

Ergon: Phaistos 2013-2017 - Activities undertaken by the University of Catania

Athens, October 27, 2017

The Cretan Archaeology Center and Department of Humanities of the University of Catania performed activities as part of "the Palace and the City" project, in close collaboration with the University of Venice.

The University of Catania moved along three lines of action: field studies and study of materials; digitization and communication.

These activities were of course performed in conjunction with the study of materials conducted for Catania by Simona Todaro on the Neolithic and the Antique Mines, by Orazio Palio on TMI and Francesco Tomasello on architecture.

Field activity focused on two areas. Actual excavation was carried out in the southern area of the so called Greek Temple, an area still unexplored, to discover the continuation of the building already investigated by Doro Levi.

The result was unexpected. The stratigraphic sequence was profoundly altered by three events: the removal of the oldest structures carried out in the proto-geometric or geometric ages, and two landslides dating from the late IV to the end of III BC.

These episodes erased most of the previous levels. However, we can reconstruct the following sequence of events. Superimposed on the MMIII house excavated by Levi was an elevated floor plan with a large rectangular building with thick walls, dating between the MMIIIB and early TMI.

On top of part of it was built the XVII-XLVII House under the temple already studied by Pernier. It consisted of a room with a pillar, a paved polythyron, and an open courtyard. Thanks to two essays, we dated the building to TMIA and found several fragments of frescoes with spiral and daisy motifs that match those found at the beginning of the 1900s and allow us to piece together a frieze running above the doorway in the polythyron.

The house had a short life, and was probably abandoned before the beginning of TMIB. The area was occupied by a staircase or an access ramp to the building. Only one room on the south wall of the building remains from the TMIII period. A series of walls whose function is not easy to interpret pertain to the orientalizing geometric and archaic age.

The lowest levels, dating to between the 8th and the beginning of the 7th century, were probably dwellings with a threshold and the remains of a hearth that were however obliterated by a series of parallel walls running NW-SE, of uncertain use.

The most likely hypothesis is that it is the substructure of a ramp similar to the "geometric" one, which went up the hill. These are to be associated with the large wall found by Pernier under the temple, which seems to be a supporting wall for a space and perhaps a second stretch of the ramp going towards the top of the hill. This phase should be coherent with the geometric houses to the West of the Temple.

The construction of the temple marked a complete reorganization. The walls were obliterated; the area was probably paved with a raised floor plan. The chronology, indicated by both the layer of the destruction of the walls and the fragments in the foundation of the temple, should be set to the first quarter of the 6th century BC, which certainly does not exclude subsequent remodelling. It is not yet clear, however, what the floor plan of the area was during the life of the building. The subsequent phases are unfortunately only represented by fragments found in the landslides.

North East complex.

Investigations in the North East Complex, which consist of a total of 4 buildings (called Rooms 101-104), dated between MMIII and TMI, were of a different nature. From House 101 came the famous Phaistos Disc. The complex had been extensively researched by Pernier even up to the rock, so our research was limited to small surveys and a systematic analysis of the wall structures that were unfortunately often mostly restored.

The results are the following.

In the pre-palatial phase (AMIII / MMIA), the whole North-East strip would have been used as a dump for bones and pottery coming from the top of the hill. This deposit shows traces of burns and is perhaps the remains of the “conspicuous consumption” episodes identified by Todaro.

The MMIB sees reorganization through the construction of a long wall running along the edge of the hill to perhaps delimit the main building from the area to the north. A crafts area was installed here, characterized by a plastered basin with small canal, probably in the open.

At the beginning of the MMIII, intensive construction activity led to the realization of the entire North-East Complex in a relatively short period of time. This complex was subject to several construction phases that we are in the process of defining. This is a provisional scheme.

Interesting results came from Room 101, which was concluded to be a liquid treatment plant. From it comes, among other things, a tablet fragment. Along with the Disc and PH1, these texts demonstrate the interest of the administration in craftsmanship. In Room 103, a drain canal full of animal bone and pottery canal was identified, confirming that the function of the area was to prepare food for a first-floor banquet hall.

A number of interesting details came to light regarding the post-Neo-palatial phases. As is well known, all of the structures to the rear were broadly assigned to a “Hellenic” phase. The excavation of the only unexplored area up to the rock, area I of Room 102, however, has led to more accurate dating. The area actually presents an MMIII phase with an overlying rectangular room with regularly shaped blocks, similar to those used in the Mycenaean Homes to the West of the square. It is dated to between TMIIIB (foundation deposit), and TMIIC (destruction depot), thus between the XIII and the XII century.

