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FROM SCATTERS OF POTTERY TO COMMUNITIES? ISSUES OF FUNCTION, TEMPORALITY AND MOBILITY IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SETTLED LANDSCAPE OF THE PREPALATIAL MESARA (SOUTH-CENTRAL CRETE): A VIEW FROM PHAISTOS*

Simona Todaro

Keywords: Minoan archaeology, settlement strategies, urbanism, social evolution, site formation processes, legacy excavations

Parole chiave: Archeologia minoica, strategie insediative, urbanesimo, evoluzione sociale, processi di formazione del sito; dati di archivio.

Abstract:

Recent advances in Minoan archaeology have highlighted that the rise of the First Palaces, and the emergence of the early state, can be addressed by focusing on the scale of those communities that developed into palatial centres and on the level of hierarchy documented by the settlement systems of their regions. In the case of the palatial site of Phaistos in south-central Crete, however, two contrasting estimations of site extent and population size have been proposed, aligned to two contradictory interpretations of settlement and residential strategies (nucleation vs dispersed). Building on a thorough reassessment of stratigraphy, phasing and formation processes at Phaistos, taking into account the results of all previous excavations at the site, this paper builds up an understanding of settlement and residential strategies at Phaistos and its wider region. When combined with the results of recent geomorphological studies in the vicinity of Phaistos a radical new picture of the site and how it functioned emerges for the crucial period leading up to the emergence of the palace. The results of the paper challenge the orthodoxy that Phaistos urbanises to become a major nucleated population centre just before the construction of the palace. Instead Phaistos emerges as a regional ceremonial centre, from the end of the Neolithic, with the hilltop given over to open areas, which were progressively formalized and monumentalized, while the western and southern slopes of the palace hill were occupied by structures where specialized craft activities were carried out. While there is plentiful evidence for large-scale gatherings of people on the hilltop, and communal production on the western slope, these groups derived from the surrounding region, with residential activity at Phaistos itself limited, low-density and shifting, save only for during major periods of palatial building activity.

Negli ultimi trent'anni il problema della nascita dei palazzi a Creta, visto che l'esemplificazione della nascita dello stato, è stato affrontato concentrandosi sulla componente demografica di quei siti che all'inizio della media età del Bronzo diventarono centri palatini. Nel caso di Festòs, situata nella Creta meridionale, sono state avanzate due proposte molto diverse sulle dimensioni del sito e sulla sua componente demografica, calcolata a partire da due opposte concezioni dell'organizzazione e struttura interna del sito: agglutinata o sparsa. Partendo dai risultati di uno studio recente che ha consentito di assegnare le varie strutture e depositi Prepalaziali ad una specifica fase di occupazione del sito stabilita su base stratigrafiche, in questo articolo si propone una lettura diversa del sito e delle strategie insediative in atto nella regione della Messarà, che meglio si adatta all'ambiente paludoso e a tratti malsano quale ricostruito in un recente studio paleo-ambientale. Lunghi dall'essere un insediamento che attraverso le varie fasi del Prepalaziale cresce fino a diventare un centro proto-urbano e quindi un centro palatino, Festòs appare un sito cerimoniale a valenza regionale, un punto di riferimento per una vasta popolazione che di norma vive sparsa nel territorio -katà komas, ma periodicamente si riunisce sulla collina del palazzo che comincia a configurarsi come la capitale spirituale una regione che, per comprensibili ragioni di tipo ambientale, era caratterizzata da una intensa mobilità residenziale.

* In my previous work on Prepalatial Phaistos I have avoided estimating settlement size or population because contextual reassessment indicated that the site was not a canonical settlement. The decision to tackle this issue now has been triggered by the realisation, following conversations with various colleagues, that the old orthodoxy regarding Phaistos, albeit seriously questioned in my publications, retained a vigorous currency. The first person to thank is T. Whitelaw, who has always encouraged me to publish my results and interpretations, particularly so when they diverged

from his and others' interpretations, so as to open up discussion; I would also like to express my gratitude to E. Hatzaki, V. Isaakidou, K. Kristakis, S. Triantafyllou, S. Andreou, P. Halstead, N. Efstratiou, P. Militello, N. Cucuzza, S. Privitera, O. Palio. A special thank you goes to P. Tomkins, for the most useful discussions and for having contributing to the writing of the text in its final form, and to M. Metcalfe for having commented on a previous draft of the article. Responsibility for the ideas expressed in the texts and any errors remains with the author.

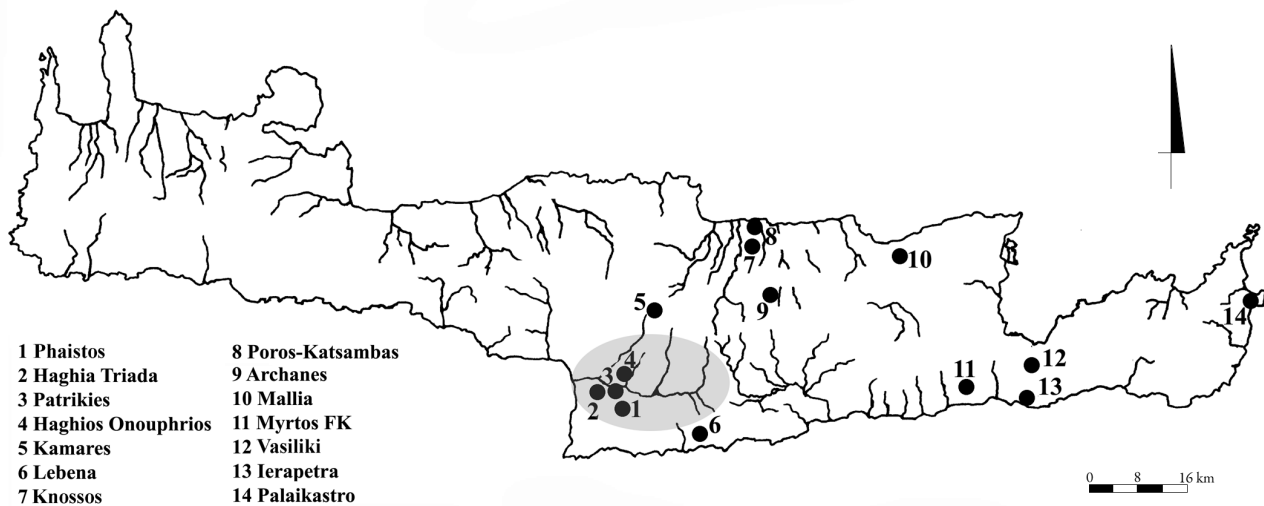


Fig. 1. Minoan Crete, with the locations of the major sites mentioned in the text, and the plain of Mesara shaded.

Recent advances in Minoan archaeology have highlighted that the rise of the First Palaces, which has been considered to epitomise the emergence of the early state in Minoan Crete (fig. 1), can be effectively addressed by focusing on the scale of those communities that developed into palatial centres and on the level of hierarchy documented by the settlement systems of their regions¹. Both site-based and regional approaches have been successfully used in various parts of the world to track the development of centralized economic and political systems, and rely on the well-documented, cross-cultural association between population size and level of social complexity/political organization². This is not to say that their application in Minoan archaeology is without problems: first, because no agreement has been reached about the scale at which a community can be considered to be urban and a regional system be regarded as the representation of a state; and second, because the earlier phases of those sites that developed into centres of power need to be reconstructed by assembling together the bits and pieces that, spared by later building activity, were fortuitously intercepted in the test pits opened underneath later floors and/or paved areas.

In the case of Phaistos, which was occupied from a late phase of the Neolithic to an advanced stage of the Hellenistic period, the earlier phases of occupation are represented by pottery and/or isolated stretches of wall that more often than not cannot be convincingly assigned to freestanding or agglomerated buildings. Therefore, as is to be expected when dealing with challenging, fragmented data, researchers who have addressed the earlier phases of occupation of the site have tended to produce differential readings, not only with regard to the size of the site, but also its internal structure and therefore its resident population.

T. Whitelaw has made several attempts to assess the scale of Prepalatial Phaistos³, the most recent of which estimates site extent at 3.3 ha during EM I-II and 18ha in EM III-MM IA. He has argued that the settlement had a *nucleated/agglutinative structure*, like other known Early and Middle Minoan settlements in Crete, and on the basis of this comparative study has proposed a density multiplier of 400/ha as appropriate for settlements of the EM I-II period⁴ and 300 inhabitants/ha for the EM III-MM IA period⁵. By his reckoning, therefore, Phaistos in EM I-II had a population of 1350 inhabitants, distributed across approximately 225 houses, while in EM III-MM IA it had a population of 5400 resident in 1080 houses⁶.

¹ WHITELAW 2012, p. 119.

² KOSSE 1990; FEINMANN, MARCUS 1998, pp. 95-114.

³ WHITELAW 1983; WHITELAW 2012.

