was structured and how centre and periphery related at different moments of Minoan history by using a whole range of scientific disciplines. This includes of course archaeological survey and excavation but also georadar, aerial photography, topography and GIS, geoarchaeology, micromorphology, physical anthropology, archaeozoology, palaeobotany, ceramology, petrography and many other approaches. More information on the project can be found on the website (www.sarpedon.be) or in our publications (<http://www.i6doc.com/fr/collections/aegis/>).

The Kephali hill has a particularly interesting shape and location, which made for the settlement's **strategic importance**. Two river beds border the hill and form the most likely route to inland Crete: through the Selinari Gorge. Incidentally, this is the same trajectory the modern road follows today. The settlement controls a junction of trade and communication routes. Travellers and goods destined for Malia or eastern Crete had no other option but to pass Kephali Hill. The local populace undoubtedly exploited the benefits this traffic brought about. Moreover, the small natural harbours on either side of the hill offered great anchorage possibilities. Even considering changes in sea level, the Kephali never rose more than 25 m but hills adjoining the sea are not that common on the north coast of the island. Moreover, its steep east and south slopes provided an additional defensive advantage. Hence, the discovery of the remains of a massive wall, located at the most accessible part of the hill on the southwest, seems to add to the defensive character.

Next page: topographical plan of the excavations at Sissi



---	Fence
■	Walls
□	Conjectural walls
⋯	Itinerary
➔	Entrance



The Kephali Hill covers about three hectares and is composed of a flat-topped summit and several terraces located on the lower west and north slopes. Preliminary results seem to indicate that the hill was inhabited from at least 2500 B.C. onwards and was finally abandoned around 1200 B.C. Later traces are very scarce and limited to a few Geometric animal figurines and some World War II remains. As far as we can judge after the first years of exploration, only parts of the hill were occupied during this long history. Traces of the Early Bronze Age (ca. 2500-2000 B.C.) are limited to the cemetery, located next to the sea on the north side, and some areas on top of the hill. Middle Bronze Age tombs and architectural remains, however, cover a much larger area but only during the early phases of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1700-1450 B.C.) was the entire hill occupied, with important buildings on top of the hill and workshops on the lower terraces. During this phase, however, the cemetery was abandoned and we don't know where the dead were buried. During the later phases of the Late Bronze Age (1450-1200 B.C.), only the summit proper remained in use and was furnished with impressive terrace walls and buildings. Gradually, the size of the settlement retracted to be finally abandoned before 1200 B.C.



Kamares sherd from near megalithic wall

Visiting the Site

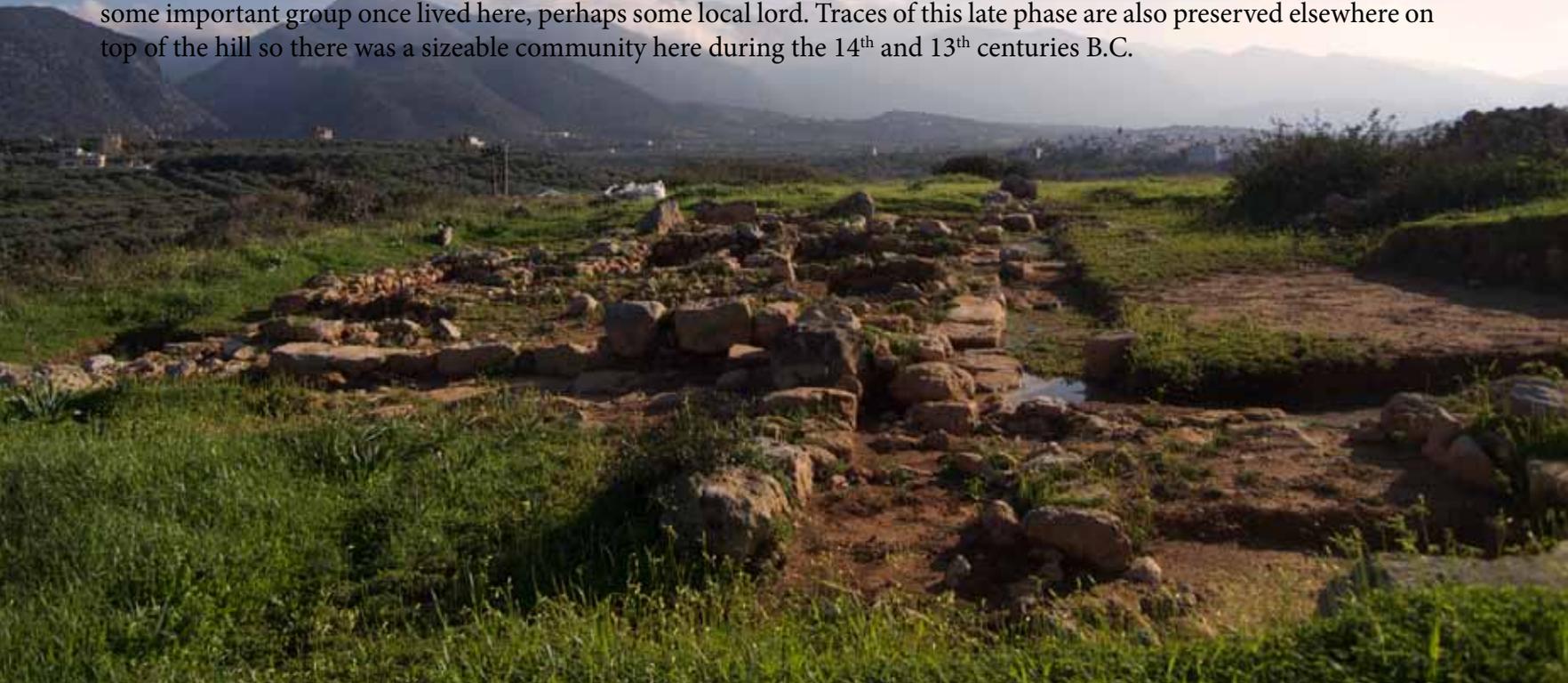
On entering the modern gate you immediately cross the remains of massive walls that form a corner to protect the easiest access to the settlement. But whether this was against an enemy or the flooding river, as still happens during winter, is not clear. The megalithic – almost cyclopean – walls here appear to have been constructed at the very beginning of the Neopalatial period (around 1700 B.C.) but seem to have been given up quite soon afterwards.



Megalithic wall dating to MM III at the southwest foot of the hill

Top of the Hill

Climbing up the hill, look behind you. The view from the summit on the Selena Mountains behind is quite impressive. It makes you realise that the hill still dominates the coastal plain of Sissi. All over the top of the hill there are remains of architecture and potsherds and we found evidence for continuous occupation from about 2500 B.C. until 1200 B.C. The earlier remains – dating to Prepalatial, Protopalatial and Neopalatial periods – are located beneath the later walls and floors and are difficult to distinguish since most have been covered over after the excavation. So, most walls which you see date to the Postpalatial period (1350-1200 B.C.) when the northwest part of the hill top may have carried a single large building complex, spread over two wings, south and north of a small court. Its prominent location, size (40 by 25 m), the impressive west and north walls and its overall organization in functionally differentiated wings suggest that some important group once lived here, perhaps some local lord. Traces of this late phase are also preserved elsewhere on top of the hill so there was a sizeable community here during the 14th and 13th centuries B.C.





