Preliminary report on the 2011 season at Karystos-Plakari, Euboia

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The excavations concentrate on the highest part of the Plakari hill, where surface and chance finds had indicated the location of a sanctuary datable to a period covering the 11th to 7th centuries BC. The overall aim of the project is to understand the character of this early sanctuary and its associated cult and settlement, and to establish the site’s position and functioning within local, regional and inter-regional contexts. The fieldwork also addresses such issues as site-formation processes, post-depositional processes and the formation of the surrounding landscape, as part of the broader framework of the occupation history of the site, beginning in the Final Neolithic. Research at Plakari is urgent, since past and future building developments pose a threat to the site.

In the summer of 2010, a small-scale campaign was held to make a detailed, digital map and 3D elevation of the hill top and its extant archaeological remains, to describe the site’s topography and morphology, and to record and map all known find locations (see fig. 1). Furthermore, a study was undertaken in the Karystos museum of the survey and chance finds from Plakari that had been collected over the years; a large selection of pottery and terracotta and metal small finds were catalogued, studied, drawn and photographed.

The first excavation season in 2011 was in the period 20 July–19 August. Three trenches were opened on the Plakari hill top (see fig. 1: 1-3). At the same time, a small team of geo-archaeology students examined the subsurface in the coastal plain to the SW and NE of Plakari by means of coring, in order to study landscape formation processes and influences of the maritime environment (see preliminary report below).

Trench 1 is located on the south slope of the hill (fig. 1: 1) at the eastern end of the southern section of Terrace wall 1 (TW1), which had collapsed in this particular location. Due to this collapse, a large deposit of pottery, bone and other finds had become visible in the scarp of road A2 to the south, and had long suffered from erosion and visitors illegally collecting material. This trench, which in the south is bordered by the road scarp, is relatively small (4 x 2 m), but fitted our purposes: the primary aim of our activities in this location was to retrieve as much pottery and as many small finds and animal bone and botanical macro-remains as possible. The collection of finds was maximized with the help of dry-sieving and wet-sieving (flotation). The area of the trench was excavated in two halves in order to establish a possible stratigraphy within this deposition, and to establish whether this would correspond to different actions of depositing material. Study of the excavated material was expected to provide information about cult activities (votive practices, sacrifices, ritual meals, ritual breakage of objects, etc.) and help to define their chronological span.

It was initially thought that this deposit was a bothros or apothes consisting of votive material and equipment used for sacrificial meals that had been dug in a peripheral spot of the sanctuary, against one of its terrace walls (TW1). Our investigations showed this hypothesis to be only partly correct. Numerous archaeological finds were uncovered, but all were found within a thick layer of gravel. The position of this gravel layer shows that it had slid down from an area higher up the hill, to be halted first by a pocket formed by natural rock folds and then by TW1, which must have been a free-standing temenos wall rather than a terrace wall in the narrow sense of the word. No stratigraphy could be detected within this layer of gravel.
and finds, and it seems that its deposition took place within a limited time span. Trench 1, which was excavated almost down to bedrock, has yielded more than 6,500 sherds and 112 small finds (see table below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Small finds</th>
<th>pendant</th>
<th>sheet</th>
<th>rings</th>
<th>pins / nails</th>
<th>fibulae</th>
<th>knives / blades</th>
<th>figurine frs.</th>
<th>mini. vases</th>
<th>bead</th>
<th>other</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Gold</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bronze</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Iron</td>
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<td>terracotta</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The preliminary study of the ceramics shows that the contents of this deposit were rather uniform: it contains a disproportionally large amount of painted fine wares, most of which can be linked to eating and, above all, drinking (fig. 2 a–k). The number and the nature of the small finds are also in accordance with what one would expect to find in a sanctuary rather than in a settlement context (fig. 3 and table above). These two facts indicate that this material can still be attributed to a sacred deposit, but the find location and especially the gravel layer show that the contents of this bothros were found ex situ, and that
Fig. 2: a.-k. Protogeometric and Geometric pottery fragments, from Trench 1. l. bronze ‘phalera’; m. terracotta lamp; n. bronze miniature wheel, all from Trench 2.
Fig. 3: Small finds of bronze, iron, gold and terracotta, all from Trench 1.
the bothros’ original location has to be sought in an area higher up the hill. The chronological range of the pottery shows that cultic activities spanned the period from the 10th to the 7th century, with a peak in the deposition of ceramics during MG II or MG II/LG. Our preliminary studies also show that, next to a host of pottery that was probably locally made, there were also imports from Attica, central Euboea, the Cyclades and even the Ionian coast (fig. 4), indicating that the sanctuary fulfilled a supra-regional function.