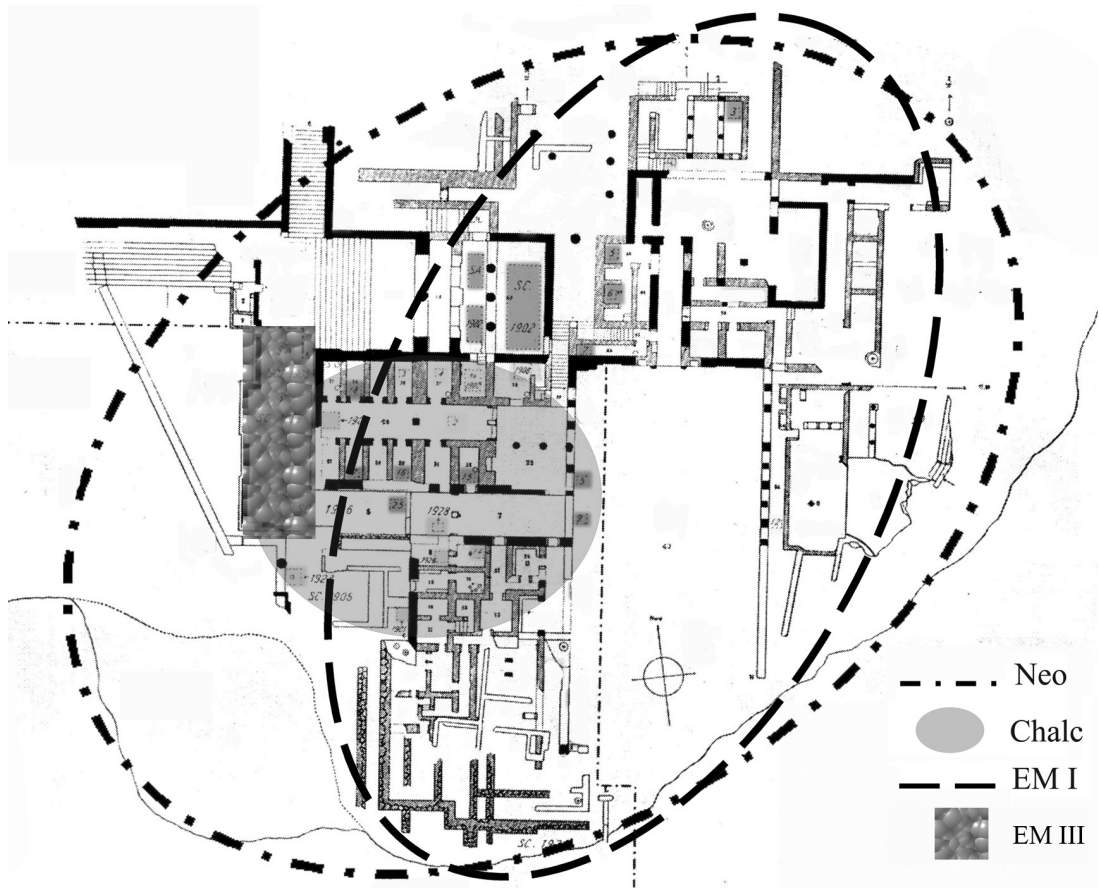
⁴ The density multiplier of 400 inhabitants/ha is based on Myrtos Fournou Koriphi (WARREN 1972). The settlement, destroyed by fire in EM IIB and abandoned, showed that a *site area* of 0.09ha (900m²) was occupied by 5 or maximum 6 houses with an average area of 80m². On the basis of cross-cultural work on the relationship between population and roofed dwelling areas that suggests 4-6 people per domestic unit, an estimated population of 25-30 inhabitants was reached; WHITELAW 1983; WHITELAW 2012. This meant that 1000m² could

have hosted 40 persons and 10,000m² (1ha) 400 persons.

⁵ Whitelaw acknowledges that in large agglomerations the density of population usually decreases as the distance from the centre increases, WHITELAW 2012.

⁶ For EM III-MM IA Whitelaw in fact proposes a maximal figure of 5400 inhabitants calculated from a site area of 18ha, and a minimal figure of 1650 inhabitants calculated over a *site area* of 5.4ha, WHITELAW 2012. This may be an attempt to mediate between his reconstruction and the ones proposed by Watrous or the present author, which are based on much lower estimates of the density of population.

Fig. 2. The Palace hill with the assumed dimensions of the 'settlement' in the Neolithic, Chalcolithic, and EM I-II, according to Pernier's description of pottery distribution, and with the EM III building hypothesised on the basis of the patches of red stucco floors (re-elaborated after PERNIER 1935).



In contrast, V. Watrous, who conducted a regional survey in the western Mesara with the aim of understanding the emergence of a Phaistos polity early in MM I, argued that the site had a *dispersed structure* and favours a much lower density of population of 35-50 inhabitants/ha based on the average density of present-day, 'traditional' villages in Cyprus and the Mesara, which are often composed of closely-spaced houses that are typically never all contemporaneously in use⁷. He therefore argued, on the basis of his 5ha estimate of the extent of Phaistos in EM II, for a much lower resident population of just 175 individuals, which due to nucleation of a previously rural population rose by EM III-MM IA to 1350 inhabitants occupying an area of around 27ha⁸. In an attempt to mediate, at least in part, the much higher population figure proposed by Whitelaw, Watrous extends the upper range of his density multiplier to an absolute maximum of 100 persons/ha for sites larger than 10ha on the basis that ethnographic data support slightly higher densities for such larger settlements. However, he refuses to take into consideration figures such as 400 or 300 inhabitants/ha, noting that even Mesoamerican and Near Eastern archaeologists, who study areas where such high concentrations of people could at least in theory have been sustained by very high local agricultural productivity, nowadays prefer to use density multipliers no greater than 100-150 inhabitants/ha.

How might we resolve this impasse in terms of data and interpretation? Are the data available from Phaistos really so sparse and scarce that they do not permit us to reconstruct a definitive picture of the nature and extent of settlement in the various phases of the Prepalatial period? Is the spatial distribution of pottery and structures the only means open to us to assess the extent of the earlier phases of occupation at a multi-phase site?

Prepalatial Phaistos: data, approaches and interpretations

Excavations carried out at Phaistos since 1902 have made clear that the hill was occupied well before the construction of the palace. While individual investigations of Prepalatial activity are typically constrained by the presence of later structures and are thus partial and difficult to assemble into a clear horizontal picture, they are nevertheless very

⁷ WATROUS *et al.* 2004, pp. 24-26. Even nowadays it is common to find clusters of buildings with many houses abandoned and used to

discard rubbish.

⁸ WATROUS *et al.* 2004, p. 256.

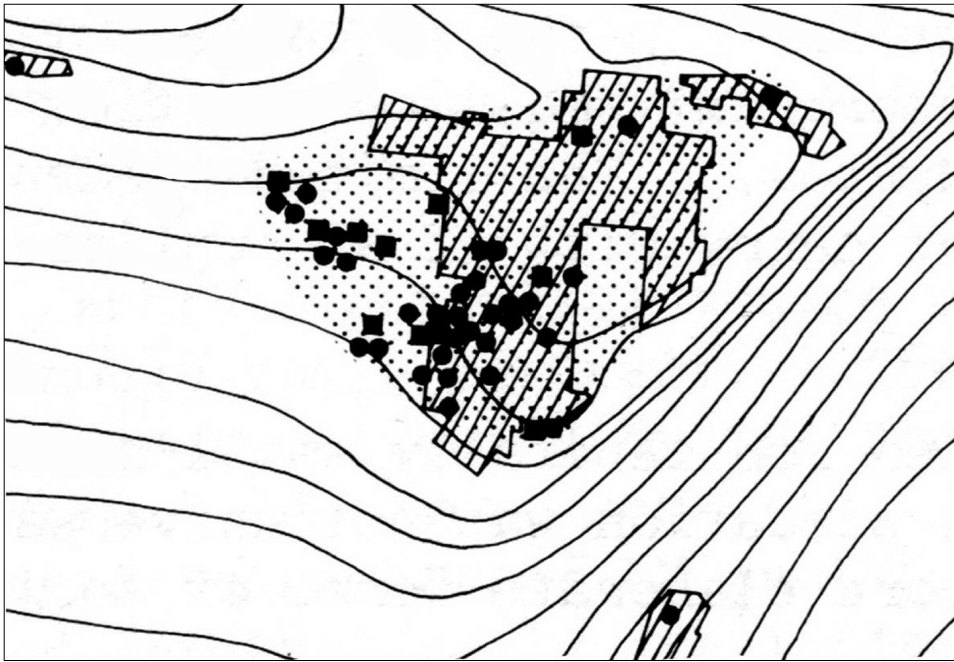


Fig. 3. Distribution of EM I and EM II deposits across the hills of the Phaistos ridge (after WHITELAW 1983).

numerous in number (185 recorded stratigraphies⁹) and extensive in coverage. As a result, although collectively they encourage consideration of site size, individually they are so fragmented as to make it difficult to say much about the structure of the settlement (*dispersed* or *nucleated*), or about the size and plan of the dwellings that, more often than not, were interpreted as houses or residential units solely on the basis of the presence of occupational refuse.

Acknowledging these limitations L. Pernier focused on the size of the settlement, which he tried to assess by using the distribution of pottery and datable structures and/or features such as floors and paving. He hypothesised that the site extended over the entire hilltop in the Neolithic period; was restricted to the area between the west façade and Rooms 38 and 17-18 in the Chalcolithic period; was spread over the area between room 103 to the north and *corridoio* 97 to the south in EM I-II; and was dominated by a monumental building that extended from room V to room XXVII, in a N-S direction, and from these rooms to room XXXV/38 in an E-W direction in the EM III-MM I period (fig. 2). This building, documented by patches of red floors and paved areas, was compared to the *House-on-the-Hill* at Vasiliki and was considered to be a formal predecessor of the first palace, mainly due to its position and to the presence of a paved court to its west.