Aerial view of Buildings CD and E on top of the hill

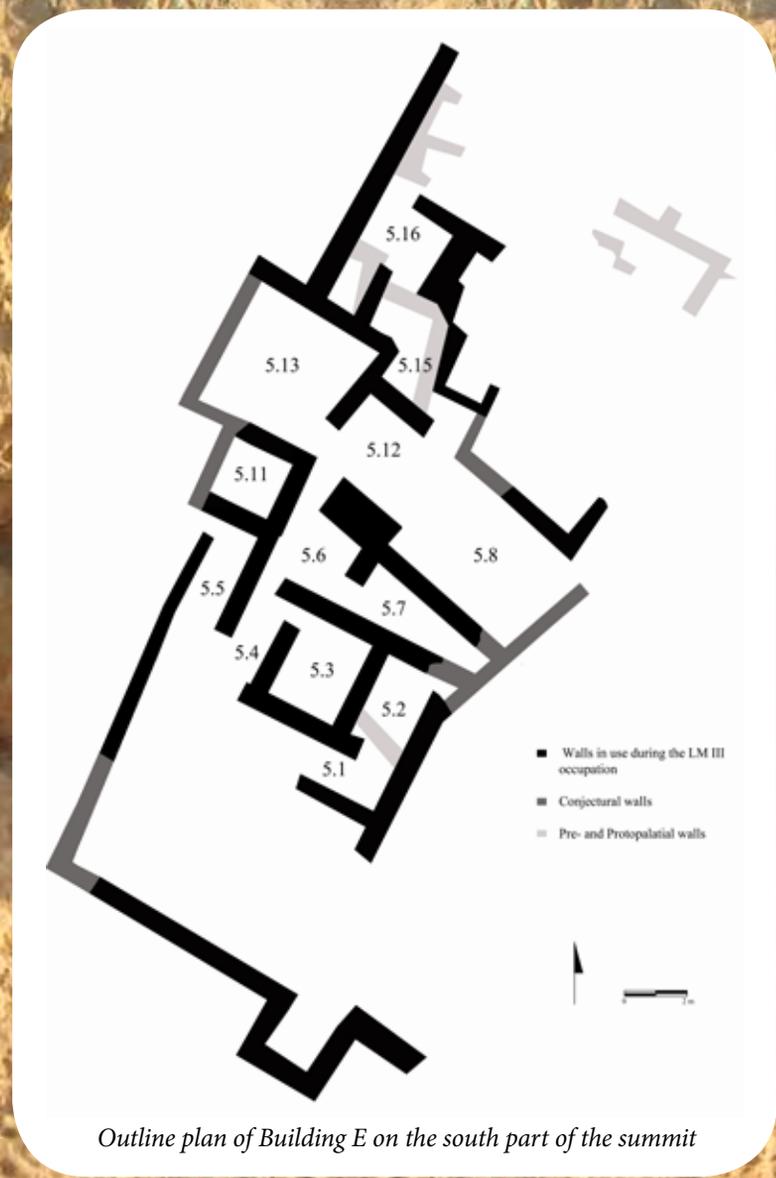


Building E

The south wing is the first you see on arrival. It is formed by a series of small rectangular rooms, mainly for the storage and production of goods. There is no evidence for an upper storey although the flat roof may have been used for some domestic activities. Most of the pottery found in the rooms here is plain, meant for daily use, and included storage vases, plates, bee-hives, cups and jugs. Only in the largest room to the west (room 5.13), partly eroded away because of the slope, we came upon some ritual vases, including what is called a 'snake tube' – a tall, cylindrical vessel with snake handles, used a support for another vase – and a fine rhyton, a vase used for libations, shaped like an opium poppy. Other rooms in this south wing yielded bronze and stone tools, including a fine stone mortar, found with its pestle. Beneath the floor of court 5.8 we found a large lead vase, completely preserved. Such lead vases are extremely rare and are usually found squashed. Our example may have served to keep water cool. Most of the rooms in this part of the site burned down early in the 13th c. B.C. – traces of fire can still be seen here and there – and were given up afterwards.



