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Settlement desertions in Venetian-Turkish Sphakia, SW Crete

ABSTRACT

Here I consider settlement discontinuities and desertions in Sphakia, SW Crete, using five examples from the Byzantine-Venetian-Turkish (BVT) period, and comparing archaeological, environmental, textual and oral information where available. I analyse this BVT information using the concept of resource packages, developed to investigate landscape management in Sphakia (Nixon 2006). A resource package is a perceived resource or combination of resources in a specific area, which people use in a particular way at a specific time.

People in Sphakia tended to live in more or less sedentary agropastoral communities.

Each settlement had a minimum local resource package including arable, pasturage, water procurement, and connectivities (in/visibility, inter/visibility of specific locations; networks inside/outside Sphakia, by land and sea). People also used other resource packages, often some distance from settlements, and sometimes at a significantly different altitude, as in the case of the pastures (Madares) in the White Mountains.

This paper looks chiefly at five deserted settlements, four Small (2-9 houses each), and one Midsize (16 houses). These settlements lie in four areas of Sphakia: the Askyphou Plain and the Frangokastello area (East Sphakia); the general Ag. Ioannis area (West Central Sphakia); and the Trypiti Gorge (West Sphakia). Three are known from texts; two are not, as far as we know. The presence of at least some evidence for the Prehistoric and Graeco-Roman periods at these settlements suggests that they each had a useful agropastoral resource package. There is evidence that resource packages at or near these five locations were used in some way after settlement ended.

I explore the causes of settlement disruption and desertion at these five examples, using evidence from the Sphakia Survey, an archaeological project which investigates human activity in this rugged area, from the Late Neolithic to the end of Ottoman rule on Crete.

KEYWORDS: Sphakia, Crete, settlement desertion, settlement discontinuity, resource packages, agropastoralism, churches

Five settlement desertions in Sphakia, SW Crete, are considered in this paper. The Byzantine-Venetian-Turkish epoch provides us with a splendid range of evidence, of which the Sphakia Survey has made full use (see also Nixon et al. 2009, Nixon and Moody 2017). Information for this epoch includes archaeological, environmental, and textual information, complemented in

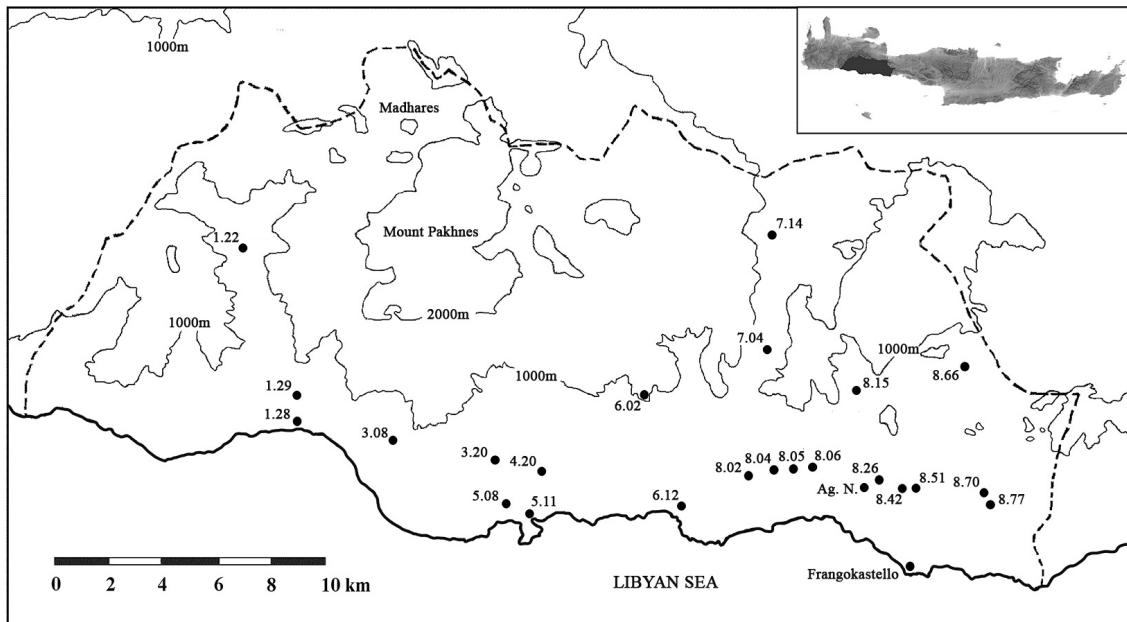


Fig.1. Map of Sphakia with Crete Inset and Villages inhabited in 1898.

