



The Patela and the area of Priniàs in the Hellenistic Period

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Introduction

The Early Iron Age city on the Patela of Priniàs was abandoned between 600 and 550 BC. More than three centuries later, roughly between 220 and 150 B.C., a 41 m square fortress with square towers at the corners was superimposed on the remains of the ancient settlement. It has recently been ascertained that the fortress was not isolated in the territory, but was the core of an articulated defence system. The assumptions that led to the creation of a network of outposts at the watershed of central Crete had to cease by the 2nd century B.C., when the fortress was definitively abandoned and, most likely, was rendered useless by demolishing its southern side.

The Patela

The excavations of recent years have made it possible to date the fortress and outline part of the structures within it. On the W side, a building with a tripartite plan (7.35 x 15.10 m) was identified, connected to other structures, the one and the others still to be explored further. The rainwater supply system came to light at the southwest corner of the wall. In addition, as indicated by some Hellenistic funerary epigraphs and numerous fragments of large clay containers engraved with the name of Athena in the genitive (AΘANAIAC) datable to the 2nd century B.C., there must have been a burial area and a place of worship. However, as these findings were found in a secondary context, it is impossible to ascertain the exact location of the tombs and the sacred area. As a mere working hypothesis, one might think that the site of Athena's cult was the aforementioned tripartite building, with a plan similar to that of the Archaic buildings.

The Territory

In the territory, a mighty wall barring the pass between the Patela and the nearby Vervelida hill was excavated in the last century. Two other sites with a defensive role were identified through field surveys. One of these, meaningfully named Petrokastelo, lies at the top

of a chain of hills about 3 km to the SW of the fortress as the crow flies. It consists of a barren, naturally fortified rocky outcrop, on top of which the remains of walls emerge. The few fragments found on the surface date to the Hellenistic Period and are partly coeval with the fortress on Patela. The site, towards the N, is only visually connected to the latter. A mountain ridge indeed hides from view the road connecting the N coast of the island and the western part of the Patela. Towards the S, however, the view extends over the whole of Messara as far as the Libyan Sea. It seems therefore that the outpost had the role of guarding and countering possible threats from the S, i.e. from Gortina. In support of this hypothesis, it should be noted that towards the S it dominated the only connecting road between Knossos and Gortina and the area of Panassos, where, on the basis of the discovery of a dedication to the Curetes from the 2nd century B.C., the existence of a frontier sanctuary in Gortinio territory has been hypothesised. On the opposite side of the valley, towards the west, at the highest point of the hill called Aghiothomianì Patela (Patela of Aghios Thomas), the remains of a phrourion were identified. It consists of a rectangular enclosure measuring approximately 22 x 10 m oriented EW with a square tower, 5.50 m in side, at its NW corner. The latter, in terms of shape, size, and the interlocking system at the edge of the enclosure is the same as those of the fortress on the Patela of Priniàs. Furthermore, the largest side and wall thickness (approximately 22 x 1.10 m) of the enclosure is proportionally half as large as that of the fortress on the overlooking Prinianì Patela (41 x 2.50 m). These constructional similarities allow us to assume that the two forts coexisted and that, together with Petrokastelo and the wall that barred the pass between the Patela and the neighbouring Vervelida hill, they formed a pincer defence system dominating the ancient road from Gortina.

Concluding remarks

It is evident that in the Hellenistic period the Prinias district assumed the role of territorial garrison of a border area between the expanding area of Knossos and that of Gortina. For the time being, the archaeological evidence is insufficient to assert exactly when the fortress and the related territorial defence system were created and in relation to which precise historical moment: many warlike events occurred, in fact, in the long span of time between 220 and 150 B.C. It is evident, however, that the entire defence network was designed to prevent a potential threat from Gortina and that the fortress on the Patela of Prinias, contrary to what had been assumed in the past, cannot be attributed to the latter city. In the first half of the 2nd century B.C., as evidenced by two well-known and debated inscriptions (ICr IV, 254-262, nos. 181-182), there was no shortage of boundary line shifts between the territories of Gortina and

Knossos and skirmishes between the two cities. This climate ceased with the arrival of the Romans on the island, when Knossos came off worst. After more than a century, in 63 A.D., in fact, a mutilated inscription from Priniàs (ICr I, 302, no. 29) testifies with certainty that the ancient border area was now part of the 'praedia publica Gortuniorum'.

Picture captions

Petrokastelo, from the south

Plan of the fortress on the Patela of Priniàs in light of the latest excavations

North side of the phourion on the Aghiosthomiani Patela