Protopalatial columnbase from room 5.1

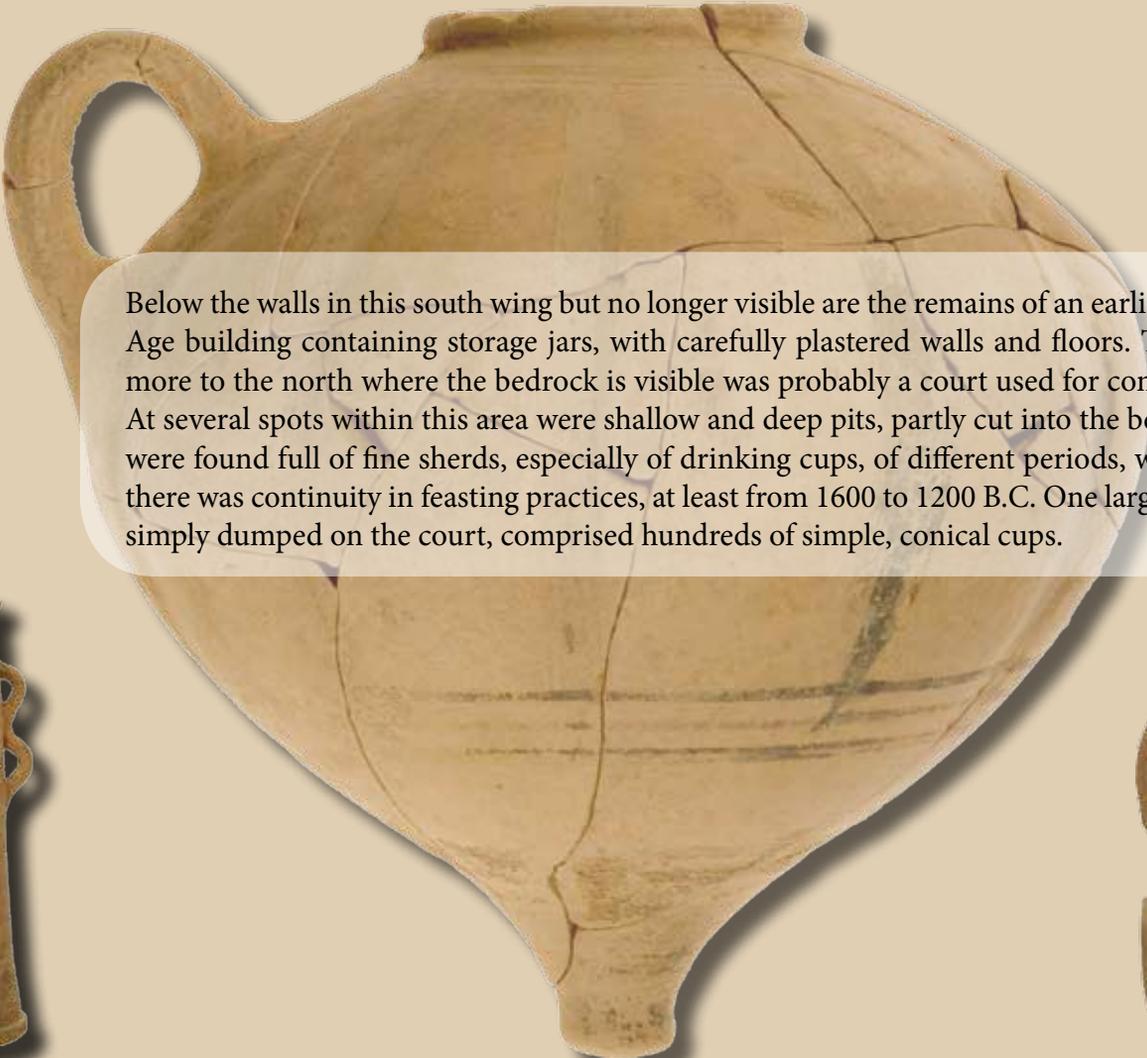




Lead vase from room 5.8



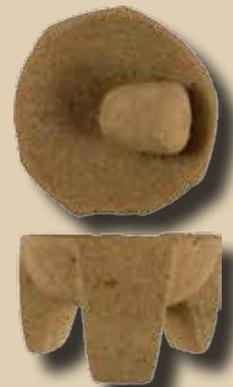
Destruction deposit from room 5.12 showing traces of fire



Below the walls in this south wing but no longer visible are the remains of an earlier, Middle Bronze Age building containing storage jars, with carefully plastered walls and floors. The irregular area more to the north where the bedrock is visible was probably a court used for communal activities. At several spots within this area were shallow and deep pits, partly cut into the bedrock. These pits were found full of fine sherds, especially of drinking cups, of different periods, which suggest that there was continuity in feasting practices, at least from 1600 to 1200 B.C. One large pottery deposit, simply dumped on the court, comprised hundreds of simple, conical cups.



Snake tube from room 5.13



Stone mortar and pestle from room 5.8

Rhyton from room 5.13

Building CD

The northwest part of the summit is taken up by the north wing of the large building which, after the south wing had burned down, continued to function for a while on its own till it too was abandoned late in the 13th c. B.C. North and south wing together may have formed the main construction of the settlement during the advanced Late Bronze Age (1300-1200 B.C.). The north wing is organized in three parts that seem complementary: two of these have in their centre a large hall with column or pillar bases on either side of a central hearth (3.1; 4.11) and a series of subsidiary rooms. Between the two halls was a small shrine (3.8).

During excavation we found that several rooms had been blocked off and abandoned before the final destruction. This was certainly the case with rooms 4.8, 4.9, 4.10, 4.7, 3.6 and 3.5 but also perhaps 4.16 and 4.17. This means that during the late 13th c. B.C., only the core of the building still stood with the large halls (3.1, 4.11), room 3.3, corridor 3.2 and shrine 3.8 being used. The earlier abandonment may have happened at the same time as the south wing burned down or somewhat later. It may have involved some fire, however, especially in room 4.6 and from a small fire destruction layer found against the west façade (outside room 3.6) comes a sherd with possible Linear B signs, the script the Mycenaeans used during the Late Bronze Age.

In general, we were fortunate enough to encounter much archaeological material in position on the floors: large and small ceramic containers, some painted and with many different shapes, stone tools and vases, animal bones, seeds, shell. Surprisingly, the preservation conditions were excellent, which seems to indicate that the destruction occurred relatively sudden: The last inhabitants clearly did not have the time to take all their belongings with them but metal objects only come from earlier levels, which suggest some prior notice of the disaster. Why the site was abandoned for ever around 1200 B.C. remains somewhat of a mystery.



Sherd with possible Linear B inscription



Outline plan of Building CD showing blocked doorways



Aerial view of main Hall 3.1 with columnbases

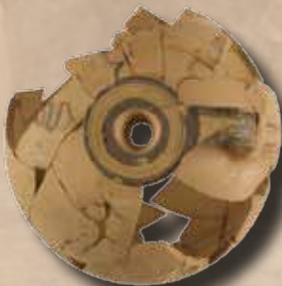
The large hall with column bases in the northwest part (3.1) is accessible through a massive grey limestone threshold. This was the most important space of the complex, measuring ca. 7.50 by 8 m, since 40 people could easily have seated here on wooden benches along its walls. The installation in the northeast corner of this hall held a tub which may have been a wine press since two small stone troughs in the floor could have held wooden beams for the stone weight which was found here, together with a strainer and a pithos. The stone bin in the southwest corner contained a dozen stone tools. The two bases in the centre indicate that the hall originally had two wooden columns, perhaps on either side of an opening in the roof. Two decorated chimney pots were found here. The large area east of the entrance threshold for the moment only shows the top of some walls that are barely distinguishable. It in fact hides an impressive Neopalatial building, destroyed by fire around 1450 B.C., after which it was levelled and turned into an open court during the later phases of the Bronze Age. The east and south façade walls of this earlier building can still be seen, with a paved road and drain which ran alongside the south façade. This building may have been decorated with stone horns of consecration, a Minoan religious symbol, a fragment of which was found outside to the northwest.



Storage vase (pithos) from Hall 3.1



Possible chimney pots from Hall 3.1



Destruction deposit from room 4.9





Destruction deposit in room 4.9

To the north and west of the large hall 3.1 are situated a kitchen (4.8) and storage rooms (4.9; 4.7) but the doorways to these rooms were all blocked before the final destruction. In the kitchen was found a hearth, a collection of edible shells and some cooking pots whereas the pantries to the west had many small and large vases as well as stone tools. In the very northeast corner is a deep space (4.10), perhaps some kind of cistern, with an outlet through the western wall. A terracotta channel still crosses the base of the eastern wall, draining the room to the east, which originally had a plastered floor which also ran up its walls. This room could have been a bathroom. Its location close to the main hall parallels similar situations in Mainland palaces and Homeric epics where bathing is usual when guest friends are entertained.

The hall more to the south, 4.11, still preserves its clay hearth in the middle, between two square sandstone bases. When we excavated this room, there were still several cooking pots standing around the hearth, with their contents. Other pottery, including a fine goblet and a stirrup jar with octopus design come from here. North of this pillar hall, is corridor 3.2 which was used for storage of pots (including a decorated flask) and perhaps the collection of rain water since half of a pithos, turned upside down, was found on the stone platform, made of reused mill stones, in its east end.