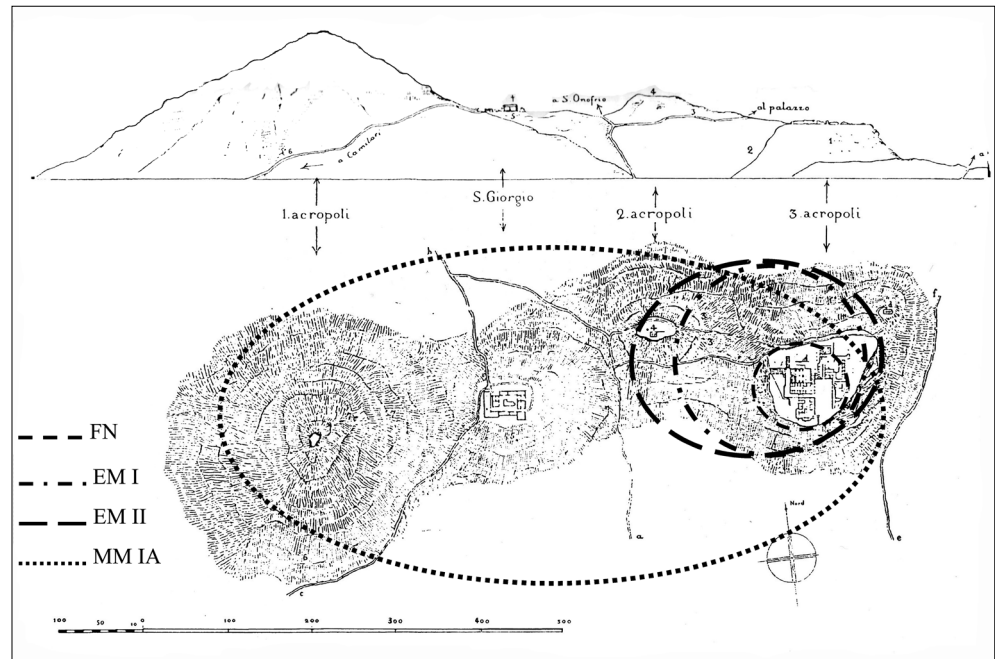
Pernier's reconstruction of Prepalatial Phaistos was radically modified by D. Levi, who excavated a few other Prepalatial buildings on the southern and western slopes of the palace hill and on the southernmost slope of the middle hill (*Acropoli mediana*). The discovery of three superimposed paved ramps connecting the southern slope to the hilltop via the western slope, the first of which dates to EM III (Phaistos VIII), eventually led Levi to state that the red stucco floors and the paved areas found by Pernier under the floors of the NW block of the First Palace, belonged to private buildings that were contemporary to the SW block of the palace, rather than to a monumental building that preceded its construction. Levi concluded that prior to the construction of the palace, which he saw as the end-result of a long-lasting project, Phaistos lacked any monumental architecture and was a small and sparsely inhabited site. Indeed, the few EM structures that could be identified beneath the palace in different parts of the hill were spaced widely apart and interspersed with open areas that usually contained middens. Moreover, it was clear, for instance in the case of the buildings discovered under *piazzale* LXX, which had clearly been built and used in different phases of the same period, that buildings of the same phase need not have been contemporary and thus should not be interpreted as the outcome of a growth of the settlement, but rather as the result of a shift in the locus of habitation. As such the EM evidence could not, according to Levi, be considered to attest the existence of a nucleated settlement with dense, agglomerated architecture. Consequently, it was easy for Levi to dismiss Branigan's hypothesis that the room excavated by Pernier under *peristilio* 74, measuring only 4.30m x 5.65m, formed part of a monumental building that represented a forerunner of the First Palace¹⁰.

⁹ TODARO 2013, pp. 47-160.

¹⁰ K. Branigan (1970) described palatial society as the "inevitable result of a linear, progressive and cumulative growth" from the previous

period. In his opinion, EM society not only had craft-specialists but had also wealthier people who lived in larger mansions which, like the building found by Pernier under *peristilio* 74, could be consid-

Fig. 4. Curves of settlement growth from FN to MM IA reconstructed according to the data provided by Watrous (2004).



While Levi and his collaborators were more interested in dating the various parts of the First Palace than understanding its functions or the processes that led to its construction, other scholars have subsequently tackled these issues using a regional perspective, focusing either on settlement size and variations in settlement patterns, or on the practices through which the communities of the region had seemingly negotiated their social identity. The former approach was first applied in 1983 by Whitelaw, who argued, on the basis of the observed pattern of distribution of EM I-II deposits and structures on the Phaistos hills, that the site had a minimum extent of 1.1 ha in EM II (fig. 3), and an estimated population of 300-450 persons living in 75 houses, a situation which he saw as hinting at more complex forms of organization than those suggested by the Mesara tombs¹¹. Building on the results of this study, P. Warren compared the wide distribution of EM II deposits and structures with the scarcity of data available for the EM III-MM IA period and suggested that Phaistos, large and prosperous in EM II, underwent a period of partial desertion in EM III-MM IA, and was re-founded at the beginning of MM IB, 'with a powerful family establishing the first palace and others erecting buildings in the town'¹².

S. Damiani Indelicato, instead, dated the re-birth of the site to MM IA on the basis of her attribution of the theatrical staircase and of a nearby curvilinear wall, which she interpreted as an early *Kouloura*, to this period¹³. She argued that this hinted at the presence of a public space, and thus the oversight of a central authority, prior to the construction of the palace. In her view urbanization both preceded and caused the foundation of the First Palace.

MM IA is similarly favoured by Watrous as a phase of pivotal realignment for Phaistos and its surrounding region. Integrating the information from the Palace hill with the regional survey data he suggested that Phaistos had been the largest settlement in the region ever since its FN foundation, and, after a temporary setback during the EM III period, had emerged as an urban centre at the beginning of MM IA. His site-size figure of 27 ha (fig. 4) was based on the doubtful assumption that the settlement in MM IA extended continuously from the palace hill to the hill of *Christos Effendi*, where pottery of that period was found. He connected this apparent dramatic increase in size with an observed dramatic decrease in the number of MM IA sites known in the wider region, leading him to explain the former as the outcome of the latter in terms of a nucleation phenomenon **where**, following an EM III disruption, brought about the desertion of the countryside and the relocation of the rural population to Phaistos¹⁴.

Watrous, however, believed that Phaistos had a special status in the Mesara not only on the basis of its population size, but also on the basis of its eccentric burial and social practices. In his opinion, while the other Mesara communities had started gathering at communal tholos-court complexes since EM I so as to celebrate their group identity and proclaim their ancestral right to the surrounding land, Phaistos buried its dead in individual graves located on the

ered forerunners of the palaces because they had been built in prominent positions within the site and with the corners oriented towards the cardinal points.

¹¹ WHITELAW 1983, pp. 334-339.

¹² WARREN 1987, p. 54.

¹³ DAMIANI INDELICATO 1982, p. 25; DAMIANI INDELICATO, CHIGINE 1984, pp. 229-230.

¹⁴ WATROUS *et al.* 2004, pp. 268-269.

northern edge of the Ieroditis Ridge, and left an open area within the settlement, in the area of former burials dating to the Neolithic period, for ceremonial purposes¹⁵.

The special status of the site in EM I and EM II is also proved, in Watrous' opinion, by the uneven distribution of obsidian tools in the region: almost all of the evidence is indeed concentrated at Phaistos or in its vicinity, leading him to hypothesise the presence at the site of attached artisans working for an elite patron¹⁶. For the MM IA period, instead, a dominant role for the site in the region could only be supported by the large size of the settlement that Watrous estimated on the basis of pottery distribution. However, the remains of MM IA on the hill are very scanty and include the few walls and patches of floors identified by Pernier beneath the north wing of the palace and the pottery retrieved by Levi from above the Prepalatial houses beneath *Piazzale LXX*.

Watrous' conclusions were radically put into perspective by M. Relaki, who rightly pointed out that population estimates should be treated with the utmost care because of the coarse chronological framework available for the Prepalatial period at Phaistos and generally in southern Crete¹⁷. According to Relaki it was the building of the palace that biased our perception of Phaistos' political position with respect to the other Mesara communities in previous periods. The evidence available then (namely an apparent lack of deposits attributable to EM IIB-EM III and the diversity of its burial practices) seemed instead to show that Phaistos, important in the FN period perhaps as a regional focus for ceremonial activity, could not subsequently find its way in the competition initiated in the region in the EM II period with the appearance of the tholos tomb and new social practices performed in the funerary sphere¹⁸. In particular, the rich data from the cemeteries of the region led her to hypothesise that other communities, such as Ayia Triada for example, held a more significant status than Phaistos in the late Prepalatial period.

