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Discontinuity on Chryssi Island from the Minoan to the Hellenistic Period

ABSTRACT

Recent investigations have provided a wealth of information regarding ancient activity on the small island of Chryssi, ~15 km to the south of Ierapetra. While previous study has concentrated on the Minoan remains, in particular the evidence for purple dye production, this paper focuses on a less understood phase on the island: the Hellenistic period. After the abandonment of the Minoan Faros settlement at the end of LM IB, the island seems to have been uninhabited until the Hellenistic period: a clear discontinuity of over a thousand years.

Twenty sites were recorded in a surface survey as belonging to the Hellenistic and/or Roman periods, with the majority dating to Late Hellenistic/Early Roman. Most of the sites preserved field enclosure walls, abundant roof tiles, and a wide range of domestic pottery, including fine wares. The evidence implies that the island was intensively exploited during that time, coinciding with (and directly resulting from) the increasing economic growth and dominance of the city of Hierapytna.

Although a significant amount of Hellenistic pottery has been recovered from the recent excavations on the island, intact stratigraphic deposits of that date are thus far minimal and extremely fragmentary, with much of the material recovered from disturbed fill and/or dumped deposits. Interestingly, the excavated pottery appears to date overwhelmingly to the 1st century BC, shortly before the Roman conquest of Crete. Excavated remains associated with this period at Chryssi include a two-room tower, a small, vaulted cistern, a poorly preserved room, a built cooking installation, and multiple pits. The recent finds, though only preliminarily studied thus far, help provide a better understanding of the nature of the Hellenistic activity on the island.

KEYWORDS: Chryssi, Hierapytna, Faros, Late Hellenistic, Early Roman, cistern, pits, pottery, tower

Recent investigations on Chryssi have provided a wealth of information regarding ancient activity on the island (Fig. 1). Twenty-eight sites attesting to small-scale habitation or exploitation during the Final Neolithic, Bronze Age, Hellenistic, Roman, Early Byzantine and Venetian periods were identified in the surface survey conducted from 2008-2010 (Chalikias 2013, 2015). Rescue excavations by the Lasithi Ephoreia from 2008-2009 and 2016-2017, followed by systematic

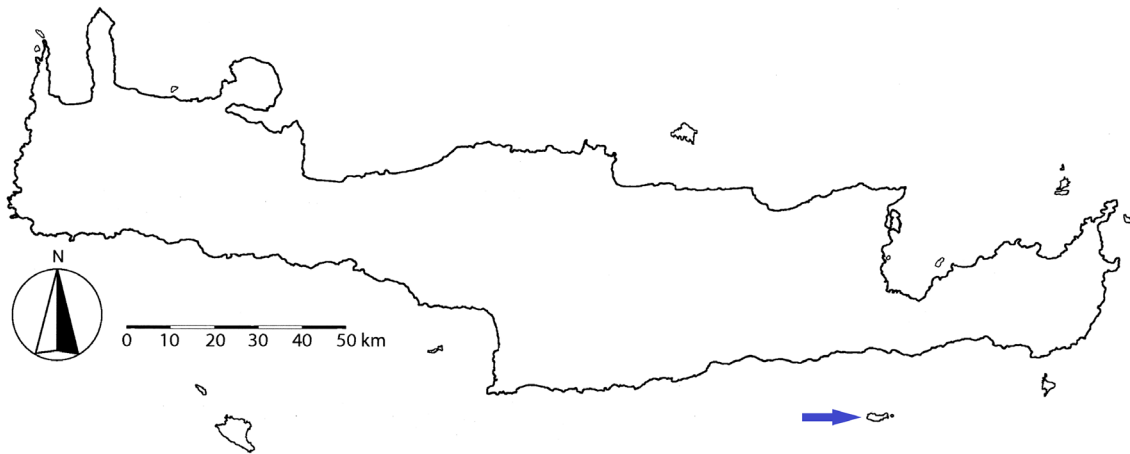


Fig. 1. Map of Crete showing the location of Chryssi (M. Eaby).

excavations beginning in 2018, have concentrated on the Bronze Age settlement near the lighthouse (faros) on the northwest coast (Apostolakou, Betancourt, and Brogan 2010; Sofianou 2020a; 2020b, 5-6). While previous presentations and publications have focused on the Minoan remains, in particular the evidence for purple dye production (Apostolakou, Brogan, and Betancourt 2012; Apostolakou et al. 2016; Brogan et al. 2019; 2025), this paper will focus on a less understood phase on the island: the Hellenistic period. After the abandonment of the Minoan Faros settlement at the end of LM IB, the island seems to have been uninhabited until the Hellenistic period; the clear discontinuity represented by over a thousand years of abandonment is thus relevant to one of the conference's themes.