From here, one could enter a small shrine (3.8) with a triangular stone in its centre, perhaps some kind of altar. Around this stone were originally standing two 'snake tubes', tall cylindrical vessels which were used as stands for other smaller vases. One of these tubes was decorated with horns of consecration, the other with handles that appear like snakes. Between the altar-stone and the back wall were several ritual cups and a large triton shell. The latter could have been used as a music instrument, as illustrated by Minoan iconography, or as a reference to some marine divinity. Snake tubes and tritons are common implements in shrines of the 13th and 12th c. B.C. on Crete but in later examples they would be accompanied by large terracotta statues of women. Immediately north of the shrine are two small closed compartments, found empty. They were perhaps accessible from room 4.14 where a small staircase made of cut sandstone blocks is conserved against the northwest corner. Room 3.4, located in the very core of the building, had a large, circular hearth.



Snake tubes from shrine 3.8



Large triton shell from shrine 3.8

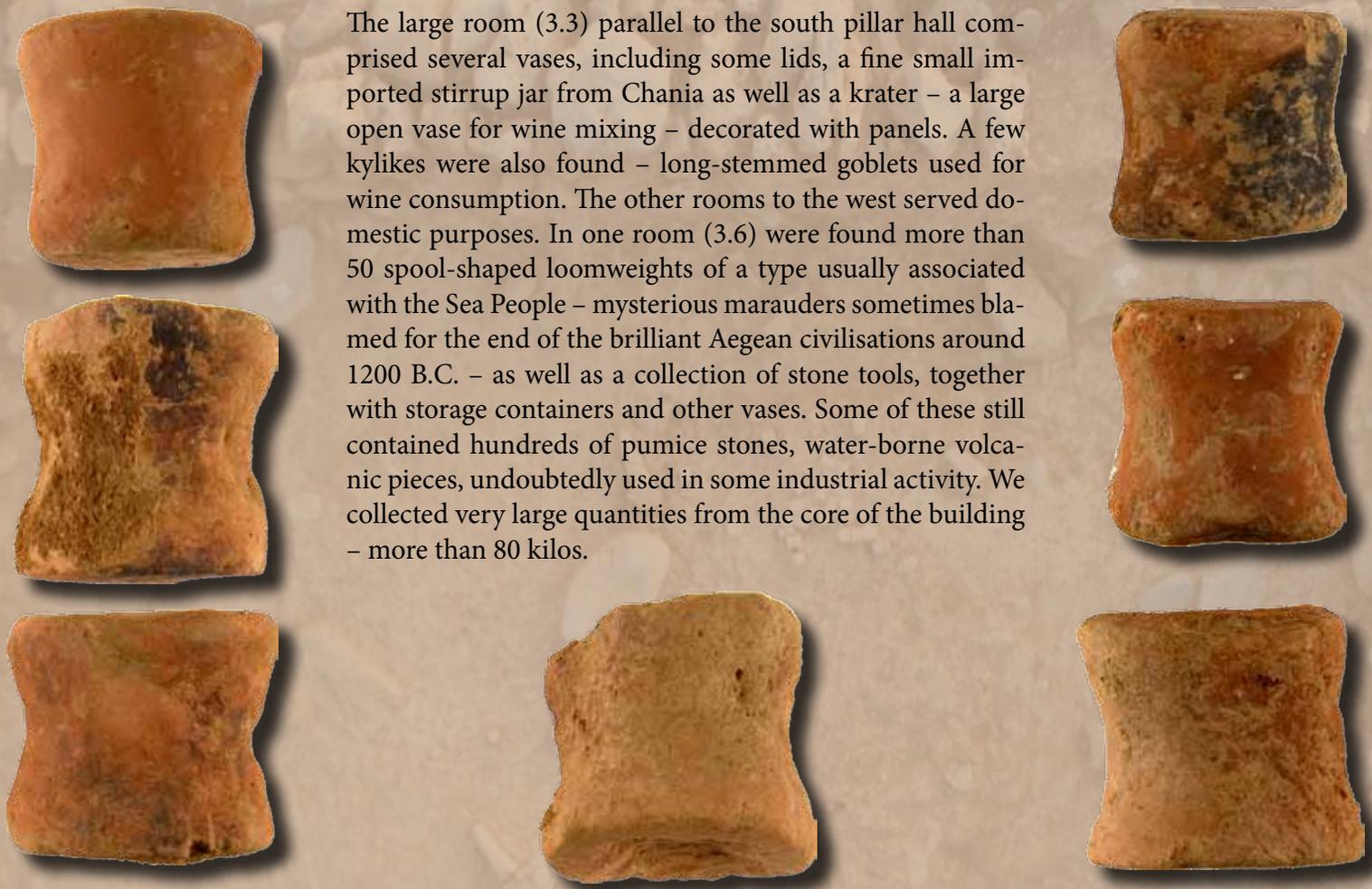




Stirrup Jar from room 4.11

Shrine 3.8 as found

The large room (3.3) parallel to the south pillar hall comprised several vases, including some lids, a fine small imported stirrup jar from Chania as well as a krater – a large open vase for wine mixing – decorated with panels. A few kylikes were also found – long-stemmed goblets used for wine consumption. The other rooms to the west served domestic purposes. In one room (3.6) were found more than 50 spool-shaped loomweights of a type usually associated with the Sea People – mysterious marauders sometimes blamed for the end of the brilliant Aegean civilisations around 1200 B.C. – as well as a collection of stone tools, together with storage containers and other vases. Some of these still contained hundreds of pumice stones, water-borne volcanic pieces, undoubtedly used in some industrial activity. We collected very large quantities from the core of the building – more than 80 kilos.



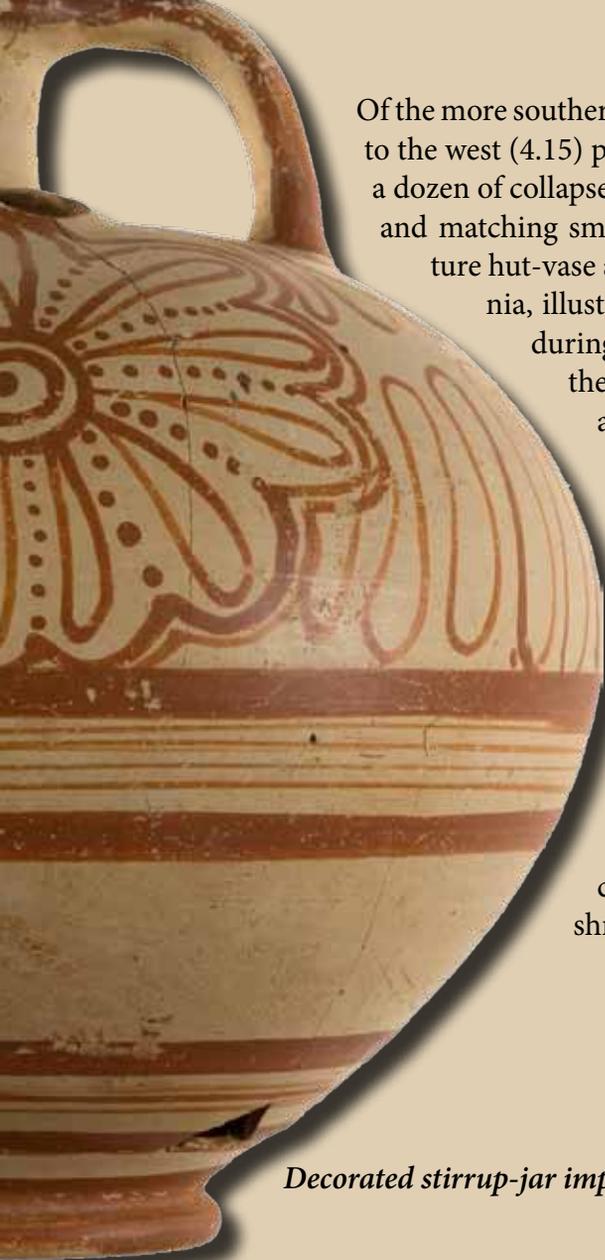
Selection of terracotta spools (loomweights) from room 3.6