A similar opinion was expressed by the late Prof. V. La Rosa, who in 2000 initiated a series of excavations at Phaistos targeted at specific locations on the palace hill and with the aim of addressing some of the major issues left unresolved by earlier research activity: (1) *relative chronology* and the length of the Prepalatial period; (2) the extent of the *disturbances* that took place during the construction of the palaces; (3) the reliability of the data available for assessing the *status* of the site in the Neolithic and Early Minoan periods¹⁹. These excavations revealed that (a) the stratigraphy of the site supported Evans' tripartite division of a 'long' EM period; (b) the hill was not abandoned at the end of EM IIB, but rather saw frenetic building activity that led to the establishment of many of the features that Levi had attributed to the first Protopalatial phase²⁰. Elements such as the earliest of the three superimposed paved ramps leading up from *Piazzale LXX* to *Piazzale I*, or the earliest of the three superimposed pavings of *Piazzale I* and of *Corridoio III*, were dated to the Prepalatial period, and more specifically to the EM III and MM IA respectively²¹. The excavator, however, thought that these paved areas were related to private units that had nothing in common with the First Palace and therefore concluded that the site did not have a leading position in the EM period but 'emerged' in the course of MM I-II. More specifically, he thought that the site acquired a dominant role in the region only in the MM II period, in coincidence with a new building programme that led to the establishment of the most distinctive features of the Protopalatial architecture (raised walkway in *Piazzale I*, *Kouloures*; West Façade with orthostatic blocks and *Propileo II*)²².

A contextual approach to site development: Prepalatial Phaistos through formation processes and patterns of deposition

The results of the deep soundings excavated by La Rosa, especially those conducted on the western slope of the palace hill²³, have provided the basis for a more detailed understanding of stratigraphy, phasing and chronology at Phaistos and thus a new perspective from which to address questions regarding its nature and development during the Prepalatial period. Ten major phases of occupation have been defined in terms of pottery and building techniques by cross-correlating 120 stratigraphies identified across the entire site²⁴. Each of these major phases was anchored to specific events that were recognised across the site thanks to the composition of the deposits or the nature of their deposition: e.g. construction fills composed mainly of stones separating Phaistos I from Phaistos II; an *astraki* level sealing the destruction of Phaistos III; a floor with thick clay preparation and red ochre surface in Phaistos IV; floors composed of multiple, thin green and red levels in Phaistos VIII; a thick red soil in Phaistos X (fig. 5)²⁵. Indeed, each

¹⁵ WATROUS *et al* 2004, p. 230.

¹⁶ WATROUS *et al* 2004, p. 231.

¹⁷ RELAKI 2004.

¹⁸ RELAKI 2004, p. 181.

¹⁹ LA ROSA 2000.

²⁰ LA ROSA 2002; CARINCI, LA ROSA 2002.

²¹ LA ROSA 2002; LA ROSA 2004b.

²² CARINCI, LA ROSA 2007.

²³ LA ROSA 2002; LA ROSA 2004a.

²⁴ TODARO 2013; TODARO 2019.

²⁵ TODARO 2012a; TODARO forthcoming a.



Fig. 5. Stratigraphic features diagnostic of specific phases of Prepalatial Phaistos. A. White floor of kouskouras, typical of Phaistos IB; B: Red floor made from a clayey preparation with red ochre surface typical of Phaistos IV-VIIA; C-D: Red floor with a green clayey preparation, remade up to 20 times, typical of Phaistos VIII; E: Red soil typical of Phaistos X (photos by author).

of these phases, rather than being simply dated through the use of Evans' chronological labels, has been characterised (a) in ceramic terms, through the accurate description of the formal and decorative repertoires of each ceramic class; (b) in architectural terms, through the description of the building techniques; and (c) in physical terms, through the description of the physical properties of the archaeological deposits and of their processes of deposition. This procedure on the one hand can facilitate the re-unification of archaeological contexts that were excavated in nearby areas by different excavators, and the attribution of the various assemblages or structures to one of the 10 phases of occupation. It also minimizes the risk of considering contemporary features that, although associated with the same classes of pottery, could in fact have been in chronological succession, due to the long duration of each ceramic phase (Table 1).

At this point it is worth noting that this recent chronological work has revealed a major issue for previous attempts to estimate the size and nature of Phaistos, which have followed an approach that relies on exhaustively mining the literature for information about the distribution and date of deposits at the site. The Prepalatial deposits from Phaistos have been excavated over the course of more than a century and have only been partially published and in this time opinions on the date of pottery have changed. Moreover, it is not widely known that the descriptions of pottery produced by excavators at Phaistos sometimes apply traditional pottery labels in a completely unconventional and inconsistent way. For example, a survey of the Prepalatial pottery excavated by Levi and stored in the stratigraphical Museum in Phaistos²⁶ has revealed that the label "Ayios Onouphrios style" was used by the excavator to indicate not only the red-on-buff pottery best represented at the site of the same name and dated to EM I, but also all dark-on-light pottery decorated with linear motifs and all pottery with linear motifs executed in white colour on a red ground,

²⁶ This survey was conducted by the author between 2004 and 2007, and between 2008 and 2011.

Hilltop/southern slopes	Western slope, to the south of ramp	Area to the west of piazzale I	Area to the south of piazzale I	Ceramic phases / periods	Physical properties
Vases with triton and astragali @ cortile 40; circular hut; unit beneath room 25; burial; unit with pits;		Floor beneath room CVIII	Kouloura I: black soil	Phase I	Black soil
Hearths @ rooms XIX-29, and @ cortile 40	Floor and hearth Hearths			Phase II	Brownish soil; animal bones
Room LII; wall beneath propileo II; unit to the west of rooms 17-18; strata beneath piazzale I	Zeta 1-3; alpha 3 astraki		Kouloura II: walls and astraki	Phase III	astraki
Unit beneath room XIX; beneath propileo74; walls @ room 24; paving with vases above circular hut	Floor beneath Room CXIII	Floor beneath room CVIII	Kouloura III: chalices and animal bones	Phase IV	Red ochre floor
Fills on hilltop; in Room LII	re-use Wall M/7;	Room IC; to the east of Room LXXXV beneath strada del Nord		Phase V	Red ochre floor
Room CC	Beta 0-2, 94-93			Phase VIA	Earth beaten floor
Casa Est	910 low; ; 6.40; alpha/2 (91-92); 1222; 89			Phase VIB	Red ochre floor
Casa Ovest/ Fill in CC	910 upper; 610; 405; 502; 73; 88;		Kouloura I: pottery	Phase VIIA	Earth beaten and red ochre
Red and green floors above casa Ovest	71a; 88 910-907; 609-607; Gamma 1223/ 1220; 1221			Phase VIIB	
Above red and green levels is Phaistos IX	1218, 213, 212; fill beneath paved ramp; 70; 87, 86			Phase VIIIA	stones and lumps of clay and vitrified pottery
	First paving ramp; Delta 1-4 (1212; 1215); firing pit 85	Room XCIV: stratum 39 (fill with vitrified pottery)	Walls in Kouloura II	Phase VIIIB	stones and lumps of clay and vitrified pottery
	1217; 32; 209 pav.; 84	Room XCIV: Fill and pit (38a; 37),	Fill between 1° and 2° paving of the ramp; fill to the west of Kouloura I	Phase VIIIC	Green clayey level; horn-core
Paving piazzale I /curvilinear wall; structures and paving @ piazzale LXX		Room CXIV: stratum 36; strada del nord: 13; 12; 26		Phase IX	Earth beaten floors/paving
Many of the complete vases from beneath the north wing of the palace; vases from pit in room XIX;	69	Pit 8a; strata 11; 8; 48		Phase X	Red stucco floors re-laid/ red earth
Vases from bench in wall alpha @corridoio III/7; Jug from beneath Room 13				Phase XI: First palace	Clearance and terracing: pits with red stucco floor/ foundation deposits

Table I. Synoptic table of main EM and MM deposits from the palace hill at Phaistos (after TODARO 2019).

regardless of the decorative and formal repertoires. The label “Patrikies style” was used to indicate not only early polychrome decoration but also all pottery decorated in off-white on a black ground, again regardless of decorative and formal repertoires. It is largely for such reasons that some periods (namely EM I-II) have come to be overrepresented in the settlement history of the site, while others (EM IIB-EM III) that are now considered major phases of activity were previously considered to be almost totally absent.

The attribution of each context from all previous excavations to a specific phase of occupation permitted a second level of inquiry that aimed to highlight the settlement history of the site and its specificity in terms of function or status. This goal was pursued by addressing, for each of ten identified phases of occupation, issues such as (a) the extent of the settlement; (b) the spatial organization of the community in terms of lay-outs and average dimensions of buildings, and in terms of ratio between roofed and unroofed areas, i.e. private and communal spaces; (c) the nature of the activities performed in various areas of the site; (d) the function and status of the site in comparison to the other sites of the Mesara.

Scholars had generally assumed that the Phaistos hills were occupied on a permanent basis, and that the excavated refuse therefore reflects the activities conducted by a local, resident population, and can be used to infer a minimum number of inhabitants²⁷. However, this assumption had not previously been subject to detailed evaluation. The occupation history of the site was re-assessed, first, by opening up the range of possible interpretations of occupation to include not just *habitation*, but also *visitation*, which might not even involve camping, and *encampment*, which might last from several days to less than a year (seasonal occupation). Second, by recognising that *habitation* can be brief, i.e. lasting from more than a year to less than a decade; extended, i.e. lasting from more than a decade to less than a century; and supra-extended, i.e. lasting for more than a century; and third, by acknowledging that these diverse forms of occupation might occur in various areas of the same site, depending on their use²⁸.

