

## **The wild country east of Dikte: Contextualizing Minoan Petras<sup>1</sup>.**

More than 15 years ago, I was fortunate enough to fly a kite over Petras and take aerial photographs of the newly discovered palace and surrounding settlement and it gives me great pleasure on this occasion of the official book launch of 25 years of Petras to pay tribute to the site and its excavator, Dr. Metaxia Tsipopoulou and the members of her team.

For anybody travelling east from the Isthmus of Hierapetra, the *wall* formed by the Thryphti mountains would indeed have appeared impenetrable, the start of a different world – the wild country east of Dikté... In my paper, I want to return first briefly to the exploration of the **Far East**, as I will call the region east of the Sitia valley, and then attempt to put Petras in perspective – at least where its Minoan history is concerned.

If one browses the accounts of the first travelers, one cannot escape the impression that they left this part of the island aside – haunted as it was, by corsairs and pirates, till well into the 19<sup>th</sup> c. Or that if they did visit it, it did not receive much mention in their writings, as was the case with Robert Pashley, who, accompanied by a Spanish engraver, Antonio Schranz from Malta, spent seven months on the island in 1834. His map shows he must have passed Sitia and Petras on his way to Eremoupolis/Itanos and Toplou but no mention is made in his published notes. For Captain Spratt, publishing in 1865, it was already obvious, however, that Petras was important, and he even wondered whether the ‘remains of Cyclopean walls and terraces’ were not those of ‘the capital of the district; probably it was the capital of Eteo-Crete’ (I, 161-162). When Luigi Mariani passed the site 20 years later, he too noted “*gli avanzi di costruzioni poligonalì molto grandiose nel borgo che occupa una piccolo elevazione presso il mare*”. Evans spent most of the 1890s travelling through Crete and the Far East of the island was much his favorite. During his very first trip, in 1894, he approached the area from the south coast, first travelling to Ziros, Epano Zakros and Palaikastro before heading for Toplou and hence to Sitia. From there, he tells us on April 12<sup>th</sup>, ‘*I rode out to Petra where on the side of a limestone hill are*

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Metaxia Tsipopoulou for the invitation and to Tim Cunningham for criticism; Maud Devolder’s recent BCH paper on Neopalatial burial customs was influential as to the hypothesis expressed here on the relation between monumental tomb construction and palace establishment.

*remains of early walls, rude horizontal style. This is probably the site of Eteia but the walls seem prehellenic*'. Over the next years he frequently returned to East Crete but apparently stayed away from the Sitia-Petras area and most of his attention went to the *Frouria*, the guardhouses that remain one of the most bizarre elements in the East Cretan countryside. For Evans too, East Crete was already the land of Eteocretans but mostly because of the frequency of sealstones with Cretan Hieroglyphic signs which he obtained from the area. The discovery of an archive written in the same script at Petras a 100 years later is, in this regard, especially intriguing. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> c. onwards, the Far Eastern sites – especially Zakros, Palaikastro and Praisos – were explored systematically by members of the British School, and here the names of Hogarth, Bosanquet, Dawkins and others linger. Before starting at Palaikastro even, Bosanquet states that he “*made trials at Petras on June 17th and 18th, 1901, employing ten men the first day and sixteen the second*”. His informants told him that “*two Moslem brothers bought and reclaimed it, setting a large force of laborers to demolish the ancient masonry and to form the hill-sides into cultivation-terraces*” which explained the state of the remains. Still, he identified several important structures and ceramic deposits on the hill, at least two potential towers and a fine staircase, more than 1.50 wide with a basalt-like threshold. A “*clay 'label' 9 cm. in diameter with three parallel strokes incised near the perforation at the top*” was also found – this sounding suspiciously like the discovery of a Cretan-Hieroglyphic fragment. Evans had found the Hieroglyphic deposit in the palace at Knossos the year before, but Bosanquet seems not to have realised the importance of this discovery. Work continued at Praisos, Kouphonissi, Zakros and Palaikastro for a while and the MM IA oval house at Chamaizi was excavated by Xanthoudes in 1903 but little happened in the Far East for the next 50 years. After the second War, the French School explored Eremoupolis/Itanos and Vai but it is especially in the late fifties and sixties that Nikolaos Platon and from the late sixties and early seventies onwards that Kostis Davaras excavated a large number of sites in the Far East, turning it into the most intensively explored region of Crete. Platon excavated a good number of countryhouses and the palace at Zakros whereas Davaras concentrated especially on the peak sanctuaries and the Agia Photia cemetery. The creation of archaeological museums, first at Ayios Nikolaos in 1970, and then at Sitia in 1984 allowed finds to remain in the area. Then we reach the 80s when another major wave of