Large decorated krater from room 3.3



Deep bowl from hall 3.1

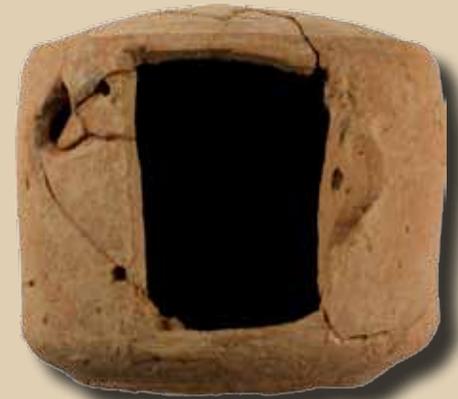


Decorated stirrup-jar imported from Chania from room 4.15

Of the more southern rooms (4.15 to 4.18) of this wing, only the one to the west (4.15) preserved its contents. Here we came across half a dozen of collapsed pithoi – large storage vases – but also a juglet and matching small cups, some other vases as well as a miniature hut-vase and a fine small stirrup jar imported from Chania, illustrating how Sissi maintained maritime contacts during the Late Bronze Age (1350-1250 B.C.). In the northwest corner of this room was a pit with a pithos in which many shells and sea-urchins were found, and next to it a cooking plate and hearth. Strangely enough, this room only connects to the outside court to the south where the ceremonial pits are and we imagine meals and drinks being prepared in this room for feasts and community rituals taking place outside. The entire complex shows a relatively complex organisation and a functional differentiation. We even wonder whether some distinction between the sexes lies at the origin of the plan, with men especially using hall 3.1 and women hall 4.11. The shrine seems clearly connected to the female wing.



Deep bowl from room 4.15



Hut model from room 4.15



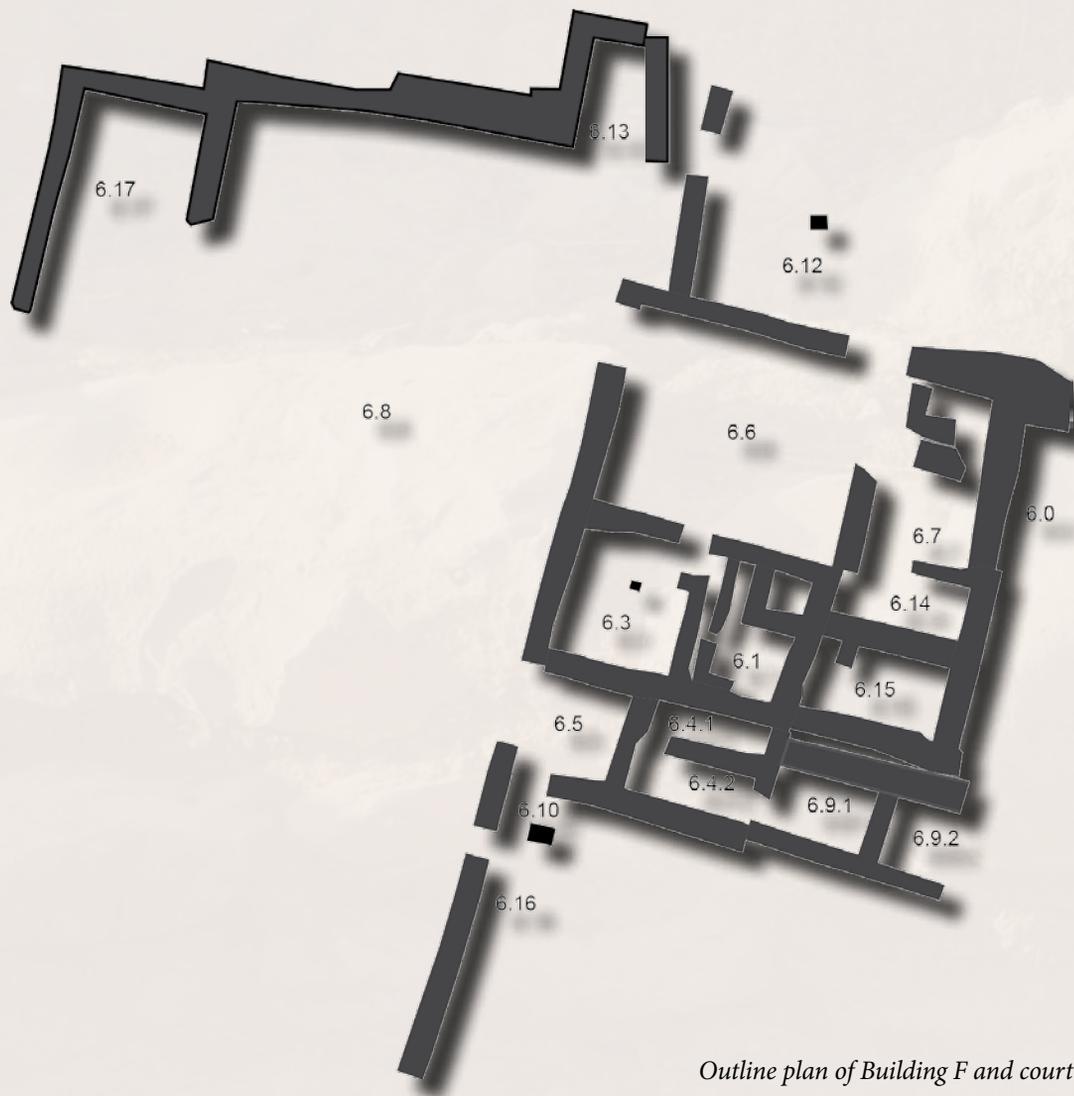
Aerial view of destruction deposit in room 4.15 in Building CD



The Southeast terrace of the Hill (Building F)

A path leads from the main excavation to the southeast side of the hill-top, where we have started to reveal the remains of another important building, unfortunately not very well preserved. The architectural remains you see date to different periods (Proto-, Neo- and Postpalatial) but the essential architecture is Neopalatial. Its straight west facade, made of flat limestone slabs is actually a base for an original wall in finely cut ashlar blocks, some of which were found in the court in front. There were probably two or three doors in this façade wall, two to the very north and one to the south. The south threshold has next to it a large stone with in its top plane a circle of shallow depressions. Similar stones, called kernoi, have been found in many Minoan sites but especially at nearby Malia where they are always given a ritual significance. They signal some kind of ritual taking place next to courts and entrances. This entrance originally led to a double doorway (perhaps opening out to a staircase) but the doors were blocked and the rooms (6.4) reused for storage during the Postpalatial period. It included one of the finest decorated stirrup jars hitherto found on the site. Within one of the other back rooms (6.9) was found a large deposit of Neopalatial cups and other pottery, including a rhyton, similar to one found in the palace at Malia. Beneath one of the walls of room 6.1, a triton shell had been carefully hidden, perhaps a foundation deposit, intended to placate earthquake-related deities.