Ag. N. is a 20th c.C village replacing 8.26.

some cases by oral information. I analyse these data using the concept of resource packages (RPs), developed in order to assess landscape management in Sphakia (Nixon 2006). A resource package is a perceived resource or combination of resources in a specific area, which people use in a particular way at a specific time.

The information used here comes mainly from the work of the Sphakia Survey. The main goal of the Survey is to investigate how people used the landscape of Sphakia, with its highly dissected terrain, and its wide range of altitudes. The Survey covers three main epochs: Prehistoric (PH), Graeco-Roman (GR), and Byzantine-Venetian-Turkish (BVT). After our fieldwork was complete, Strasser et al. 2018 found evidence for Palaeolithic occupation in the Asphendou area north of site 8.26 (Fig. 1).

Throughout the period studied by the Sphakia Survey, people tended to live in more or less sedentary agro-pastoral settlements, each of which used a set of local resources called resource packages (RPs). Each RP included at least one resource or a combination of resources: arable, pasturage, water or the ability to procure it, and connectivity (in/visibility, inter/visibility of specific locations; networks inside/outside Sphakia, by land and sea). People also used other RPs, often some distance from settlements, and sometimes at a significantly different altitude, as in the case of the pastures (Madares) in the White Mountains (Fig. 1).

BVT churches inside and outside settlements can be important indicators of resources. Churches outside settlements (exokklisia) often mark RPs outside Venetian-Turkish settlements; settlements with significant RPs at or near them will often have higher concentrations of churches.

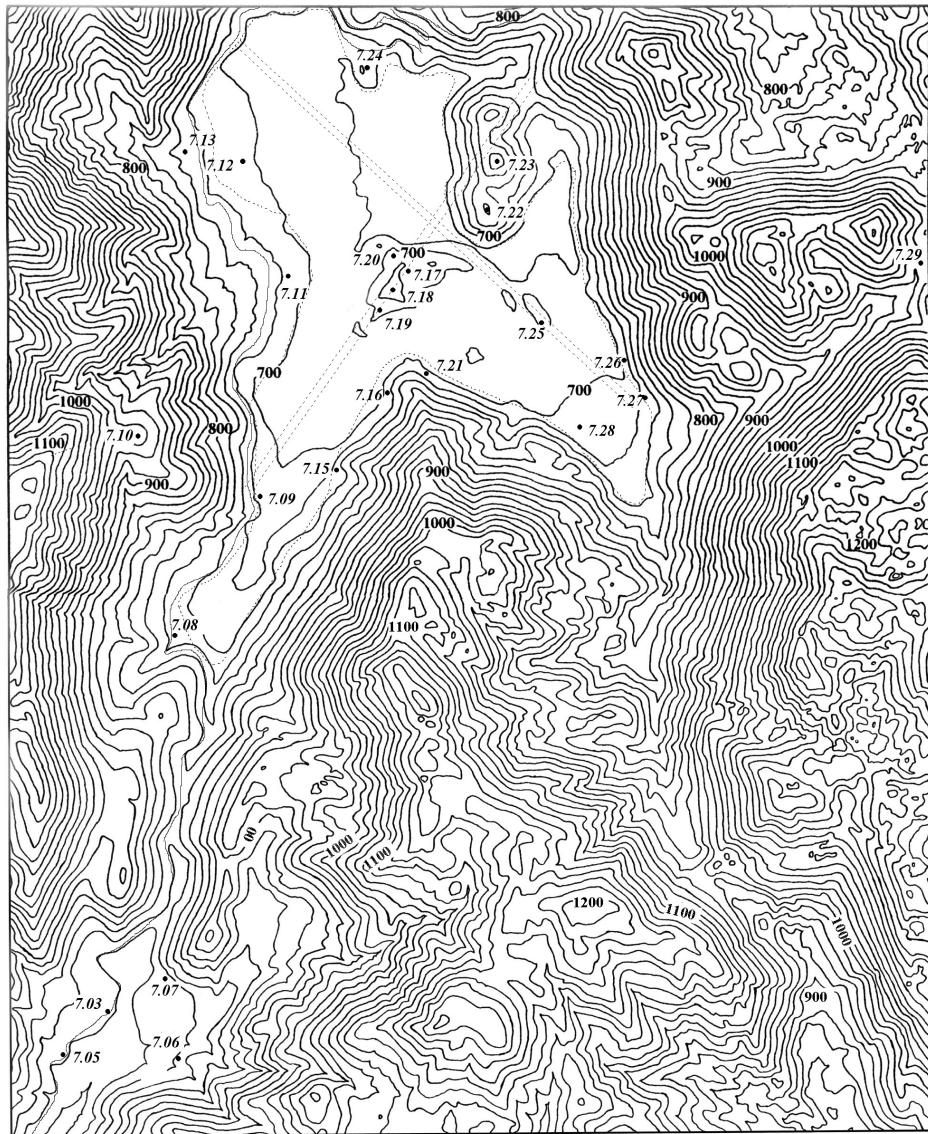


Fig. 2. Map of the Askyphou Plain.