This range of potential residential strategies was explored empirically by assessing how the Phaistos community managed its rubbish. Ethno-archaeological studies have identified linkages between discard behaviour and residential strategies leading to the development of a range of models of abandonment behaviour for ‘nomadic, semi-sedentary, and sedentary groups’²⁹. These studies have clarified that *primary refuse* is generally associated with mobile hunter-gatherers and short-term residential stays³⁰, while the relocation of refuse to secondary dumps, or the storage of equipment for future visits, refers to sedentary groups³¹. They have also made clear that, aside from the actual length of residential stays, the anticipated length of occupation was an important variable in conditioning refuse disposal, with gradual, planned abandonment and anticipated return resulting in high levels of *de facto refuse*, including numerous cached items³².

Assessment of the use and function of buildings and open areas is challenging for Prepalatial Phaistos as it must confront difficulties caused by the restricted dimensions of the excavation trenches, which often hinder even a basic understanding of the lay-out of the buildings and of the settlement in general, especially with regard to the ratio between roofed (private) and unroofed (communal/public) space. In some instances, however, it has been possible to isolate clear cases of *de facto* refuse, i.e. floor assemblages sealed by stones deriving from the collapsed walls that thus provides reliable information about the activities performed in the structure prior to the destruction³³. It is therefore legitimate to expect that other cases might be detected after a thorough examination of all the available evidence.

Definition of the size of the site in each phase of occupation identified for the Prepalatial was attempted after having assessed not only *how* the deposits were formed and *what* they represented, but also whether the patterns of deposition identified in certain areas occurred also in other places and, therefore, whether the processes that brought about their formation were broad or limited in spatial extent, i.e. whether they involved the entire site or only small portions therein. Thus, for example, study of the Neolithic strata excavated in Room XIX and in the area comprised between the 7th and 8th base of the colonnade that limited the western side of the central court of the First Palace, suggested that these areas were not permanently occupied, but rather periodically used for acts of ceremonial consumption of food and drink that might also have encompassed people from a wider region³⁴. When the other Neolithic deposits trenches are also taken into account it is surprising and striking to notice that the same patterns of deposition for Phaistos I and II recur across the hilltop with identical sequences of features (i.e. specific types of floors, charcoal,

²⁷ See for example WHITELAW 1983.

²⁸ SCHIFFER 1987, pp. 100-101.

²⁹ KENT 1993, p. 66.

³⁰ BINFORD 1978.

³¹ STEVENSON 1982, p. 253; TOMKA 1993, p. 24.

³² STEVENSON 1982.

³³ TODARO 2009b.

³⁴ TODARO, DI TONTO 2008. The stratigraphy of Room XIX, in particular, revealed 2.10m of FN Neolithic deposit, within which it was possible to identify five episodes of occupation, followed by as many episodes of abandonment, thus clarifying that series of superimposed strata could be the outcome of a periodical re-visiting of the same location by groups of non-residents, rather than the outcome of uninterrupted habitation.

debris; fig. 5). This is to the extent that during the most recent excavations at Phaistos it was possible to predict even the type of soil and the types of layer that would be encountered as excavation proceeded down towards the bedrock³⁵. This realisation is important because it suggests that the hill was periodically subjected to site-wide events. It is important, however, to keep in mind that such a phenomenon cannot help in assessing the site of the community that occupied the hill, because a small group of people can create a large spatial signature by using different parts of a relatively large area for different types of activities conducted at different times. In this sense, only a thorough contextual study of all the assemblages assigned to a specific site's phases can provide a reliable picture of the resident population.

The new emphasis on formation process led all the Prepalatial assemblages excavated at the site to being grouped into four major categories of deposit: (1) floor deposits; (2) rubbish dumps; (3) construction fills; (4) structured depositions. With regard to the first category –*floor deposits*– it should be immediately stressed that most contained few, if any, usable, portable items, suggesting that the relevant structures had been abandoned rather than destroyed. Pottery in these cases comprised broken vases, small tools and sherds that were accidentally embedded into the matrix of the floors, and pithoi. Nevertheless, indoor floors, i.e. floors belonging to a roofed structure could be easily assigned to specific site phases because the ways in which they were constructed changed over time. For example, the floors of Phaistos IA structures are composed of small pebbles inserted into a bed of red clay; while those of Phaistos IB are composed of white lime. Floors of Phaistos IV have a surface of red ochre laid over a preparation of green clay (fig. 5A) and this particular technique continues to be used at the site for floors in certain, apparently high-valued, structures. From Phaistos VII onwards, such floors tend to be re-laid several times, testifying to a certain degree of continuity of occupation (fig. 5B). Floors made of beaten earth are particularly frequent on the western and southern slopes of the palace hill and in view of the associated materials could be areas for the production of obsidian blades and/or pottery. More specifically, the production of obsidian blades is documented by the presence of finished products, cores, flakes and various types of debitage materials; pottery production was more difficult to detect because, aside from the regular occurrence of kiln wasters, which were often retained and repurposed by potters, the production area was characterised by the presence of multi-functional tools, and mainly by *improvised* or *ad-hoc tools*, i.e. broken vases that were modified so as to be used as shaping supports/moulds³⁶.

The second category of deposit are *rubbish dumps* that were further distinguished into *occupation refuse*, formed due to sedimentary accretion occurring during or between occupation phases (in some cases it was possible to ascertain that structures in a state of disuse were used for the disposal of refuse), and *middens*, i.e. refuse heaps that are usually greasy and dark due to the presence of decayed organics and which, unlike rubbish dumps, display evidence for the deliberate and sequential accumulation of refuse at one location. *Middens* are the outcome of specific rubbish management strategies and as such are extremely helpful and informative, not only regarding the character of activities performed at the site, but also their temporality.

The third category comprises *construction fills*, which were in turn distinguished into *homogeneous* and *mixed fills*: the first of these includes the debris of specialised activities that were performed ahead of building projects (e.g. work-feasts³⁷ or pottery production cycles); the second includes materials that were removed and re-deposited during the levelling and reshaping of previous deposits. Mixed fills are rare at Phaistos, where the most common pattern of deposition was *in situ re-building* after periods of abandonment, which led to a constant raising of the surface level and produced a distinctive alternating sequence of contexts rich in material and food remains, and layers of sterile soil; a pattern which is frequently encountered also in caves³⁸.

A special category of construction fills with complete vases that are usually related to acts of ritual consumption of food and drink are so-called *foundation deposits*, which occur at the site from the construction of the building known as the First Palace³⁹. Their recurrence, underneath floors or within benches, justifies the two most prevalent interpretations proposed by scholars, i.e. as depository cache/votive offerings⁴⁰, or as mnemonic devices aiming to preserve the memory of specific events⁴¹.

³⁵ The stratigraphy encountered on the southernmost part of the western slope of the palace hill was identical to the one encountered by Levi in room 6, to the extent that in both areas the stratum rich in animal remains also produced a human finger; E. Platania, personal communication.

³⁶ TODARO 2009b; TODARO 2016; TODARO 2018b.

³⁷ For feasts and Labour mobilization see DIETLER, HERBICH 2001; for EM Phaistos see TODARO 2013.

³⁸ Levi has already noted the similarity between the hearths at Phaistos and the one which he had excavated in the Asripetra cave, in

Cos; LEVI 1925.

³⁹ TODARO 2009; CALOI 2018.

⁴⁰ LA ROSA 2002.

⁴¹ TODARO 2009a; CALOI 2017; TODARO forthcoming b underlines that the appearance of foundation deposits in coincidence with the beginning of the Middle Minoan period might signal a change towards a less mobile way of *style*: because a foundation deposit is not visible it can perform its function as a mnemonic device only if a witness is available to tell a story about it.

Mind the gaps? On the importance of defining absences at an intra-site level

A final dimension of any intra-site contextual study, and **ones** all too easily overlooked in studies of site development, is the *absence of deposits* assignable to specific phases, particularly when these occur within areas notionally designated as belonging to a single archaeological site or zone of cultural deposition. Two examples, one from Ayia Triada, and one from Phaistos will serve to illustrate the importance of this point.

Two EM buildings at the nearby site of Ayia Triada⁴² provide a useful opportunity to consider settlement and residential strategies elsewhere on the Phaistos ridge, not only because they could be more fully explored thanks to the lack of later structures, but also because their stratigraphical relationship clearly indicates that they were constructed in different phases of the same ceramic phase and were both abandoned without apparent reason. In advance of a detailed study of the pottery, which might clarify the time that may have elapsed between the construction of the *Casa Est* and the abandonment of *Casa Ovest*, the detailed report by the excavator C. Laviosa makes clear that the two buildings document two distinct episodes of occupation, circumscribed in time and space.