Aerial view of Building F with court from north



Outline plan of Building F and court



Neopalatial Rhyton from room 6.9



Postpalatial mug decorated with whorl shell from room 6.7



Decorated stirrup jar from room 6.4.2 in Building F

approximately 10 m wide and more than 20 m long. With a floor made of lime, sherds and pebbles (now covered) and oriented about 15° off north, this court seems to point in the direction of Mt. Selena, the peak towering to the south. Pottery collected immediately above and beneath the court is all Neopalatial, a date which agrees with the large pottery deposit found in room 6.9. On its west side, the court is probably bordered by a sandstone ashlar wall of which the top has only just been uncovered. This wall is parallel to the façade on the east. Close to this ashlar wall, several fragmentary horse figurines were found, our only Postminoan find thus far. The north side of the court is bounded by a wall and a bench with a series of circular depressions and a niche in the northeast corner. Both are likely to have had ritual functions. Both to the west and north excavations are unfinished. The different architectural characteristics highlighted suggest the presence of a small court-centred building here, a building elsewhere called a palace. The presence of a court, a kernos, ashlar walls, the overall organisation and the Postminoan figurines are all arguments in favour of such a hypothesis. Future excavations are needed, however, to confirm this.

The large room 6.6 was found entirely empty but the rooms 6.2. and 6.7, although originally formed by a series of long, parallel Protopalatial spaces, were reused during the Postpalatial period and a terracotta mug, decorated with whorl shells was found here. The west façade flanks a large, rectangular court (6.8) of ap-



The Industrial Quarter (Buildings BA & BC)

Returning to the top of the hill, we follow the north façade of the large building C/D to the west and go downhill. From here there is already a view on different structures that were found on the middle terrace, to the northwest, where there is a large flat area. Here, only Neopalatial occupation has thus far been identified (16th-15th c. B.C.), nothing earlier, and nothing later. While going down and before reaching the complex you will first pass some sturdy walls on your left. Although erosion has destroyed much of the evidence, it is likely that these walls also belong to a similar rectangular construction as revealed lower down where there are at least two buildings (BA-BC), perhaps three. They are built in relation to each other so it is not impossible that they formed a single organisational unit. Still, the entrances seem to have been placed intentionally far from each other: one in the southwest corner, one in the northeast. We have dubbed this part of the site the industrial quarter which is somewhat of an exaggeration. The different houses were probably normal residential structures for families who were, however, occupied with a variety of artisanal activities. It were these people who, during the Neopalatial period, surely formed the backbone of the Sissi community, essential for the settlement's survival. The plan of each building, although different in details, is quite similar with a large rectangle subdivided into a series of small rooms around a main room. Similar houses have been excavated at Malia (Ayia Varvara).



Decorated Neopalatial jug from Building BC



Aerial view of Neopalatial Houses (Buildings BA and BC) on the middle terrace of the hill

The south building (BA) contained large numbers of loomweights, a bronze needle tool kit and perhaps a loom installation within the sandstone blocks. If so, this building was very much occupied with textile production. A quantity of shells found in the area may have been used for dyes. The north building (BC) had a wine press, many cooking pots and other vases. On the floor of two of its rooms (2.10-2.11) were found limestone figurines, similar to the famous Cycladic figurines. Between the south and north building is a large room, 2.12, the only one to show a fire destruction.



Weights from Building BA



Pseudo-cycladic limestone figurine from Building BC, room 2.10

This yielded some Late Minoan I pottery as well as a fine stone blossom bowl. It is possible that some of the rooms had already been abandoned before the final destruction. This earlier abandonment was certainly close in time to the Santorini eruption, around 1530 BC. While attempting to reconstruct the ancient landscape, the impact of this cataclysmic event will need to be considered: to this day, the beaches of Sissi are still covered with pumice.



*Neopalatial stone blossom bowl
from Building BC, room 2.12*

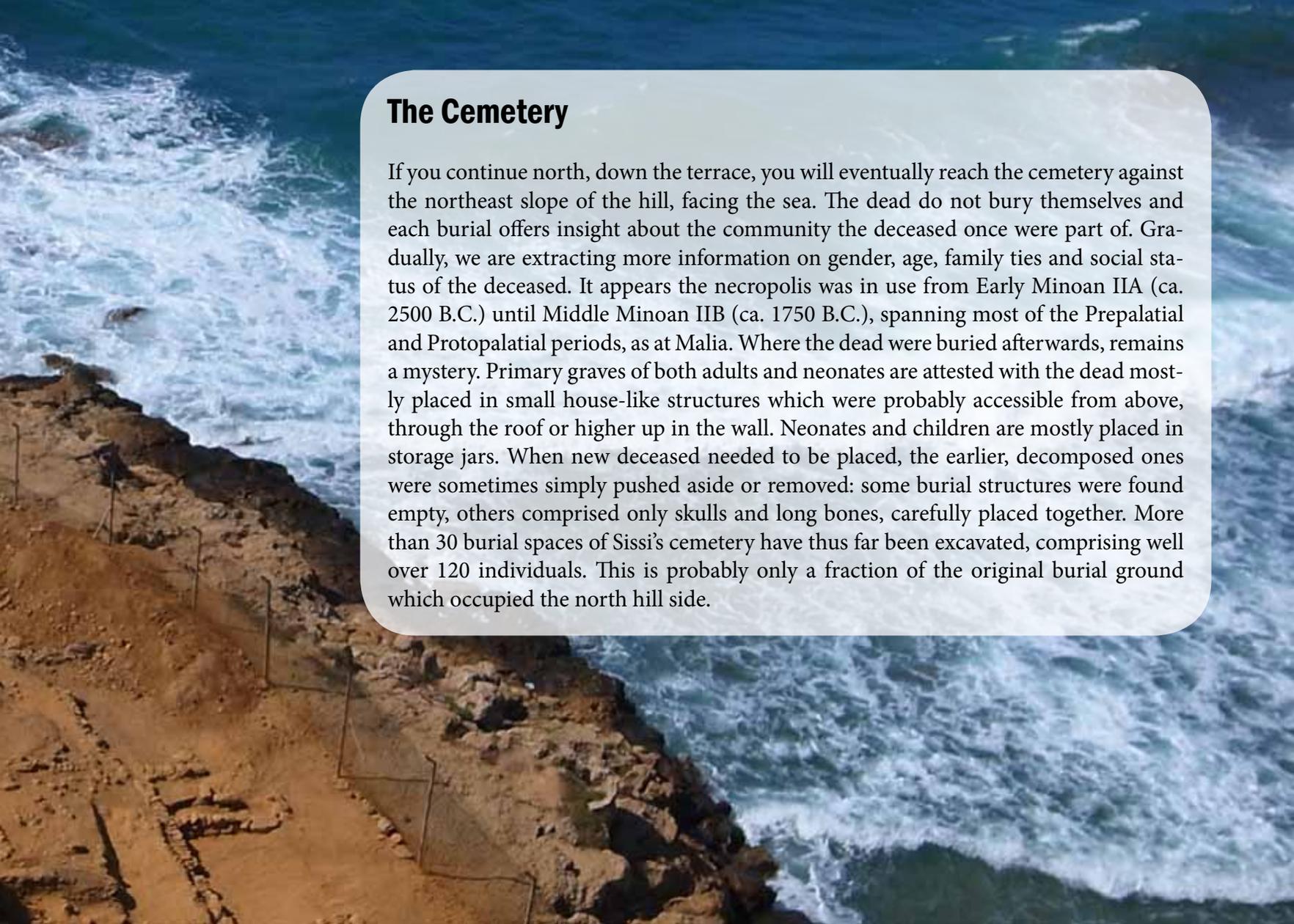
- Walls/column bases
- Hypothetical wall
- ≡ Stairs
- Thresholds
- ▨ Blocked entrances
- Entrances in former walls
- Platform/bench
- Brick tiles
- Gournes