explorations began: starting with the excavations at Agia Photia-Kouphota, where she excavated a MM IA building in 1984 and continued with an intensive survey, Metaxia has been involved in the Petras area for more than 30 years, beginning excavations at Petras in 1985 and a survey there the following year. As a member of the Palaikastro team I visited the site at many occasions and it is with pleasure that I recall these visits. Every attempt to retrace the Minoan history of the Far East of the island, putting Petras in context, is necessarily incomplete and biased since, given the time, it would need to include the results of the joined French-Greek-Italian-Belgian mission at Itanos and especially that of their survey, that of the Minoan road's team, especially by Chrysoulaki and Vokotopoulos at many different places including Karoumes and Choiromandres, Sofianou and Papadatos' work at Papadiokampos and Livari, but also N. Schlager's work in the SE corner, K. Branigan in the Ziros area, J. Whitley and Sofianou at and around Praisos, and Nowicki's explorations of the mountains. I simply concentrate on the parallel history of the three main sites, relying heavily on Metaxia's work at Agia Photia and Petras, MacGillivray, Sackett, Cunningham and Knappett's work at Palaikastro as well as that by father and son Platon at Zakros.

The three sites have of course in common that they are all three located on the coast, have relatively good harbours (which may have been better in the Bronze Age for Palaikastro and Zakros than now) and a fertile hinterland.

We still remain largely ignorant of what happened during the long Neolithic period, let alone the earlier phases. Still, geomorphological conditions favorable to human presence that exist in West Crete also exist in the Far East so we shouldn't exclude the possibility of finding Paleolithic and Mesolithic traces in the future – and the Pelekita cave remains an excellent candidate! What is perhaps a bit strange is that, despite the proximity of, and visual connections with, the Dodecanese and hence Anatolia, the Far East of the island seems at present not to have been occupied before the end of the Final Neolithic (IV). If the first Knossian colonists came from Anatolia, one would assume that they first landed in the Far East but thus far there is nothing to go on apart from the presence of some metamorphosed igneous examples that are typical for the Sitia area which were identified by Tom Strasser among the pre-Final Neolithic levels at Knossos, suggesting hence a, for the moment, hidden Neolithic occupation in the Far East. By

the end of the Late and certainly during the Final Neolithic, however, a large number of sites have been identified, both on the coast and on the Platyvola – the highlands, where pockets of agricultural land attracted colonists. The origin of these settlers remains disputed, some assuming overpopulation at Knossos, others the arrival of people from outside the island. Until recently, only a single open-air Neolithic site, Magasa, had been excavated and this very early in the history of Minoan archaeology. It is now dated to the Late Neolithic. The sheer number of axes (36) and bone awls (260) at Magasa makes me wonder whether this wasn't a special function site, partly too because its architecture doesn't really correspond with contemporary evidence elsewhere. At Zakros, there seems to be Neolithic evidence in some nearby caves such as Pelekita and Mavro Avlaki but thus far not in the palace site itself and the same seems true for Palaikastro. And here already explorations at Petras have shown their importance with the discovery on the Kefala of settlement remains, admirably excavated and largely already published by Yiannis Papadatos. The site is almost unique in showing two architectural phases that belong to two ceramic horizons – termed FN IV and EM IA, allowing a much better understanding of the Cretan transition to the Bronze Age in general and that of East Crete in particular. Petras Kefala seems to be a local EM IA culture, in contrast with the Cycladic connection evidenced during the next phase, EM IB, by the Kampos material found in the nearby rock shelter and perhaps also by the earliest material at Kouphota - Aghia Photia as well as in the 263 excavated tombs at Agia Photia which date to the mature EM I and EM IIA phase. Here, 95% of the pottery can be associated with the Kampos group and much of the rest of the material culture, including the grave types, metal and obsidian have more in common with the Cyclades than with local Cretan culture.

One may notice a more or less parallel development in the three main centers of the Far East during the Prepalatial period since the earliest settlements seem not, on present evidence, to be located at the spot where the main later developments would take place. This is especially obvious for Petras with the location of the settlement and house tombs cemetery on the Kephala, probably belonging to a settlement which only moved to the palace hill in EM II. But also at Palaikastro, the only secure EM I evidence seems to be either from outlying settlements (Aghios Nikolaos church) or from on top of Kastri, and at Zakros there is only funerary evidence