EXAMPLE 1: SITE 7.09, BIRI AVLOKHI, ASKYPHOU PLAIN, EAST SPHAKIA (FIG. 2)

The Askyphou Plain is a mountain plain with arable, pasturage, and water, lying on the main north-south route connecting Sphakia with the north coast of Crete. Site 7.09, deserted within the V period, reveals an early plasticity in the Venetian settlement pattern. The pottery at this Small settlement (2-9 houses) 7.09, was exclusively BV. The location of the site, on slopes in the southwest arm of the Askyphou Plain, permitted control of the main route to the south coast, and indeed a built path ran through the houses here. Later in V, when 7.09 was deserted, the main (and larger) neighbourhoods were established at five other slightly higher places (7.11, 7.13, 7.21, 7.24, 7.25), on rocky lumps above the Plain. A large enclosure wall to keep animals out was built around the bottom of the Plain, with a new path around its outer edge following a slightly different route from the older one.

Unusually for this period, we have some important textual evidence. The earliest written record of the Sphakiote landscape is a Perambulation, given in a charter seemingly of 1191. The charter was attached to a land grant current in Early Venetian times, and it gave jurisdiction over a territory dependent on Anopoli to the Skordylis family (Gerland 1907-08, Document IIIA, 21-29).

The unnamed territory described in the Perambulation used 42 boundary points (topothesies) to outline an area about four-fifths of modern Sphakia, with a boundary from the coast southeast of Vouvas (8.05), to the middle of the Askyphou Plain, up to (part of) the Madares, and down to the coast south of old Ag. Roumeli (1.29; Fig. 1). Many of these topothesies were still in use in the 20th c., including five for the Askyphou Plain.

We know from another document of this period that the Askyphou Plain was divided into areas held by three noble families: the Skordylides, as already mentioned; the Phokades; and the Melissenoi (Gerland 1907-08, Document IIIB, 34-38). The later church on 'the saddle of Khristos' is 200m from the Perambulation's turn in the middle of the Askyphou Plain, near 7.25. This location was probably at the junction of lands held by the three families. At some point within the Venetian period, the Askyphou Plain was no longer divided into three; it was then possible to manage its resources as a whole.

The earliest phase of site 7.09 probably dates to the time when the Askyphou Plain was divided into three, and it belonged to the Skordylides. The RP of the Plain continued throughout the whole BVT epoch, and is still in use today.

EXAMPLE 2: SITE 8.05A, TA LIVADIA, FRANGOKASTELLO PLAIN, EAST SPHAKIA (FIG. 3)

In 1300, very early in the Venetian period, a will in Latin records the bequest of Theodorus Scordili to his natural brother of a settlement (casale) with land called Livadia, 'meadows' – a topothesia indicating a productive area – 'as far as the village of Vraskas [8.04]' (Pizolo 1300/1978, 66, no. 133).

The topothesia Livadia is still in use, so we could locate the settlement (our site 8.05A), where we found an Early Venetian church of the Analipsi tou Sotiros with graffiti of 1429 and 1520, and remains of a small settlement nearby, with two wells. The area is well watered in Sphakiote terms, with easy access to the coast. In 1300, it apparently made sense to have very small settlements like 8.05A near larger ones like Vraskas (8.04), but this approach seems to have changed quickly: the actual settlement did not last long. Olive trees surviving today were planted between 1400 and 1550 (dated by their diameters; cf. Rackham and Moody 1996, 80), on new terraces overlying the houses. The people living at Livadia may have left for one or other of the two nearest villages, Vraskas (8.04) or Vouvas (8.05). At around the same time as the planting of the olives, a large wall was built to enclose the church, which continued in use (Khaireti 1968, 370, no. 334). The RP with its arable, pasturage, and water was used throughout V and into T, presumably by people living in the two nearby villages, as was the church. PH and GR material was also found here. The area is still used today.