Outline plan of Neopalatial Houses BA and BC on the middle terrace



Aerial view of the northeast part of the cemetery

An aerial photograph of a coastal archaeological site. The foreground shows a dirt path and some excavated areas on a hillside. The background features a rocky coastline with waves crashing against the shore. A white rounded rectangle is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing text.

The Cemetery

If you continue north, down the terrace, you will eventually reach the cemetery against the northeast slope of the hill, facing the sea. The dead do not bury themselves and each burial offers insight about the community the deceased once were part of. Gradually, we are extracting more information on gender, age, family ties and social status of the deceased. It appears the necropolis was in use from Early Minoan IIA (ca. 2500 B.C.) until Middle Minoan IIB (ca. 1750 B.C.), spanning most of the Prepalatial and Protopalatial periods, as at Malia. Where the dead were buried afterwards, remains a mystery. Primary graves of both adults and neonates are attested with the dead mostly placed in small house-like structures which were probably accessible from above, through the roof or higher up in the wall. Neonates and children are mostly placed in storage jars. When new deceased needed to be placed, the earlier, decomposed ones were sometimes simply pushed aside or removed: some burial structures were found empty, others comprised only skulls and long bones, carefully placed together. More than 30 burial spaces of Sissi's cemetery have thus far been excavated, comprising well over 120 individuals. This is probably only a fraction of the original burial ground which occupied the north hill side.

Legend

- Tombs
- Natural limit of the lower terrace
- Isolines (1m interval)



Gold and stone objects from Burial structure IX



One of the skeletons found in space IX.2 of Burial structure IX

The first burial construction, only a stone throw away from the Neopalatial houses, is formed by a large structure with a series of rooms that do not communicate. Thus far, only the two rooms to the northeast have been explored. The north cell (IX.1) comprised the remains of 11 deceased, among who were three partly articulated perinatals and one body was in a pithos. The original burial in the room to the south, IX.2, may have been of an important member of the community since he or she was placed in a clay tub or larnax and when one side of this larnax collapsed, it was used as the bed for the later deposition of an adult, an infant and a child. On a higher level were deposited six contracted individuals. At slightly higher level, within an area prepared with stones against the south wall, were found four babies and two adults, more or less articulated. Here and there in the tomb were some plates and cups, usually placed upside

down. This is thus far one of the latest (dating to Middle Minoan I and IIA) and most impressive burial structures with a good view both on the cemetery below and towards the settlement on top of the hill. It is also the only tomb in which more elaborate personal objects seem to have accompanied the dead. Apart from the plates and cups, we also found a golden earring and stud, an agate bead and a marble sealstone.



Aerial view of Burial structure IX in the west part of the cemetery



View on one of the earliest Burial structures (I.11-I.12) found in the west part of the cemetery

Continuing east, we reach the cemetery proper which is a vast area of small rectangular cells, added, it appears, continuously when the need arose; some walls are carefully constructed, others not at all. Some comprised proper inhumations, others pithos burials, others again isolated bones and sherds. Primary deposition seems the rule and it is only subsequent interference which sometimes obscures the fact that basically the skeletal material is in articulated position. In many cases, rapid sequences of depositions can be identified, throughout the different phases EM IIA, EM IIB, EM III, MM IA, MM IB, MM IIA and MM IIB. The tombs found in Sissi stayed in use for long periods and were used continuously. During the last phase of the use of the cemetery, Middle Minoan IIB (18th c. B.C.), depositions here especially took the form of pithos burials, set either on their side or upright. This middle terrace also comprises the earliest tomb, dated to EM IIA (1.11-1.12). It consists of two communicating rooms: the west cell had four disturbed primary burials, including one adolescent; the east cell had one primary inhumation of a male against the north wall and four jars with the remains of perinatals in the south part. The tomb and its surroundings continued being used for burials at higher level where both primary depositions and pithos burials were cleared. Lower down are more burial structures, often less well preserved and sometimes covered by remains of later burials washed down the hill. The burial structures usually are placed in front of the bedrock walls of the various natural terraces. The space in between was found filled with pottery, sometimes simple

