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BOOK REVIEW

Aphrodite's Kephali: An Early Minoan I Defensive Site in Eastern Crete

By Philip P. Betancourt (Prehistory Monographs 41). Pp. xxii + 247. INSTAP Academic Press, Philadelphia 2013. $70. ISBN 978-1-931534-71-0 (cloth).

Reviewed by Peter Tomkins

One of the great contributions archaeological survey has made to our understanding of prehistoric Crete has been the diverse picture of activity it has revealed on the margins of the main (lowland) agricultural zones. However, while we now know much more about when and where on the margins people were active, all too frequently we lack the excavated assemblages that would allow more secure insights into how such groups actually lived, subsisted, and interacted. This volume, which presents the results of an excavation at **Aphroditis[[use "Aphrodite's Kephali" throughout?]]** Kephali, a small, elevated Early Minoan (EM) I site overlooking the southern agricultural lands of the Isthmus of Ierapetra, takes an important step toward correcting this imbalance and makes an extremely valuable contribution to our understanding of settlement and society in this region at the turn of the third millennium B.C.E.

The volume begins with a series of chapters on geography (Betancourt), geology (McCoy), and early settlement in the region (Betancourt, Chalikias) that set the scene for the presentation of the site. Betancourt's discussion of the EM I architecture makes a crucial contribution to the very small corpus of information on this subject, while his study of the pottery, combined with the ceramic petrographic work of Nodarou and Dierckx's study of the lithics, draws considerable value from small, highly fragmented assemblages. A very welcome development in the pottery chapter is the decision to structure the presentation of wares and typology by petrographic fabric groups. This facilitates a clear presentation of the relationships between composition, provenance, technology, forms, and surface treatment, which means that the publication will continue to remain relevant and useful as our understanding evolves in the future. The absence of accompanying photographs of the sherd material is an unfortunate oversight, as these would have provided a means of controlling and clarifying the ambiguities in the pottery drawings that arise with very fragmented assemblages of handmade pottery. It would also have been useful to include a discussion of the ways in which vessels were formed. The gas chromatography study by Koh and Betancourt of selected ceramic samples is notable for the recognition of red wine residues in cups and small jars, and more faintly in the well-preserved early pithoi for which the site has already become known, together with olive oil traces in small jars.

One area requiring particular comment is chronology. The most reliable latest Final Neolithic (FN)–EM I sequence in southern Crete is that of Phaistos, as presented by Todaro (**"EM I–MM IA Ceramic Groups at Phaistos: Towards the Definition of a Prepalatial Ceramic Sequence in South Central Crete,"[[article title added, please confirm.]]***CretAnt* 6 [2005] 11–46). The Aphroditis Kephali pottery finds close parallels with Phaistos IV, a correlation that supports and affirms the other synchronisms noted by the pottery study. However, this correlation with Phaistos also indicates that the Aphroditis Kephali pottery does not, as suggested in the volume, belong to or define the beginning of EM I in Crete. This instead is defined by Phaistos III, the pottery of which is morphologically and technologically intermediate between the final

phase of the Neolithic (Phaistos II) and "mature" EM I as represented at Aphroditis Kephali. Therefore the decision to use the label EM IA to refer to the Aphroditis Kephali assemblage, although well intentioned, may ultimately cause confusion once the Phaistos III phase of EM I is better defined at other sites. The chronological resolution now available for the late FN and EM I also sheds a more searching light on Betancourt's thesis of a sudden "ceramics revolution" during the phase of EM I represented at Aphroditis Kephali (131–49). Rather than a single revolutionary horizon of change, the ceramic data suggest a longer and more diverse period of technological innovation, heterogeneity, and change, beginning already in the later Neolithic and running on into EM II.

The environmental sample recovered from the excavation is perhaps its most significant outcome, given the general scarcity of hard evidence for subsistence and consumption practices at marginal sites. A striking feature of the site is the absence of any of the animal and plant domesticates that form the main staples of Neolithic and Bronze Age diets. This surprising lacuna is handled in different ways by different specialists. While Reese and Betancourt prefer to see the absence of domesticated animal bone as a reliable pattern indicating a special function site dependent on a larger settlement in the vicinity, Margaritis, in her study of the archaeobotanical sample, sensibly admits the possibility that taphonomic processes could have affected preservation and representation in the recovered sample. Only consumption of food that could be eaten raw or with little preparation (e.g., fruit, nuts, olives, wine) is represented, which, if not a function of preservation biases, would support the hypothesis that this was not a straightforward domestic habitation site.

In his discussion and final assessment, Betancourt argues—on the basis of its small size, strategic, elevated position, possible perimeter wall, and evidence for bulk storage in pithoi—that it was an early defensive site (117–29, 131–49). Pointing to the evidence elsewhere for increased insecurity in East Crete during EM I (e.g., preference for elevated locations, construction of perimeter walls), he suggests it operated as a "tiny fort," dependent on the larger nearby settlement of Vainia Stavromenos and controlling the routes and resources of the southern isthmus from a southern threat. While the evidence for a concern with security is suggestive, the decision to frame the discussion in explicitly military terms (e.g., "fort," "fortification systems") strikes a discordant note and encourages the reader to infer a degree of centralized control that is not (yet) convincingly evidenced for this period in the isthmus. The comparison of Aphroditis Kephali with early fortifications in the Aegean instead has the effect of underlining the substantive differences in form and scale, while the notion of a specific southern threat is undermined by the fact that a substantial proportion of the pottery **consumed[[found?]]** at Aphroditis Kephali exhibits styles and fabrics of likely south coast provenance. Broadly comparable Early Bronze I curvilinear, multiroom complexes in elevated locations are known from other sites in East Crete (e.g., Kephala Petras, Messorachi) and the Dodecanese (e.g., Nisyros), suggesting that such sites may have been a more widespread cultural form at this time, with functions answering to a variety of needs.

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