Trench 2 is situated to the north of Trench 1 and to the west of the highest point of the summit. Trench 2 is divided into three parts (see fig. 1: 2a-c): Trenches 2a and its NE extension 2c are located on a small terrace delineated in the N and W by Terrace wall 2 (TW2), while Trench 2b is laid out to the W of this terrace wall. It is expected that this area contains remains of the sanctuary and will thus yield information about the internal organization of the cult and cult place. In the end, Trench 2b remained unexcavated and in Trench 2a only the topsoil was removed, as most of the work was concentrated in Trench 2c. After removing topsoil and layers containing gravel and medium-sized stones, a rectangular

Fig. 4: Geometric pottery fragments, from Trench 1.
building of dry stone masonry came to light. This building (Building A; see fig. 5) is set almost directly against the N section of TW2, suggesting that the walls were constructed in conjunction.

Building A measures approx. 4.65 m (N–S) by 5.21+ m (W–E; its E wall, however, remains unexcavated, as in this part of the trench a strip of soil was left in place for stratigraphical considerations). Parts of the living rock were incorporated in the W and S walls of the building, while its beaten earth floor was set directly upon the partly levelled living rock. A 1.4 m high entrance was found in the south. The remains of burnt mud-brick and charred wood suggest that the building was destroyed by fire and then collapsed. This has resulted in the building’s furniture being in an excellent state of preservation. A series of low tables were uncovered against its N wall; these are fine schist slabs standing on a support of roughly hewn stones. A host of plain or black glazed pottery wares were found on and next to these slabs (fig. 6). Most of these wares are complete or restorable; they include drinking vessels, cooking pots, a brazier and a number of lamps. Some of the drinking vessels bear an incised monogram (see e.g. fig. 7 a: AΠ); one bears the name of Nikè. A fragment of a stone slab inscribed with the letters …] KH could refer to the same goddess. This furniture, with its emphasis on the preparation and consumption of foods and drinks, in combination with the presence of a hearth in the centre of the room, allow us to interpret it as an hestiatorion. Other finds include a lekythos of the early 5th century, the head of a female figurine of terracotta (fig. 7b), attributable to the mid 4th century, and a number of bronze items, such as a large
bronze object that looks like a collar (for a statue?), a so-called phalera (fig. 2 l), a miniature wheel (fig. 2 n), and four fibulae.

The bulk of the material found in association with this building can be tentatively dated to the second half of the 5th and the first half of the 4th century BC. Although no cult buildings or cult installations have yet been found, it can be concluded that rituals were performed and that the sanctuary was functioning during the Classical period.

Trench 3 is located on the N slope of the summit, in the area where the W and N sections of TW1 come together (see fig. 1: 3a-b). This location was chosen to investigate Terrace 1 and the associated TW 1, to compare these data with the finds from Terrace 2, and to find out more about the erosion and potential loss of archaeological information on this side of the hill. In Trench 3a, the remains of a building (fig. 8) were detected under layers of colluvium, gravel and stone tumble. Two rooms belonging to this building (Building B) were excavated. The southern room was entered from the E and delineated in the S by a sturdy wall (un. 151), preserved in four to five courses. In the N wall of the same room there was a passage with two steps that gave access to the northern room. The building’s W and N walls lay outside the area that we excavated. It might be that the two sections of TW1 functioned as the external walls of Building 2, although the excavated walls of Building 2 are not at right angles to TW1. Both rooms had a cobbled floor; these floors form the natural point where we ended our excavations. The two rooms together yielded almost 5,500 amphora fragments (over 70 kg), probably attributable to the second half of the 4th c. BC, indicating that the part of the building that we excavated functioned as a store room. Apart from a bronze arrowhead found in an ashy deposit and what is probably a bronze scale pan, no other types of finds were encountered. In Trench 3b we found evidence that wall un. 151 had been founded on bedrock and continues in an easterly direction.

Fig. 6: Schist slabs and pottery found in situ against north wall of hestiatorion.
Although only a part of the building was excavated, the finds in this location confirm the information from Trench 2, namely that during the Classical period Plakari was inhabited and accommodated buildings with very different functions. Although we do not yet have a precise chronology for TW1 and TW2, it is hypothesized that they are roughly contemporary with Buildings A and B, which belong to the Classical period and are closely associated with the two main terrace walls. If this hypothesis is correct, this means that during the Classical period the Plakari hill top saw some very substantial rearrangements in architectural layout.

![Fig. 7: a. Bowl with incised monogram, b. female head of terracotta, both from Trench 2.](image)
As a preliminary conclusion, it seems fair to say that Plakari is a multi-period site that offers an opportunity to study long-term developments, for instance in the sphere of cult and settlement dynamics. As for the earlier occupation period, the excavated material suggests that Plakari housed a sanctuary of regional and supra-regional importance, with Karystos playing an important role in overseas networks that also included parts of Attica, central Euboia, the Cyclades and the eastern Aegean. The unexpected finds from the 5th and 4th centuries not only show that Plakari remained an important locus of settlement and cult, but also open new venues for research. They urge us, for instance, to reconsider Plakari’s position within the wider cultic landscape of Karystia – which includes sanctuaries in the kambos and on Karababa and the Paximadhi peninsula – and its relations with the other settlement nuclei at Paleochora and Karystos Town.

Fig. 8: Storage rooms of building dating to Classical period in Trench 3.