



Priniás Excavations and Research

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The site and the mission

Situated in the centre of the island of Crete, on the eastern slopes of the Ida or Psiloritis mountain range, the anonymous ancient settlement known in archaeological literature by the name of the nearby modern village of Priniàs stretches across a plateau at an altitude of 690 m above sea level. The plateau, roughly triangular in shape, extends at its south-eastern apex into a rocky outcrop on which stands the modern church dedicated to Agios Panteleimon. The site, naturally defended, was placed in a strategic position controlling the access route from the north to the south coast of the island. Inhabited permanently since the end of the Bronze Age, it was abandoned at the beginning of the 6th century B.C., only to be reoccupied again at the end of the 3rd century B.C. with a fortress erected on the southern slope and pertaining to the defensive system of Knossos.

The site was identified for the first time by the Italian archaeologist Federico Halbherr at the end of the 19th century, although the first archaeological explorations only started during the early 1900s. These, conducted by Luigi Pernier and Enrico Stefani, took place from 1906 to 1908 and had as a more significant result the discovery of the building known as Temple A and the nucleus of sculptures attributed to it. The systematic exploration of the site began with the creation of the Italian Archaeological Mission of Priniàs founded by Giovanni Rizza in 1969 and directed by him until 2005. From 2006 to 2020 the director of the Mission was Dario Palermo. From 2021 the direction has passed to Antonella Pautasso.

The first stable occupation between TM IIIC and Protogeometric Period (12th - 9th century B.C.)

Although there are sporadic traces of an earlier frequentation, dating back to the mid-Bronze Age, the stable occupation of Patela dates back to the Late Minoan IIIC, as attested by the discovery of pottery of this date in the oldest levels of the settlement. Fragments of statues of goddesses with raised arms (GUA) and of tubular stands, as well as various objects that may

be part of ritual equipment, come from various sectors of the settlement as well as from recent excavations in the area of the Hellenistic fortress, together with similar material found on the eastern slope pertaining to a place of worship from this period. Up to now, no structures have been brought to light that can be dated with certainty to this older phase.

Little evidence in relation to the structures still seems to be the protogeometric phase (11th-9th century B.C.), although thanks to more recent excavations and the revision of documentation from older excavations, a more articulate picture of this interesting period is beginning to emerge in the necropolis.

The development of the settlement and formation of the city (7th - 6th century B.C.)

The excavations carried out on Patela have revealed a large and important sector of the settlement, although a substantial part of it, probably comprising the so-called central area (nos. 1-4 in the plan) and the Hellenistic fortress (no. 6 in the plan), still needs to be excavated.

The settlement layout brought to light during the excavations dates to the early 8th century B.C. in its first phase. During that period, around a central space (indicated as square TZ, no. 1 in the plan), there is a large sector of the settlement to the east with a residential function (no. 2 in the plan) and another area to the west, characterised by large buildings with a residential/communal and public function, among which the large monumental building VA-VD (no. 3 in the plan), built at the end of the 8th century BC, stands out. During the 7th century, the settlement extends and new blocks occupy the slopes of the plateau; among these, the most relevant is certainly the central block on the southern slope (no. 5 in the plan) to which, in the late 7th century B.C., a large building (building C) with a community function is added. The end of the 7th century B.C. is in fact a moment of expansion and transformation of the urban layout, corresponding to the final phase of the formation process of the city (polis).

Temple A and the sculptures

The most significant building of the protoarchaic city on the Patela, erected in the late 7th century BC, is Temple A (no. 4 in the plan). Discovered and excavated in 1907 by Pernier, the temple is best known for the sculptures found during the excavation and included by the Italian archaeologist in a reconstruction of the building that has been subject to criticism and revision by other scholars over time. The structure, consisting of a rectangular cella (naos) with a central hearth (eschara) and a large vestibule (pronaos), is an independent building with a different orientation from the previous layout.

Starting in the 2000s, a research project on the building and the sculptures was initiated by the CNR and is now completed, the results of which are in the process of being published. It has involved the resumption of excavations in the building and the area immediately surrounding it, the re-examination of the sculptures found at the beginning of the century and the study of some fragments from the new excavations, the critical revision of the various reconstructive hypotheses proposed up to now, and a new interpretation of the temple and the decorative apparatus.