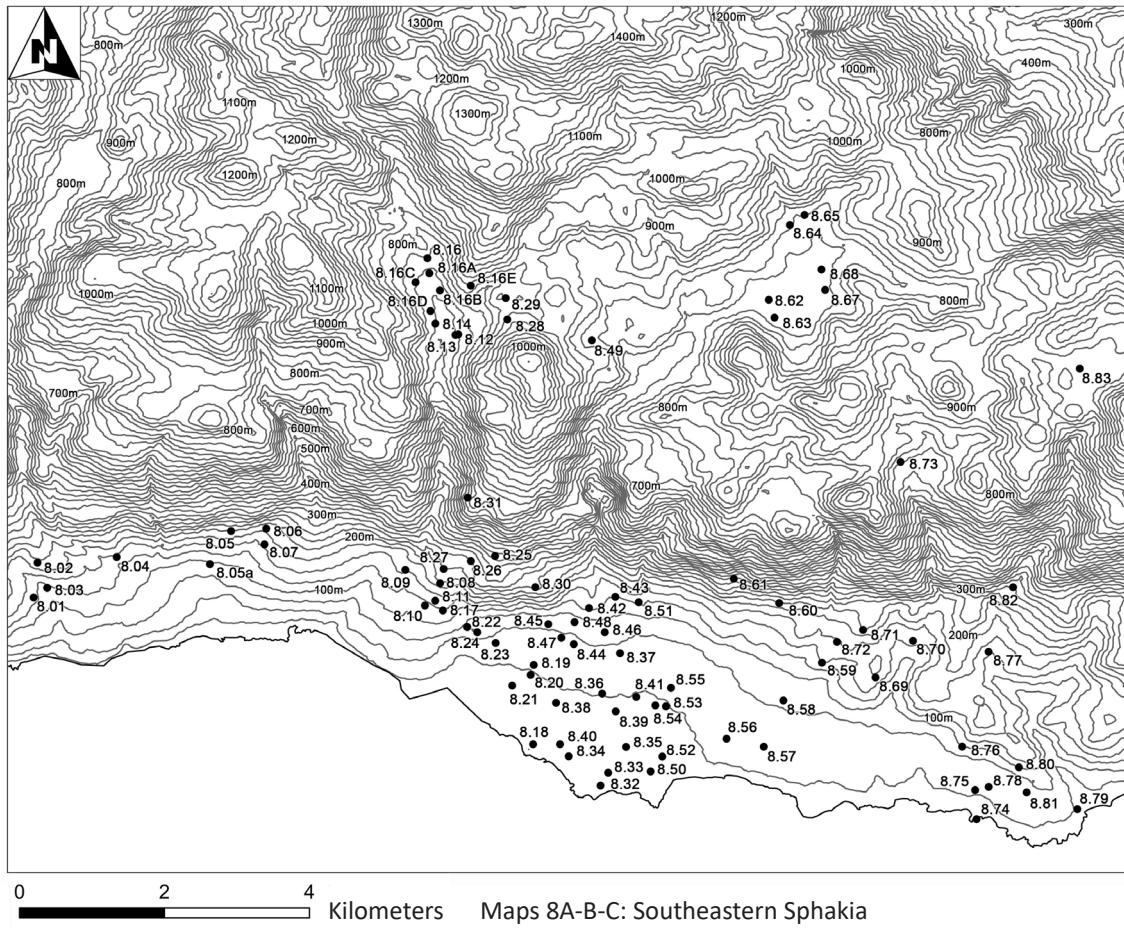


Fig. 3. Map showing the location of site 8.05A and the main Frangokastello Plain to the east, bounded by sites 8.24, 8.32, and 8.72.

EXAMPLE 3: SITE 3.02, PERIANA, WEST CENTRAL SPHAKIA (FIGS 4, 5)

Site 3.02 is a site which demonstrates the value of connectivity, and the will to use smaller RPs on routes; site 5.02 (example 4) is another. No PH material was seen here; there was some GR. The BVT phase of site 3.02 begins in the Byzantine and early Venetian period, with two Small settlements (5+ and 3+ houses respectively) on either side of a ravine, on a route well marked by churches. Terrace walls and enclosures suggest agropastoral activity here. The route begins with a double kaldirimi leading from the village of Ag. Ioannis (3.08) to two early Venetian churches at 3.03. The route continues to 3.02, and then goes down to the coast at Ag. Pavlos via a very steep path (3.01). Ag. Pavlos is one of the two oldest churches in Sphakia (10th–11th c., with possibly 13th c. frescoes; Gallas et al. 1983, 256–257). The number of houses at 3.02 is roughly the same as the number of houses at Livadia (8.05A), but 3.02 was deserted much later, in the later Turkish period. The area continued in use thereafter.

It may be that site 3.02 was deserted because another route became more important – a route also leading from Ag. Ioannis (3.08) but via site 3.14, either to 5.02 and down to the coast at 5.02A, or northeast to the village of Aradena (3.20), and from there to the Plain of Anopoli. Site 3.14 had only one house with two or three rooms and a courtyard, plus olive trees 600–700



Fig. 4. Annotated aerial photograph showing the locations of 3.08, 3.03, 3.02, and 3.01.
North is more or less on the left side of the photograph.

years old (dated by Rackham and Moody) on purpose-built terraces, and small pens suggesting pastoral activity. The house was deserted in the later Turkish period.