associated with incised, grey and burnished wares from caves in the Gorge of the Dead as near Tis Ouranias to Froudi and Spiliara where a Pyrgos-style footed cup was found. As such, EM IIA seems to represent a period of change in the Far East of the island and a moment of coalescence when perhaps several dispersed communities decided to form larger communities. This is when the palace hill at Petras seems first to have been settled and this seems also, both at Palaikastro and Zakros, the moment when major changes can be observed. At Palaikastro, traces of EM IIA occupation already occur at a few places in Roussolakkos as well as on Kastri and the earliest house tombs are also being built. The first traces of monumental architecture, represented by a major structure beneath Block Chi, appear in EM IIB when also traces of occupation are found beneath Blocks Delta, Building 3 and 7, and with more house tombs, especially at Ta Ellenika. At Zakros, Platon, found Vasiliki ware as well as a chlorite pyxis with a handle shaped as a reclining dog, identical to one found at Mochlos and surely by the same craftsman. This evidence possibly suggests a thriving community, certainly by EM IIB although architectural evidence for this is scarce. By EM III, however, there is at Zakros itself, good evidence, especially beneath room 32 of the palace, represented by East Cretan White-on-Dark ware, as well as some MM IA early light-on-dark polychrome style. Some isolated finds here and there also suggest to Lefteris Platon that much of the site was occupied by then. Likewise at Petras, there is more substantial architecture dating to EM III in Sector I and III of the palace hill but the evidence is better for the EM III/MM IA phase to which phase also belong one or more buildings in the same area. The dozen house tombs at Kephala Petras seem, according to published evidence, to start in EM III, although earlier remains dating to EM IIB are mentioned. This may suggest that whereas the habitation site shifted, the funerary site remained at one of the traditional spots and the same can be observed at Palaikastro and Zakros. For MM IA, the Kouphota Building at Agia Photia also needs mention. Its fortification betrays a continuation of Cycladic influences on the North coast but the rest of its material culture does not; come to think of it, its plan looks suspiciously similar to the somewhat later building in Block M at Palaikastro, to which I will return. MM IB is a special moment at Petras because of the Lakkos deposit so admirably studied and published by Donald Haggis. This 100m<sup>3</sup> pit covered the earlier EM III/MM IA Prepalatial building and within the masses of deposited local pottery displayed a

stylistic diversity which could well reflect the participation of different social groups in contexts of communal consumption – groups expressing their identity in a very visible way, almost emblematically. This makes me wonder, of course, whether specific interaction zones – open-air gathering zones, or public courts – already existed at the site before the palace was constructed in MM IIA, especially since similar practices of communal rituals involving feasting can also be shown to have taken place during precisely the same period at Knossos and Phaistos. These contributing groups may have been those of which we also find traces in the cemetery. House Tombs are, as is well-known, especially an East Cretan feature, attested in particular from Malia onwards. In the Far East, they are only known, at present, from the three major sites: Petras, Palaikastro and Zakros which is interesting. Since, on present evidence, the Petras cemetery (including the rock shelter) was given up in MM IIA around the time that the palace was constructed, we cannot help but connect the two phenomena and wonder whether intergroup competition, which earlier was channeled into tomb construction, was now put into palace construction. If this is acceptable, we may perhaps assume the same for Palaikastro and Zakros since at both sites, cemetery evidence stops at MM IB or MM IIA at the very latest. So should we assume that palaces are also built at these sites at more or less the same time? This is tempting but at the moment entirely hypothetical: At Zakros, this is phase III (MM II) and Nikolaos Platon mentions finding late Prepalatial remains (with spiral and other curvilinear patterns on a dark ground) beneath the northwest part of the palace, the West Court and the South approach and Protopalatial remains beneath the palace Shrine and the East Wing but major buildings already existed to the east of the palace and some houses were also thought to have been built then, remaining in use afterwards. But very little of this material has been published and Lefteris Platon has always argued that the Zakros palace was a late (LM IB) Knossian foundation. The question remains as to the date of the earlier phase of the Central Court – a brilliant white plaster floor found in a test, not unlike that at Petras in LM IA. In Palaikastro, Knappett and Cunningham (2012) recently discussed the important fill deposits especially in Block M, assumed to reflect a major construction activity early in MM IIB following a destructive event. The quality and diversity of this material may suggest the presence of one or more MM IIA monumental structures. But Block M itself was only constructed in MM IIB – it