In the Greek age, the walls were reused by lining them with small stones, and using Minoan blocks as orthostats, like in Room N excavated by La Rosa in 1994 and dated to the proto geometric age. On this, a long wall that went from House 101 was built at a much higher height in the Hellenistic age. The association of ceramic and architectural data has allowed the few surviving structures to be assigned to TMIIIB/C in the proto geometric-geometric age and the Hellenistic age.

Among these, two ramps gave passage to higher levels. It is therefore evident from our essays that the presence of the Palace has led to profound transformations in adjacent areas. With the construction of the First Palace, the North area becomes separated and used for production activities. After the destruction of the First Palace, as suggested by Carinci in 1989, administrative, productive, religious and housing functions are located in adjacent areas, including the rooms of the NE Complex, the Mansion to the South and House XLVI-XLVII.

Only in TMIB does the Second Palace achieve its full form, and this in the south leads to the abandonment of nearby houses and the creation of a partially paved square. Access may have been provided by the steps under the temple, certainly reused in the Greek age.

For the TMIII period, the architectural evidence becomes more conspicuous, with the identification a new residential district corresponding to a scattered settlement model suggested by Borgna for the “Mycenaean” phase in Phaistos. Likewise, the continuity between the end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age is confirmed, and a radical reorganization of the urban layout in the South between the end of the orientaling and beginning of the archaic period and subsequent phases.

Digital Phaistos.

The second line of activity was the Digital Phaistos project.

The main difficulty for those involved in the study of Phaistos excavations is that of very inconsistent documentation, produced during a century of research, both edited and unpublished. The Digital Phaistos project involves digitizing written, graphic and photographic documentation of the Pernier, Levi and La Rosa excavations so that the information can be used properly.

Catania continued the digitization work already begun by La Rosa, transcribing the notebooks and digitizing inventories of Phaistos and Ayia Triada (about 16,000 cards), vectorising the plans of Stefani and Oliva, organized in chronological layers.

The university, through a PhD project and a generous contribution from INSTAP, has also developed a relational database for the management of findings. The DB is arranged in 26 archives able to manage a wide range of data, texts and graphs related to the site and to findings.

In addition to the benefits of a relational database, it offers two further advantages: a) the possibility of a connection between old excavation data and the results of the new research; b) context analysis and the identification of continuous and persistent relationships between (intra-site analysis) to identify the function of various classes of materials such as small finds.

All the data collected to date has been entered in a GIS PLATFORM: vectorialized plans, reliefs published separately and never inserted (such as the Hellenistic Quarter), graphic and photographic documentation from the new excavations, as well as orthophotos of the Palace of Phaistos created by the University of Salerno, which Professor Fausto Longo has generously contributed.

The latter was created with the inclusion of orthophotos of the excavated areas since 2015, and in particular areas located at the margins of the palatial area and shall be completed by inserting an orthophoto derived from laser scanners of covered areas.

Communication.

The final phase of the palace and the city project is the sharing of data primarily with the scientific community. We aim to build a web-gis platform for online data publishing.

There is, however, another aspect of communication regarding the wider public. One of the real problems that visitors to Phaistos encounter is the difficulty in understanding the ruins. This is partly due to the inability of visitors to make use of the traditional information systems (coloured maps available on the site), but there is no doubt that the difficulty in understanding the stratification inside and around the palace makes it difficult for non-experts to appreciate it. Additionally, almost half of the palace is not actually accessible for security reasons.

A three-dimensional survey has therefore been undertaken to allow a virtual tour of inaccessible areas. 3D shots have been taken using photo modelling and laser scanning of the South West Quarter and the Northern Quarter, both covered and not accessible to visitors, as well as in Room 101. A 360-degree photographic shot was also taken in order to display the Northern Quarter.

Another goal is to produce useful reconstructions to understand the different phases of Palace. The Cretan Archaeology Center, the Department of Engineering and the IP Lab of Catania are tackling the problems regarding the relationship between survey and representation in order to develop virtual reality models as well.

At the same time, another study begun regarding how to describe Phaistos and especially the Palace of Phaistos that is not only scientifically correct, but also able to recount the long life of the Phaistos site.

We shall close with acknowledgements.