Site 3.14 was, however, marked by the highly visible church of Prophitis Ilias. There are other examples of highly visible churches outside settlements: the church above the Frangokastello Plain at site 8.25 is one (Fig. 3), another at 1.04 is discussed below in Example 5.

EXAMPLE 4: SITE 5.02, AG. VASILEIOS/ STERNI, WEST CENTRAL SPHAKIA (FIG. 5)

The RP at site 5.02 includes terraceable land and pasturage, and connectivity mainly by land. There is some PH and GR. In BVT, all the securely datable pottery is Turkish (17th–18th c., 18th–19th c.), with no definite Venetian pottery. The church of Ag. Vasileios does not help with dating; it is architecturally undistinguished and has 10 holes for immured bowls (*bacini*) which could have been Venetian or Turkish. Like Prophitis Ilias (site 3.14), this church is very conspicuous. The area of the houses suggests a Small settlement (2-9 houses). There were at least two large enclosures here. One of them surrounded six terraces; we observed olives, pears, almonds, and

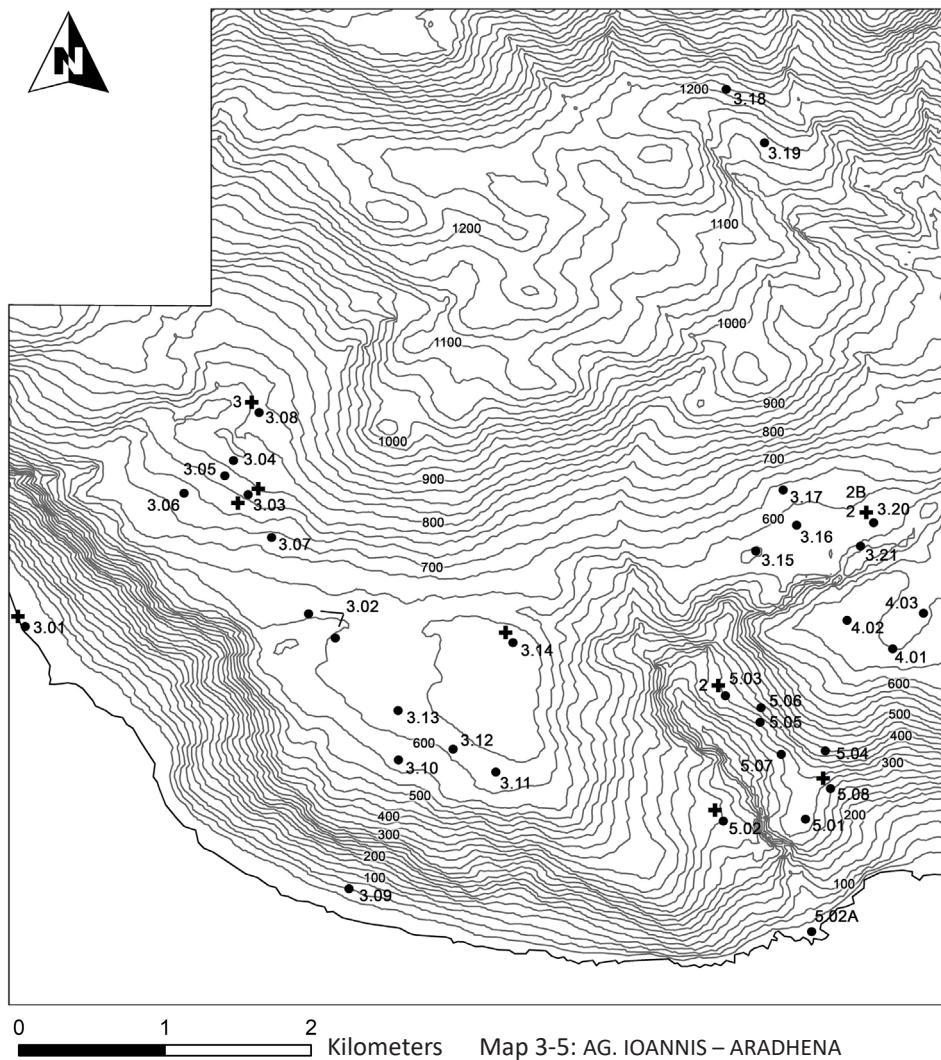


Fig. 5. Map showing the locations of 3.08, 3.03, 3.02 and 3.01, plus 3.14, 5.02A, 3.20.

a fig tree. There are also built cisterns in one part of the site, which explains the name Sterni. Site 5.02 lies on a route linking site 3.14 and the coast at 5.02A, and also to the village at Livaniana (5.01) on the other side of the Aradena Gorge, via site 5.04.