Of the sites recorded in the surface survey, 20 were identified as belonging to the Hellenistic and/or Roman periods (Fig. 2; Chalikias 2013, 32-40). Early Hellenistic (EH) pottery was scarce across the island, with only three sites showing potential signs of habitation: Site 4 on the western part of the island, and Sites 17 and 18 on the eastern end. The majority of the sites, on the other hand, were dated to the Late Hellenistic/Early Roman period (LH/ER) (Chalikias 2013, 32). Most of those sites, especially on the western part of the island, preserved field enclosure

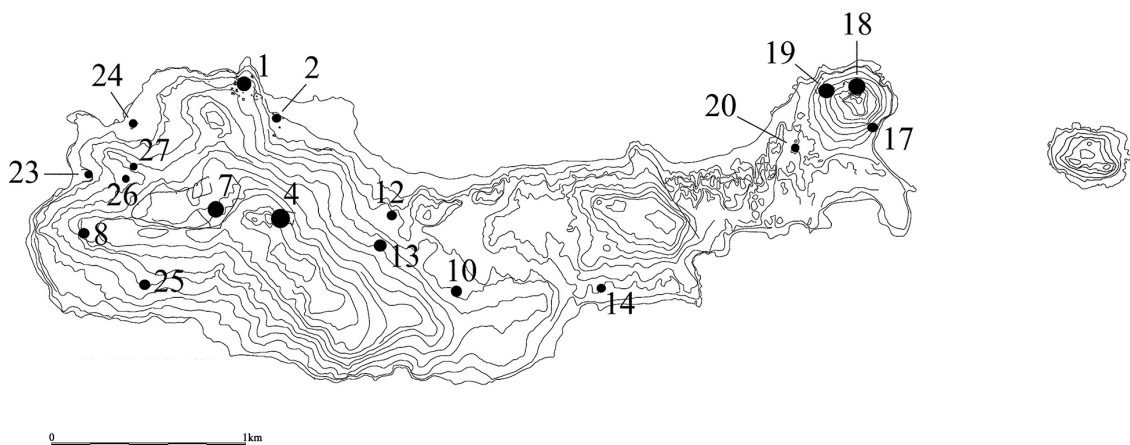


Fig. 2. Hellenistic/Roman sites identified in the surface survey (K. Chalikias).

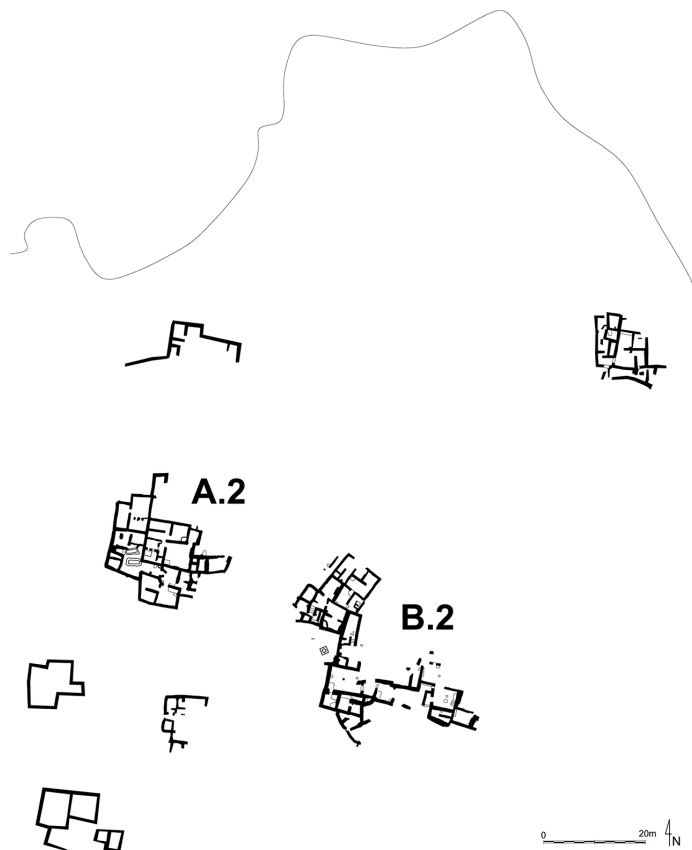


Fig. 3. Plan of Faros Settlement (D. Faulman and M. Eaby).

walls (some with perimeters up to 800 m), which have been interpreted as aiding in the agricultural or pastoral use of the island. Roof tiles were abundant, as well as a wide range of domestic pottery, including fine wares. The abundance of pottery implies that the island was intensively exploited starting in the 2nd century BC, coinciding with (and potentially the direct result of) the increasing economic growth and dominance of the nearby city of Hierapytna (for discussion on Hellenistic Hierapytna, see for example, Guizzi 2001; Vogeikoff-Brogan 2004; Galimore 2011, 104-127, 394-406; 2015; Chalikias 2013, 32-36, 50-51). Of the surveyed LH/ER sites, Site 4, for example, located ~200 m south of the partially excavated Minoan settlement at Site 1, was interpreted as representing a large

farm center/estate (likely associated with smaller Site 7); it was surrounded by an enclosure wall, and segments of walls and clay roof tiles were preserved on the surface over an area of approximately 200 x 200 m (Chalikias 2013, 60). Other types of identified sites dated to this period include Site 10, possibly a small farmhouse, Site 19 a possible harbor facility, and Site 18 a probable tower (Chalikias 2013, 63, 65-66; Sofianou forthcoming).