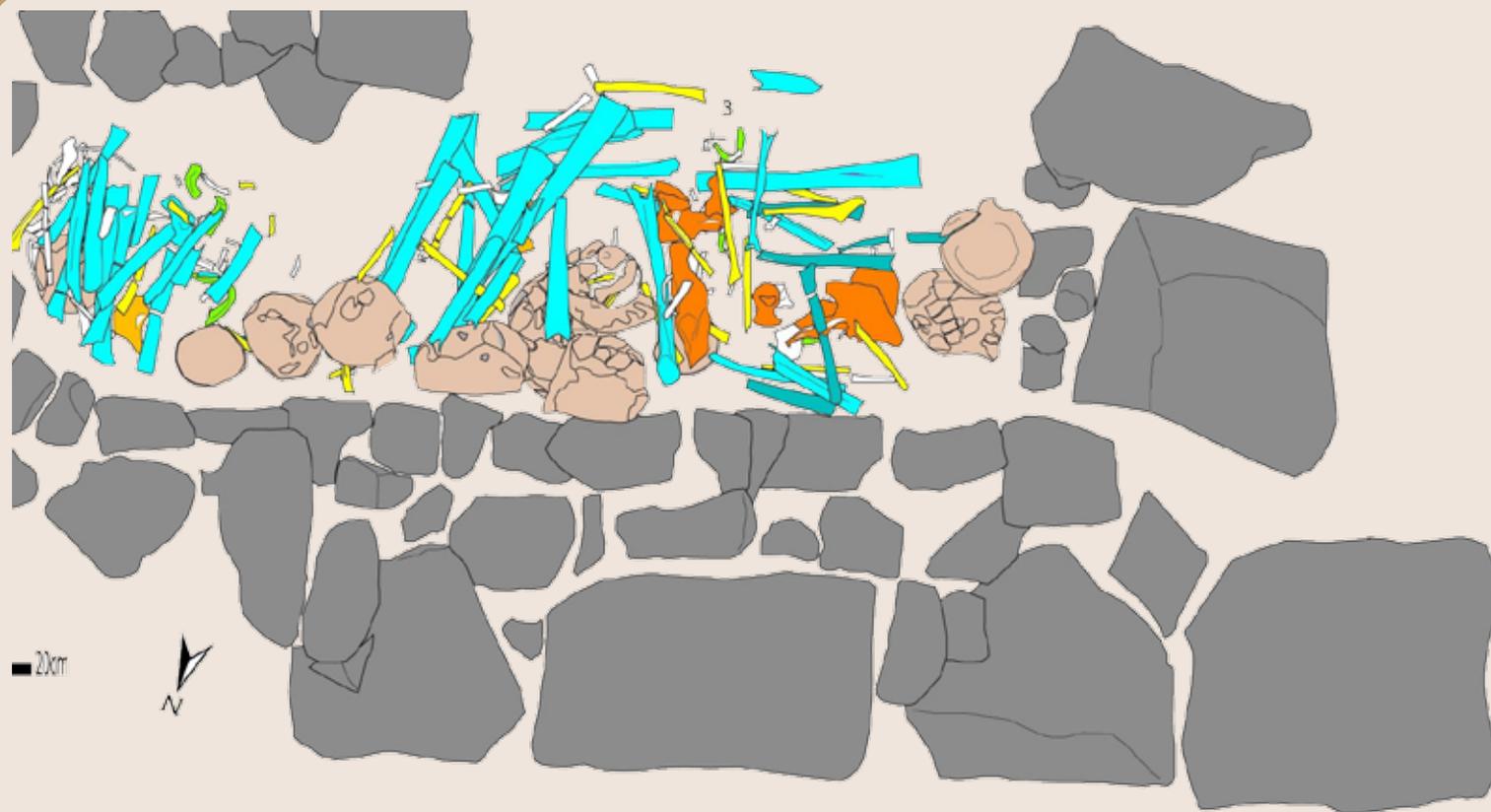


View on two bone depositories (I.9-I.10) in the north part of the cemetery

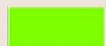
fills, sometimes carefully placed in a ritual deposit together with a large triton shell. Striking was the discovery of a massive pottery deposit on the lowest terrace, outside of the tombs, comprising especially cups, plates and lamps. These may suggest memorial services taking place outside the tombs and an important ancestor cult during MM II. On the lowest terrace, closest to the sea, we found two rectangular compartments (I.9-1.10) or rather stone bins: one of these comprised only skulls and long bones, the other one skulls, bones but also remains that had not entirely disarticulated. Such secondary deposition begs for more questions: are they the result of the clearing of a single burial structure or a more general operation affecting several tombs. This complicates our attempts at reconstructing social structure and family ties. DNA and other techniques could possibly provide us with better results in the future.



Pithos burial from space I.2 in the east part of the cemetery



bloc cranio-facial

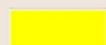


mandibule



os coxal

os long
(femur, tibia, humerus)



os long (radius, ulna)



autres

*Plan showing skulls and longbones
found in bone depository 1.9*

Some history

After five campaigns of field work, we are starting to unravel the site history and significance of the Kephali Hill settlement. We know now that, from 2600 to 1200 B.C., the same period during which Malia was occupied, Sissi formed the second most important settlement in the area. During Malia's heyday, between 2000 and 1750 B.C., the Kephali Hill may have accommodated a modestly-sized settlement at best, probably very much under the sway of its impressive neighbour. But when Malia started to lose its supremacy to Knossos after 1750 B.C., the settlement at Sissi seems to have risen in importance. Although it remained smaller than Malia (which still had a very large palace), Sissi may have become semi-independent as suggested by the construction of a small court-centred building. We see this building in a wider context with Knossos possibly investing in minor competitors within the Maliot sphere to provide a counter-balance. Therefore it does not appear to have been just a simple, second-class centre within the territory of Malia. Both Malia and Sissi were destroyed, however, in Late Minoan I. Between 1450 B.C. and 1200 B.C., Sissi was probably the most important regional centre, no doubt because the hill was more easily defensible and dominated land and sea routes connecting Central and East Crete. Sissi was itself a producer of certain commodities and maintained extensive trade relations, especially with Chania.

On present evidence, Sissi survived somewhat longer than Malia did and again its topographical advantage may have been responsible. In the end, the site was deserted, however, and it would remain so for the next 2500 years, until some Franciscan friars constructed the church of Ayios Ioannis nearby.

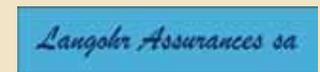


Neopalatial sealstone from room 3.5 in Building CD

A research centre for the excavations

In 2012, the municipality of Ayios Nikolaos and the community of Vrachasi ceded us the Old School for boys at Vrachasi, a building constructed in 1865 but left derelict since the 1970s. Located just above the Platanos square with its spring, the Old School is still a fine building, build in a pseudo-Venetian style. Its rebuilding and transformation as a research centre would benefit both the excavations taking place in the area as well as add to the beauty of the village of Vrachasi. The Old School was renovated twice earlier during its history, once in 1912, and once after World War II.

Our intention is to refurbish the entire building and add working spaces to the back where archaeological finds can be washed, dried and selected in all security. This means installing washing basins and drying racks. Within the building, the large space would be used for studying the finds and for conservation. ceramologists, archaeobotanists, zoologists, anthropologists and many other specialists would all be working here. It would also be a multifunctional room which can be easily transformed into a lecture and exhibition hall. The smaller office would be used for computers, drawing and photography as well as for a small archaeological library, a reference collection to be used during study. Flower beds outside would turn the area into a pleasant thoroughfare for inhabitants of this side of the village.





Restauration proposal for the Old School of Vrachasi

www.sarpedon.be



Credits for figures: © Sissi Archaeological Project/Belgian School at Athens; Photographs by Lina Manoussogiannaki and team members; Aerial photographs by Christophe Gaston; Object photographs by Chronis Papanikolopoulos; Drawings by Hannah Joris, Georgia Kremmydioti and team members; Layout by Frédéric Verolleman (UCL/Service Image et Publications).