Site 5.02 is mentioned in the *Song of Daskalogiannis* (line 418) when a Turkish force passed through the settlement. Papadopetrakis (1888: 19) says that it was destroyed in 1821. Late 20th c. informants from Anopoli said that site 5.02 had been deserted for 100-150 years. They also said that this site was an outer neighbourhood of Livaniana (5.01). The site may have been destroyed, but that does not explain why no one came back to live there. Again, it may be that the route had become less important.

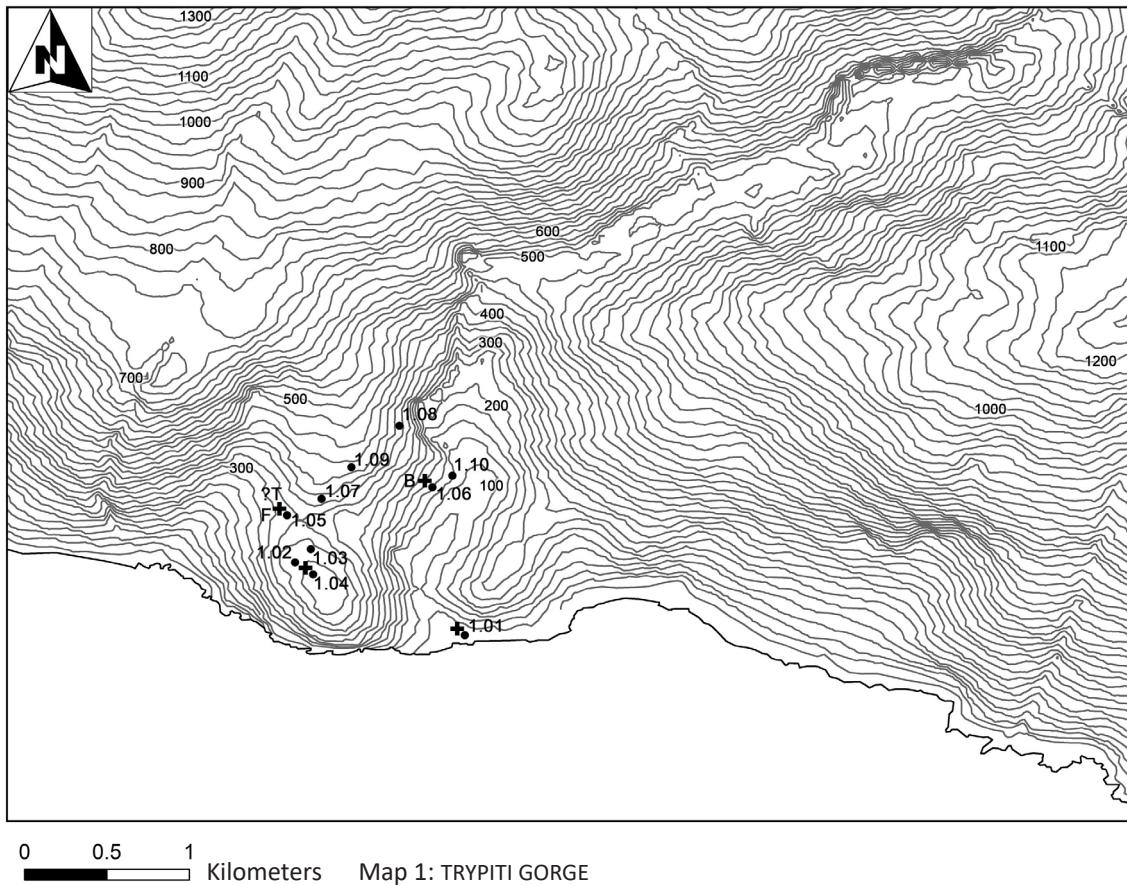


Fig. 6. Map showing sites in the Trypiti Gorge.

EXAMPLE 5: SITE 1.06, POIKILASION/ TRYPITI/ PERADORO, WEST SPHAKIA (FIG. 6)

Site 1.06 lies in the lower part of the Trypiti Gorge. It is different from the other deserted sites considered here in two ways: site 1.06 had a serious GR phase, and in the BVT epoch it counted as a Midsize village, rather than a Small settlement like those at 7.09, 8.05A, 3.02, and 5.02.

The local RP includes arable, pasturage, and connectivity by sea, with a small anchorage at the foot of the Trypiti Gorge. Connectivity by land is possible by a coastal path leading west, but the terrain makes it far more difficult to go along the coast to the east. The route up through the Trypiti Gorge to connect with the north coast is extremely difficult.