is thus contemporary to the destruction phase of the palace building at Petras. Block M continued to be used in MM IIIA, with some modifications and it may be well be that it was at this moment that some specific palatial architectural features were introduced: frescoes, a mosaiko paving in schist, a stone paved propylon and stoa, a polythuron with gamma and tau shaped serpentinite doorjamb bases, a court with limestone column bases and even perhaps a lustral basin. The court of this building is 10.40 m east-west by 7.4 m north-south, with a stoa around its sides of up to 2.60 m deep. Although central, and of similar size, this court does not compare well with that of the Palace of Petras (6 by 13 m) which is oriented north-northwest and shows two very important features totally lacking in the Block M southeast building, namely storage magazines and archives, though both did have many handleless cups. Some of the architectural features that concentrate in MM III – as they do in some other Central Cretan sites such as Kommos, Galatas etc. – are seen as betraying a direct Knossian involvement in the running of affairs, sometimes bypassing other sites. Question is of course: did Block M serve some of the same functions as the palace at Petras? With neither storage nor archives it certainly could not be considered a 'palace', and in contrast to Petras, there is no major MM IIB destruction such as was responsible for the deposition of the remarkable Cretan-Hieroglyphic archives at the latter site, found with a large collection of cups and bowls – a potential feasting deposit. But even at MM II Petras, one notices a more standardized and stylistically simpler pottery, contrasting with the originality of the earlier Prepalatial material, and again this seems something in common both then and afterwards between the three Far Eastern sites. Another common characteristic is the visual connection and intervisibility between Peak Sanctuaries and settlements in the Far East: this interconnectedness is almost like a telephone line connecting Petras over Prinias and Modi with Petsofa and Palaikastro and hence on to Traoastalos. The heydays of these peak sanctuaries is also MM I-II, however, and we may wonder if these don't reflect a similar phenomenon as we noted for the funerary structures: once the elite groups found another arena for gathering, devotion and competition, the other means are gradually abandoned. MM III – a phase prominent at Palaikastro – seems for the moment difficult to identify both at Petras and at Zakros. In contrast, LM IA seems to be the *moment de gloire* of Petras palace and settlement whereas the evidence of Block M may suggest some decline at

Palaikastro and it may be that only after the Santorini eruption (for which there is good evidence at Palaikastro but not yet in the other sites), Palaikastro and Zakros flourished again. By LM IB, however, the Petras palace seems to be having problems and it is very likely that it was destroyed early in this period – perhaps at a same moment if not even earlier than the first LM IB destruction at Palaikastro. At Zakros, the material from the Zakros Pits and the Protopalatial Building are now mainly dated to LM IA by Lefteris Platon, making the Zakros palace entirely LM IB. Is it possible that Zakros palace took over once Petras palace had dropped out? One of the implications of this hypothesis would be that Petras was indeed the only palatial centre in the area during the entire period up till the construction of Zakros palace in mature LM IB. Such an explanation fits in the hierarchical, top-down approach that some prefer. If palaces are in fact in the first place community centers where rituals were performed that served the integration and cohesion of the specific groups or the entire settlement and in which, in a more collegial or corporate way, produce was collected and redistributed on occasion of feasts, as I would like to see them, then we are perhaps allowed to assume that they existed in each and every settlement and that their size and elaboration depends largely on the size and success of the respective settlement. In this view, the central court is the most important element and this can exist and be used without the buildings around it being fully operational. In general, we notice that the three sites share the ogival cup although it is clearly more present at PK than elsewhere which may reflect a difference in destruction date. But the three sites suffered heavily from fire destruction in LM IB.

Reoccupation seems to have started early, in LM II, both at PK and Zakros, and only late in LM IIIA1 at Petras. Palaikastro seems, in contrast to Petras and Zakros, to have been especially successful and powerful during LM IIIA2, with plenty of evidence for new construction and rich tombs. Moreover, PK pottery seems to be exported to other parts of the island and seems to form a large part of the pottery preserved at Petras which during this phase may have ceded importance to another centre in the area to which the Achladia Platyskinos tholos belongs. The three sites seem to flourish till another destruction, late in LM IIIA2 or early in IIIB, but in contrast to Petras and Zakros, Palaikastro was sporadically reoccupied afterwards, at a very small scale, up till the end of LM IIIB before the site was also abandoned and only the top of

Kastri was remained settled in LM IIIC. To this we can now add the new evidence at Kefala Petras. In both cases, more defensible positions seem to have been sought with better and more commanding views. In both cases too, the presence of earlier remains may have carried a special significance for the establishment of the new settlement. At Petras Kephala the houses are likewise badly preserved but there seems to have been a 8 by 5 megaroid structure with three internal column bases, within a peribolos, in the north part of the old cemetery.

Time to conclude. The Far East of the island was and remains something of a mystery – undoubtedly because Homer, Herodotos and some more obscure writers saw it as the land of the Eteocretans – the true Cretans – a trademark of which even the Sphakiotes would have been jealous, but even during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it seems to have been a ‘different’ place, as Chalikiopoulos 1903 book on *Sitia –Die Osthbinsel Kretas* seems to suggest. For those who have worked there, it is a beautiful region, wild, windswept and barely touched by mass tourism, with people that still preserve a sense of xeneia, kefi and humour that distinguish them from the rest of the islanders. In my paper, I have highlighted some of the parallels and differences between the three major sites. The idiosyncratic character of the region, then and now, asks probably for an idiosyncratic interpretation of its different settlements. Somehow I think Metaxia is really offering us the possibility to do just that with Petras.