The earliest one, *Casa Ovest*, was composed of a main room that measured 5.20 x 5m, accessed from a room to the east and an E-W corridor to the north. This room was flanked to the south by a row of square and non-communicating rooms. The area to the east was obliterated by the construction of the *Casa Est* and thus it is not possible to say whether the room communicating with the central main room was actually part of a row of square rooms similar to the one attested to the south. The floor assemblages of *casa ovest* are however less rich than those at Myrtos because they were deprived of most of their still usable contents when the structure was abandoned. Aside from a few fragmentary drinking and pouring vessels, 8 pithoi were found which had an average height of 1.0 m and a maximum diameter of 0.85 m, suggesting a storage capacity of about 300 litres, which is usually regarded as the annual quantity required by a single individual⁴³. The number of pithoi could therefore support the view that a building of 80m² could host up to a maximum of 8 individuals, as suggested by Naroll's formula of 1 person/10 m². Alternatively, it could be that these pithoi contained staples destined for communal consumption, a hypothesis that is not otherwise confirmed by the pottery found in the structure, which is still in the process of being studied by F. Carinci.

The other, slightly smaller (6.80m x 3.70m) building, dubbed *Casa Est*, was built above the easternmost part of *Casa Ovest* with a slightly different alignment (**N-E/SW**). In terms of pottery, aside from a few pithoi that most probably belonged to the room of the *Casa Ovest* above which this building was constructed, very little was found because this building was also abandoned for no apparent reason.

It has become commonplace to refer to the two buildings as forming part of the "Prepalatial quarter" of Ayia Triada. However, two considerations render the idea of a much larger settlement invalid. First, not only were the buildings not simultaneously in use, but also it seems that the construction of *Casa Est* occurred sometime after the abandonment of the *Casa Ovest* and could therefore be associated with groups that were totally unrelated to the occupants of the earlier building. Interestingly, a similar discontinuity is documented by Tholos A, which was built in EM IIB after the *Casa Est* had gone out of use, and was in turn abandoned, apparently after only a short period of use⁴⁴. Burial activity resumed only at the end of the EM III period, i.e. a couple of hundred years later, by groups that most probably were totally unrelated to the constructors of the tomb.

The second consideration invalidating the idea of a larger EM settlement at Ayia Triada is provided by locations within the general area of EM deposition where EM deposits and structures are absent. Thus, for example, a series of test-pits opened in the area surrounding the *Casa Ovest/Est* area did not produce any traces of walls that might attest to the presence of similar structures, nor did they yield any deposits of pottery interpretable as middens, the size of which is usually directly proportional to the length of occupation of an area⁴⁵. In fact, when the assemblages and structures dating to the various phases of the EM period are taken together, along with the tests that produced negative results, it seems more reasonable to assume that each deposit represents a distinct episode of occupation or activity, circumscribed in time and space (fig. 6). In this sense it would not be inappropriate to say that Ayia Triada during the Prepalatial period was not a single site, but rather a composite of multiple sites, i.e. a palimpsest of activities intermittently performed by human groups over several hundred years.

This situation, while ideal for the isolation of ceramic groups distinctive of specific phases⁴⁶, is otherwise dangerously misleading when it comes to assessing site-size and population estimates, especially in cases where the chro-

⁴² LAVIOSA 1972-1973.

⁴³ KRITSAKIS 2011.

⁴⁴ STEFANI, BANTI 1931; CULTRARO 2003; TODARO 2003.

⁴⁵ Test-pits conducted in 2008 in the area to the north-east of the buildings, i.e. on the other side of the modern road, the construc-

tion of which led to their identification, did not reveal a single sherd, while a reconnaissance of the area to the south-west, conducted by La Rosa, identified a circular structure that might have been a tholos tomb.

⁴⁶ TODARO 2003.

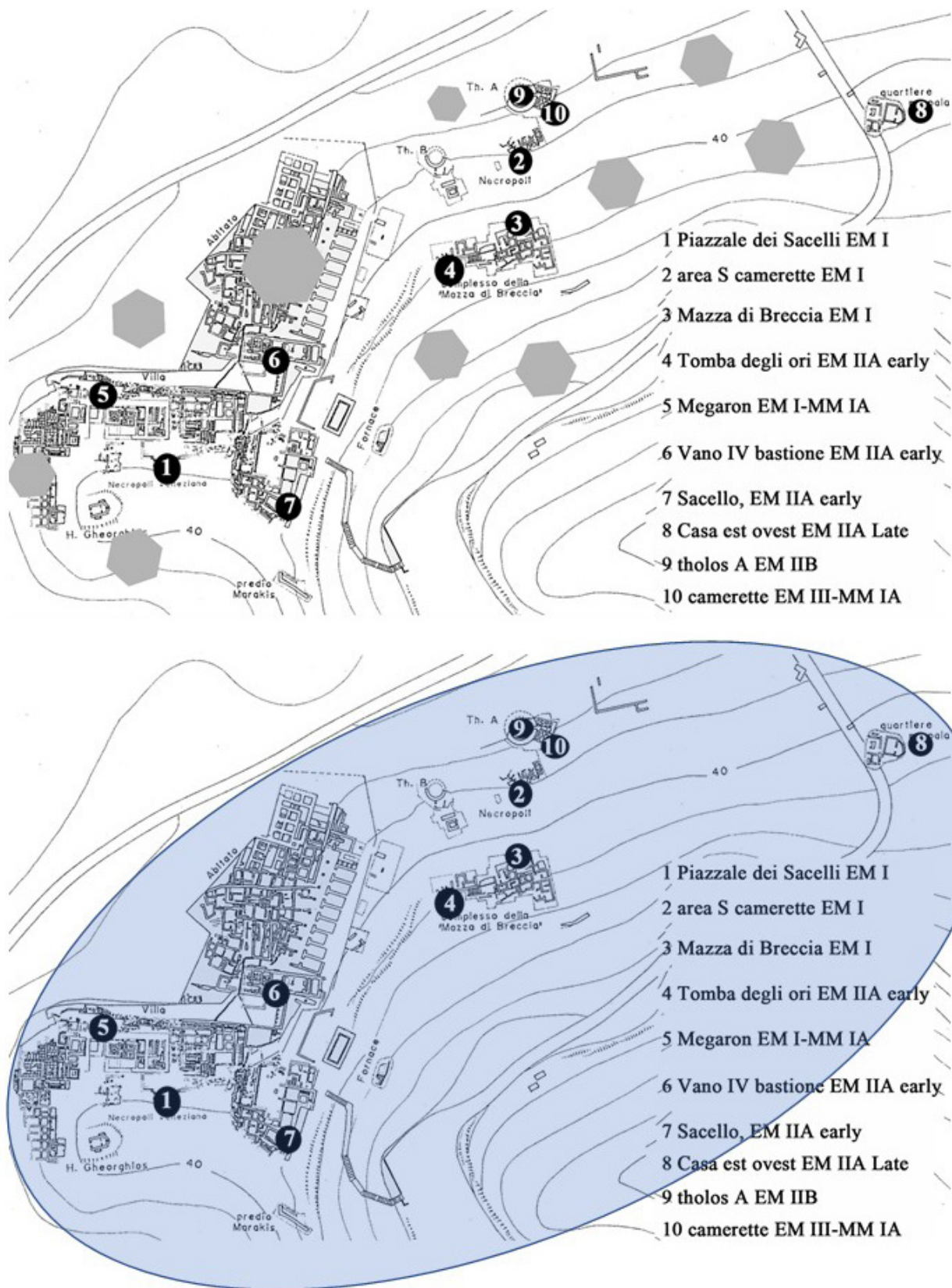


Fig. 6. Ayia Triada, plan showing distribution of EM deposits and structures. A: EM deposits and structures together with negative tests (grey hexagons) showing the patchy, focused nature of EM frequentation across the site; B: Plan showing the mega site that would be created were these negative tests to be overlooked and the EM deposits and structures combined into a macro EM I-II phase and thus represented as all contemporary and domestic in function.