There is some PH material in the Trypiti Gorge, particularly at site 1.02, where the sherds date to the later part of the PH epoch. But in GR, this area was a place of some distinction. There was a possible CH temple at site 1.05 on a saddle to the west. A temple of Serapis is mentioned in a 3rd c. AD inscription found at the site (Spratt 1865: ii. 244–5; Guarducci and Halbherr 1935–1950, *IC* ii. xxi. 1. Later site 1.06 had a LR basilica. Near site 1.06 were three bee areas with GR ceramic beehive fragments (sites 1.07, 1.08, and 1.09), two with stone enclosures, indicating RPs for one form of economic activity.

Textual evidence has led to the identification of site 1.06 as ancient Poikilasion. Poikilasion was a member of a Hellenistic koinon, the Oreioi (the ‘Highlanders’), which included Tarrha (1.28)

at the foot of the Samaria Gorge to the east, and on the coast to the west, Elyros, Syia, Lisos, and probably inland Kantanos as well (Chaniotis 2015). It is striking that most Oreioi members lived in places to the west of Poikilasion; as mentioned above, Poikilasion was well-connected by land, via a coastal path leading west. This westward emphasis could have outweighed the disadvantageous lack of a coastal path to the east, and may also explain why Poikilasion, though Small (2-9 houses), had some local importance.

The story of site 1.06 in BVT is rather different. The Byzantine church of Profitis Ilias at 1.04 dates to the 10th–11th c. It was built on the summit of the steep-sided hill on the west side of the Trypiti Gorge mouth, and is conspicuous from the sea. This church is one of only two Byzantine churches in Sphakia, along with Ag. Pavlos (3.01; Figs 4, 5). The only other material evidence for this period consists of two Byzantine-Venetian sherds from site 1.02.

The 16 structures at site 1.06 make it a Midsize Venetian-Turkish settlement. There are agricultural terraces on nearby slopes, and a threshing floor at 1.10, but no evidence for beekeeping in the area. A house had been built into the LR basilica, but no new church was built in the settlement. There was, however, a V church of Ag. Nikolaos at 1.01 near the coast, tucked behind a fold of the Gorge, and invisible from the sea. The bulk of the pottery here is Venetian-Turkish (14th–15th c. to early 19th c.).

There is also some useful textual evidence for this site, referred to as ‘Trypiti’ after the Gorge. The Venetian Register of churches notes that Ag. Nikolaos (1.01) and Profitis Ilias (1.04) still had ‘care of souls’ in 1637 (Khaireti 1968, 371, no. 353), and Trivan (1644/5) records it as the settlement of Trypiti. But the earliest Ottoman survey of Sphakia made in 1655 does not mention it in the list of *karye* (villages; Price et al. 2008).

The settlement seems to begin in the 14th c. and certainly continued into the 17th c. It then disappears from written records, but the pottery of the 18th-early 19th c. suggests that occupation continued into the 18th c. Trypiti had been deserted for some time when Spratt visited in the 1850s, and recorded ‘some ancient terraces on the side of the hills to the left, with vestiges of habitations upon them’ (Spratt 1865: ii. 245). It probably went out of use at around the time of the Revolt of Daskalogiannis (1770), and indeed Papadopetrakis claims that this was the case (1888/1971: 18). Some fire-reddening found here could suggest destruction linked with the Revolt, though there could be other reasons for fires and fire-reddening.

The real question is this: what was the reason for the desertion of the settlement? If it was destroyed at the time of the Revolt, why did people not return afterward? And if it was not destroyed, the question becomes more acute: why would people leave a village with a perfectly good RP? One answer might be site 1.06’s relative lack of connectivity – even access to the sea and a good path to the west may not have made up for the difficulty of going by land to the east or north.

The population of Sphakia in 1655 was 3789 people (calculated using the number of households; Price et al. 2008); in 1881, it was 4770 (Stavrakis 1890: table 4, pp. 29–30, omitting Gavdos). In other words, the overall population of Sphakia actually grew in those two centuries – so the desertion of Trypiti was not part of this pattern of growth elsewhere.

Whatever the reason or reasons for its desertion, people left the village of Trypiti forever. Use of the area has continued ever since, most recently for beekeeping. But no one has lived here since the later 18th c.

CONCLUSIONS

The five examples considered here have good agropastoral resources, and at least some evidence for all three epochs (PH, GR, BVT). The first two examples, 7.09 in the Askyphou Plain and 8.05A on the western edge of the Frangokastello Plain, were both deserted in the Venetian period. They show that the Early Venetian period is a time of settlement malleability. Places were tried out for Small settlements, and then abandoned as a different settlement pattern emerged. Both the Askyphou and Frangokastello Plains have at least one VT settlement nearby, so the areas were not deserted – it was just that people chose to live at other places within those areas.