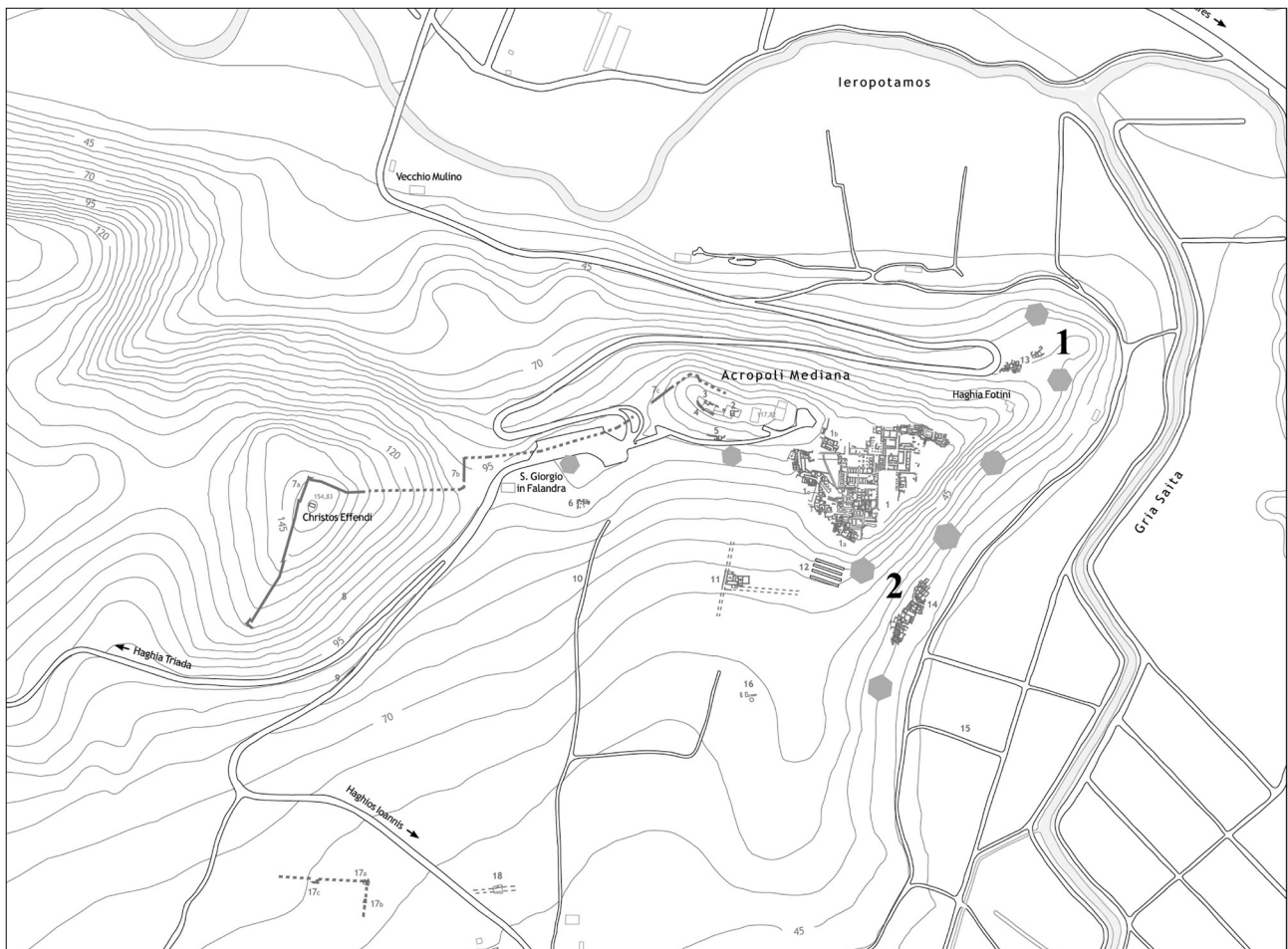


Fig. 7. Phaistos. The Palace Hill showing the location of Ayia Photini (1) and Chalara (2) and the intervening tests where only negative results were found.

no-spatial resolution available to researchers is too coarse, as for example may be the case with surface-only assemblages. Indeed, were its EM assemblages and structures to have only been assignable more broadly to a generalised EM I-II phase, as is often the case with surveyed sites, then Ayia Triada would become a single 20ha site, rather than the composite of multiple small, isolated farmsteads it most closely resembles. One wonders how often situations such as this recur among survey data?

The wider relevance of this observation may be illustrated by considering a second example, the areas of Ayia Photini and Chalara, two multi-phase residential blocks, located on the north-eastern slope and on the south-eastern slope of the palace hill at Phaistos (fig. 7). Previous estimates of site-extent and development that propose a dense, *nucleated/agglutinative structure* have assumed that these blocks form part of a more-or-less continuous contemporary residential area of similar structures. However, while it has been always clear that these blocks, with their cellular like appearance, represent a typical example of agglutinative architecture of early Protopalatial period, what has been overlooked is that the area in between them had actually been extensively tested by Levi with *negative results*, thus demonstrating that these blocks are actually isolated clusters. Moreover, close scrutiny of the phase-plan of the site published by Levi in 1976 reveals that the various rooms within each block or cluster were not considered to have been contemporaneously in use. Instead, each new room that is added to the original plan is in fact a replacement of what went before⁴⁷ and therefore does not document a progressive growth.

These examples illustrate several fundamental areas of weakness in studies of site development that rely solely on surface assemblages for their data, or otherwise do not follow an approach to excavated data that is contextual and informed by a study of formation processes. Both types of study have been widely applied in Minoan archaeology, but can be highly misleading for several reasons⁴⁸. First, because the total site-area, as denoted by higher densities of pottery distribution, is generally treated as residential despite a range of possibilities, some illustrated above, where

⁴⁷ AMATO *et al.* 2014; GHILARDI *et al.* 2018; TODARO 2018a.

⁴⁸ WHITELAW 2012.

significant parts of the total site-area were given over to non-residential activities and structures, communal spaces (e.g. gathering areas or rubbish dumps) or just areas where activities either did not leave a depositional signature or did not occur. Second, because these notional 'residential areas' are typically converted into population estimates by using a 'one density fits all' site multiplier borrowed from elsewhere rather than calculated on the basis of a contextual study of excavated residential structures at the site in question. The importance of the latter can be shown by considering Whitelaw's use of a density multiplier of 400 persons/ha for EM II sites, calculated on the basis of Myrtos Fournou Korifi, a hill-site covering a surface of 900m². While this calculation is a likely approximation of the density of people in space denoted by this *single building complex*, it does not allow for the potential spacing of such complexes, which, as in the case of the Chalara and Ayia Photini complexes, could indeed be rather wide.

These and other examples suggest that individual buildings along the Phaistos ridge tend to be relatively widely spaced, such that a density multiplier of 400/ha dramatically overestimates the overall population density when such building complexes occur in sufficient proximity and within an area that sees extensive re-frequentation over a very long period of time, such as the Phaistos hill. Wide spacing between structures has also been observed at Knossos for later Neolithic buildings⁴⁹, and a similar observation can be made for the few known buildings of EM date from this site (e.g. West Court House, South Front House), which are considerably less densely spaced than would be necessary to support the 400 persons/ha that forms the basis for Whitelaw's estimate of the total population of EM II Knossos.

The lesson to take away from these examples is surely that we need to tread very carefully when assessing the extent of residential areas within archaeological sites and to resist the temptation to join our fragments into larger 'wholes', which, while satisfyingly large and complex and seductively urban-like, may utterly misrepresent an ancient reality. To guard against this we need to not just refer to the test-pits that have provided positive results, in this case, for example, EM pottery or assemblages or structures, but rather we must also plot the position of those test-pits that did not provide a single sherd, so as to prevent other researchers from joining the dots and erroneously assuming that the area in between structures and/or assemblages could have been covered by other structures. In addition, we need to be more open to the existence of different, non-nucleated, low-density models of settlement that are built bottom-up from careful study of instances where settlement data are good, rather than importing and imposing models top-down on settlement data, particularly when these data are 'bad' or 'ugly'.

Site development at Phaistos in context: residential mobility and ritual stability?

The approach followed here in characterising and interpreting the evidence available from Phaistos for the Prepalatial period reveals a detailed picture of activities in space, which in turn offer the possibility of building up a fully contextual and contingent model of settlement. It is clear that different areas of the hill were used for different activities, which were subjected to different **pattern** of deposition and thus created different depositional signatures. Two main areas are denoted: (1) the hilltop, which from the second phase of occupation was periodically used for ritual activity that was performed at a communal level and ended with *in situ* discard of debris comprising animal bone and ritual vessels; and (2) the slopes of the hill, which played host to various types of craft activity performed either inside or outside specific structures, and which were subjected to abandonment followed by horizontal shifting or drifting of the locus of human activity. The two patterns of deposition, one on the hilltop, one on the slopes, have completely different effects on the formation of the archaeological deposit because, while *in situ* rebuilding led to the creation of a tell-like site, horizontal drifting led to the creation of a large, extended site, or pseudo-mega-site, that is much larger in size than it ever was in terms of population. In fact, both patterns of deposition may be understood as resulting from alternating cycles of activity-abandonment-activity and documenting discontinuities that, on the one hand, make sense as the outcome of residential mobility, but, on the other, make it very difficult to assess the size of the site at any one time.

The potentially misleading effect of residential mobility on reconstructions of the social landscape of Prepalatial Crete was long ago recognised by Whitelaw, albeit only for the EM I-II period and for specific ('marginal') landscapes, such as the uplands of the Asterousia and the hilly and rocky region of the Ayiofarango valley⁵⁰. In this intensively surveyed region, the existence of several *occupation sites* for each tomb led researchers such as K. Branigan to argue that each tomb might have served several hamlets or farmsteads⁵¹. Instead in Whitelaw's opinion the fact that these occupation sites were as a rule short-lived indicated that they represented a sequence of specific occupation sites that shifted location through time, but were "tethered to a tomb serving as a territorial focus"⁵². Whitelaw was also

⁴⁹ TOMKINS 2004.

⁵⁰ WHITELAW 2000.

⁵¹ BLACKMAN, BRANIGAN 1977.

⁵² WHITELAW 2000, 151.

one of the first researchers to observe that the tombs themselves, although typically interpreted as belonging to communities that resided stably in the same area for several hundred years, were rarely used for two consecutive ceramic phases. Most had discontinuous sequences of use and this, coupled with the evidence for burning and clearance, could in his opinion suggest that the tombs were in fact used only episodically by different, mobile kin-groups who moved through the region and needed some form of *territorial foci* to legitimate their control over productive resources in their vicinity. According to Whitelaw this situation contrasted with the Mesara plain because this area offered different environmental conditions that allowed larger, more residentially stable communities to develop.