The third and fourth examples are different. Site 3.02 started out as a convenient location for a Small settlement on a route from Ag. Ioannis to the coast at Ag. Pavlos. It was deserted in the Turkish period, and not replaced with a settlement anywhere nearby. Site 5.02 was also located on a useful route. The final example, site 1.06 in the Trypiti Gorge, had a flourishing GR phase, as well as a Midsize BVT settlement, yet it too was deserted in the Turkish period.

It is useful to situate these examples within the wider landscape of Sphakia. We can look more broadly at resources and how they are packaged in BVT Sphakia, by using the location and density of churches inside and outside settlements. As noted in the introduction, the basic resources for this agropastoral economy are arable, pasturage, water procurement, and connectivities (in/visibility, inter/visibility of specific locations; networks inside/outside Sphakia, by land and sea).

When studying exokklisia in Sphakia, I found that they usually marked RPs outside villages; each exokklisi was built at the time that resources in a RP came into economic use (Nixon 2006). Churches in settlements are also an important indicator of local resources and economic activity. Taken together, churches inside and outside settlements related to resources and RPs – the more resources there are, the more churches there will be.

To return to our five examples, we see that there was a church in the Askyphou Plain when site 7.09 was occupied. Site 8.05A in the Frangokastello Plain had a church on site. Site 3.02 was on a route marked by churches at and near Ag. Ioannis (3.08, 3.03), and on the coast at Ag. Pavlos (3.01). Site 5.02 had a conspicuous church. Site 1.06 had no churches on site, but did have two nearby at 1.01 and 1.04.

As Table 1 shows, these four areas differ greatly in terms of church numbers and densities. The koinotita of Askyphou has five churches, which is 1 per 12.3 km²; I refer here to koinotites as these territories certainly emerged in the Turkish period, and possibly earlier (Stavrakis 1890). The Askyphou Plain has good connectivity, as it is on the main north-south route linking Sphakia with the north coast of Crete. The koinotites of Asphendou, Patsianos, and Skaloti encompass the Frangokastello Plain, the largest continuous stretch of arable in Sphakia. These koinotites have 12 churches each, and similar densities (1 church per 2 km², 2.4 km², and 2.5 km²). This

area is also near the main north-south route. Ag. Ioannis koinotita has 10 churches altogether, very unevenly distributed, and a density of 1 church per 6 km². The koinotita of Ag Roumeli, which includes the Trypiti Gorge from the Venetian period onward, has 10 churches altogether, counting the two near site 1.06, and a density of 1 church per 9.4 km².

TABLE 1. Church numbers and densities at the end of BVT,
in descending order of koinotita size

Koinotita	Area, km ² (1963 boundaries)	No. of churches	Churches per km ²
Anopoli	100.3	18	1 per 5.6
Ag. Roumeli (1.06)	93.8	10	1 per 9.4
Askyphou (7.09)	64.4	5	1 per 12.3
Ag. Ioannis (3.02, 5.02)	59.7	10	1 per 6
Khora Sphakion (w. Komitades)	46.2	58	1 per 0.8
Skaloti	30.2	12	1 per 2.5
Patsianos	29.1	12	1 per 2.4
Asphendou (8.05A)	24.5	12	1 per 2
Imbros	18	6	1 per 3
TOTAL	466.2	143	1 per 3.3 km ²

But the koinotita with the highest number of churches is Khora Sphakion: 58 churches altogether, 39 of them in the village of Khora Sphakion – and an astonishing density of 1 church per 0.8 km²; Dalidakis 2008 has excellent information; our church numbers differ slightly from his. Other areas have more arable and pasturage than the koinotita of Khora Sphakion. What this koinotita does have is a good combination of these two resources, and the ability to procure water, and the best connectivity in Sphakia: good connections by sea, and good access by land to the main north-south route. The koinotita of Khora Sphakion shows clearly how important connectivity is in dissected terrain.

Places with fewer churches in Sphakia are usually not as well-resourced as those with higher number of churches. In the case of site 1.06, a Midsize BVT village, its poor land connectivity to the east and north (compared to almost any other settled area in Sphakia) made it potentially vulnerable. Its relative lack of connectivity may go some way to explaining why it was eventually deserted.

I conclude with some final points on the interpretation of settlement desertions. It is important to use all possible data, such as datable trees (e.g. the olive trees at Livadia), in addition to archaeological, architectural, and textual information. Settlement is one thing, and the use of a RP can be another – it is usually the settlements that are deserted, not the RP. Sometimes the question is not why a settlement was deserted, but why it was ever settled in the first place. Understanding connectivities in dissected terrain is key, as these are often crucial for settlement survival, as suggested for Trypiti. And it is always useful to count churches, because their number and density can indicate ‘resource-fulness’.

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