However, in light of this new reading of the settlement evidence from Phaistos and the funerary and domestic data from Ayia Triada, it would seem that this contrast between ‘margins’ and ‘plain’ cannot any longer be sustained. Rather, it would seem that both uplands and lowlands of south-central Crete in the EBA were occupied by small-scale communities (mainly farmsteads and small hamlets) that are characterised by a marked residential mobility. In the hilly region of the Asterousia, this resulted in the occurrence of multiple, isolated farmsteads that, if treated as contemporary, risk dramatically overinflating the size of the regional population⁵³. In the flat and rolling region of the western Mesara this way of life resulted in composite sites of individual residential units that, in the absence of sufficient chrono-spatial resolution risk coming to resemble mega-sites similar to the flat extended settlements attested in northern Greece, in the alluvial plain of Macedonia⁵⁴.

From heartland to margin. Environment and site development at Phaistos reconsidered

Of critical importance to any contextual understanding of an archaeological site is an appreciation of its environmental setting. However, this is particularly important in the case of Phaistos because of the way an orthodoxy about its position as the centre of an area of high agricultural productivity is currently being utterly transformed by ongoing geo-morphological research⁵⁵. According to the results of **these** research, during the IVth and much of the IIIrd millennia BC, the palace hill overlooked a marshy riverine landscape to the south and east created by the delta of the Geropotamos and by its tributaries, the Koutsoulidi and the Gria Saita, which ran along the eastern side of the hill⁵⁶. As a marshy and unstable wetland, this part of the plain was good for herding, especially cattle, but not for permanent settlement and must have appeared to early farming communities to be as marginal to their way of life as the uplands of the Asterousia⁵⁷. From this perspective it becomes easier to understand why the uplands and lowlands in south-central Crete were characterized by the same settlement strategies, based on isolated farmsteads that were abandoned after a short period of use. In both areas, settlements were small and usually occupied for just a single ceramic phase and in fact not even a site like Ayia Triada, which provided deposits and structures dating to every phase of the EM period, can be defined as a *long-lived settlement*. On the contrary, on account of the wide distribution of the various evidence across the site, it appears more as a composite patchwork, i.e. a palimpsest of activities performed by groups who over several hundred years happened to have settled intermittently at the site for some time⁵⁸.

Concluding remarks: factoring function, temporality and mobility in the interpretation of variation in site-size through time

Survey practitioners know only too well that *surface artefact scatters* do not necessarily represent a settlement and, in the absence of corroborating evidence, are better classified as *loci* of human activity that could have a domestic, funerary, ritual or artisanal destination, to cite the functions that are more frequently encountered in the archaeological record⁵⁹. They also know that even when the residential destination of a site is obvious, it is necessary to ascertain not

⁵³ VASILAKIS 1989-89, pp. 48-50; RELAKI 2004.

⁵⁴ PAPPAS, BESIOS 1999a; PAPPAS, BESIOS 1999b.

⁵⁵ The research was in large part conducted in the 80s, as part of N. Fytroulakis' PhD. The results and the implications for Phaistos and Ayia Triada were published in 2005, when the reconstruction proposed by Fytroulakis received further chronological support thanks to the bore-hole of a well excavated in the plain near the church of Ayios Onouphrios; FYTROLAKIS *et al.* 2005, pp. 111-123. New researches were conducted on the plain by a multi-disciplinary team directed by M. Ghilardi; GHILARDI *et al.* 2018.

⁵⁶ AMATO *et al.* 2014; GHILARDI *et al.* 2018.

⁵⁷ New studies on wetland sites of the Neolithic Swifterbant culture, which was spread in the north European plain (between Antwerp in Belgium and Hamburg in Germany) in the Vth millennium BC, suggests that agriculture **can be in fact** practiced at a low risk in a wetland environment but only on a small scale, CAPPERS, RAEMAEKERS 2008. Wetlands, however, are more suitable for cattle herding than for cereal cultivation and this might explain the large concentration of cattle found in the earliest phases of occupation of the Phaistos hill; TODARO, DI TONTO 2008.

⁵⁸ TODARO 2003.

⁵⁹ SCHOFIELD 1991; BINTLIFF 2000.

only its extent, but also its internal structure, whether nucleated or dispersed, before the scale of its resident population can be assessed. The conversion is inevitable and requires density multipliers that are calculated from contemporary excavated settlements on the basis of the average dimensions and minimal number of houses within the settlements.

Archaeologists working at multi-phase sites that developed into palatial sites have proceeded along similar lines, but have generally assumed that buildings represented houses, and pottery associated with animal bones represented domestic refuse. In this way, the desire to avoid projecting later functions into the past has prevented a deeper, closer understanding of the evidence available, which, although often patchy and incomplete, must always be ascertained on its own merits.

In the case of Phaistos a contextual and chronological re-assessment of the available evidence has changed substantially our understanding of the site, impelling a comprehensive rejection of the old orthodoxy, that Phaistos was a settlement that steadily increased in size through the third millennium BC to become an urban centre with a resident population fed by an agricultural surplus generated from a surrounding plain which it controlled. This idea has obscured and prevented a closer, more nuanced understanding of the phases of occupation that preceded the palace, and thus of the dynamics and processes that led to its construction and its function. This traditional narrative became so rooted that it remained unquestioned despite the ever increasing quantity of data that contradicted it, from the lack of evidence for a large, permanently-resident population at Phaistos to the replacement of an imagined agricultural heartland by a reality of wetland landscapes and marine embayments, or, at a more mundane level, the suggestive scarcity of the wells or cisterns, sickles and querns, all along the Phaistos ridge that would have been essential if it really had played host to **any** expanding farming community. As a result, very few scholars have raised issues regarding the real nature of the frequentation of the hill or paid specific attention to **the** distinctive patterns of deposition or to tracing the actual processes that led to the formation of the site.

The results of the study carried out by the present author on Prepalatial Phaistos have clarified that the construction of the First Palace represented the acme of a process of **continue** monumentalization of a place that was always characterised by the presence of large open areas where people from the wider region periodically gathered on the hill⁶⁰. The contextual re-assessment of the Prepalatial evidence, which consists mainly of assemblages of pottery and animal bones representing the debris of large-scale episodes of consumption of food and drink or dumps from unsuccessful kiln-loads relating to production cycles held at a communal level, has demonstrated that the palace hill from its very first phases of occupation functioned as a regional ceremonial centre for the population of a wider region. It was, in other words, the necessary focal and reference point for a regional population living across the western Mesara in isolated farmsteads, moving between the uplands and the marshy wetland, but periodically gathering on the hill to participate in communal activities and thereby in the construction of a communal identity, expressed *inter alia* in a particular way of **doing** pottery⁶¹. In this sense it is not correct to state that Phaistos emerged as a regional centre: Phaistos and the communal activities performed **of** the hill allowed the settling of an active landscape that could only be inhabited by small and mobile groups who lived **dispersed** '*kata komas*', rather than nucleated in a single urban centre.

Only on a few specific occasions - namely in EM III and MM II - did the frequentation of the Phaistos hills change from *visitation* to more permanent *occupation* through habitation, as revealed by the appearance of new clusters of buildings on the edge of the site (at Christos Effendi). In the case of EM III, however, this was an occupation that lasted for not more than a phase of occupation (Phaistos VIII), and was therefore limited in duration, probably 50-70 years, during which the palace hill was modified through terracing and cutting, and the marshy area of the Gria Saita river was reclaimed through the creation of an artificial lake⁶². Before the end of the EM III period, however, and certainly by the beginning of MM I, the locations on the edge of the Phaistos hills were abandoned, and activity resumed at Ayia Triada, Patrikies and Kommos.

In the second instance - in MM II - the nucleation of the regional population seems to have assumed a more stable form, which translated into the appearance of clusters of buildings situated at a minimal distance of 700m from each other. But in no way at all does even this settlement resemble the large extent of houses hosting a population of ca. 10.000 individuals that has been claimed by Whitelaw⁶³. Indeed, such large agglomerations simply did not exist in the Mesara, not even in the Roman period. Rather MM II Phaistos is a large extended settlement, with a very sparse structure, that did not survive the destruction of the palace in MM IIB.

The evidence from Phaistos therefore means that we have to conclude that in the Mesara it is not the palatial phenomenon that was triggered by urbanism, but vice versa, with the presence of the palace serving at certain times to

⁶⁰ TODARO 2013.

⁶¹ TODARO 2011; TODARO 2012; TODARO 2017.

⁶² TODARO forthcoming.

⁶³ WHITELAW 2012; WHITELAW 2016; WHITELAW 2018.

trigger more stable forms of occupation. Even in MM IIB, as study of the archive of sealings dating to the last moment of the life of the first palace has shown, it is clear that the hill continued to operate for a large, non-resident population who stored part of its agricultural surplus in the storerooms of the palace, while continuing to reside in the countryside. Looking forward, it is only in the late Hellenistic period that the hilltop was provided with cisterns and wells and permanently occupied, when the border of the Phaistos polity coincided with the area of the Phaistos ridge, which was surrounded by fortification walls. However, this settlement was destined to be destroyed by Gortyn in 150 BC, thus preventing us from assessing whether it was at all possible to embrace an urban way of life in this region.

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