Although a significant amount of Hellenistic pottery was noted in the survey and has been recovered from the recent excavations on the island, intact stratigraphic deposits of that date are thus far minimal and extremely fragmentary. Hellenistic material has been recovered from excavations on the eastern part of the island on Kephala hill (at Site 18), the western end near the church of Agios Nikolaos (at Site 2), and near the lighthouse in the area of the Minoan settlement (Site 1). As also observed from the survey sites, the excavated pottery from the island appears to date overwhelmingly to the 1st century BC, though limited 2nd and 3rd century material was also recovered.

The nature of the Hellenistic activity in the area of the Minoan Faros settlement is only beginning to be understood. Hellenistic material has been recovered almost exclusively from the area of Building B.2, though a small quantity of pottery of that date was also noted on the surface and in wash levels at the eastern edge of A.2 immediately to the west (Fig. 3). A stone

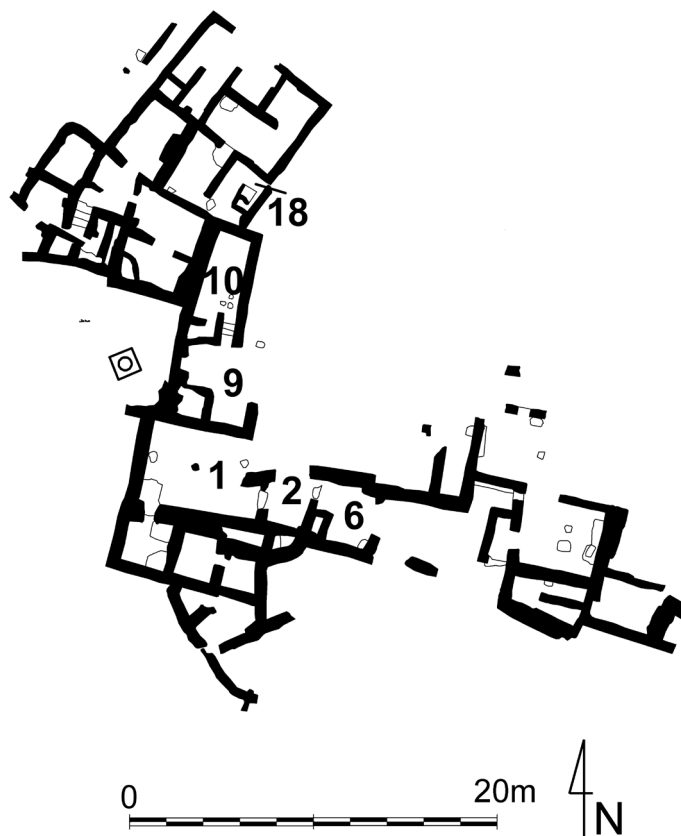


Fig. 4. Plan of Building B.2 with spaces referred to in the text labelled (D. Faulmann and M. Eaby).

1st century BC installation (~1.40 x 0.88 m) was cut into the collapse of the eastern part of Neopalatial Room 18 (Fig. 5). This installation was constructed of upright clay tiles and stones forming a rough Π-shape. An unevenly applied, roughly smoothed lining of clay (~2 cm thick) was applied to the interior, creating a circular area which narrowed toward an opening on the east side (with interior dimensions ~0.25 x 0.60 m). This feature appears to have been a cooking installation, probably a Hellenistic hearth/stove, and lopas fragments as well as a possible lopas lid fragment, were recovered from above and inside it (Fig. 6). No carbon or ashy soil was found inside the feature, though a potentially associated deposit of black soil was excavated to the southeast. The tile-built feature is placed in the corner of two roughly built walls, each consisting of a single line of stones, perhaps to shelter it from the wind. A small section of a relatively hard-packed

enclosure wall runs through the middle of the Minoan settlement (in between these two building complexes) and likely belongs to this period, as it encloses the area in which Hellenistic material was concentrated; however, a test trench beside the wall was unable to provide a definitive date, partially due to its shallow bedding. Approximately 100 m to the north-west are the remains of two shallow rock-cut fish tanks, which may also be Hellenistic or Roman, with multiple examples likely of that date known throughout the Ierapetra region (Davaras 1974; Mourtzas 2012; Chalikias 2013, 58).

The excavated Hellenistic remains in the area of Building B.2 provide multiple types of evidence, select examples of which will be presented here (Fig. 4). A



Fig. 5. Cooking installation in Room 18 (M. Eaby).

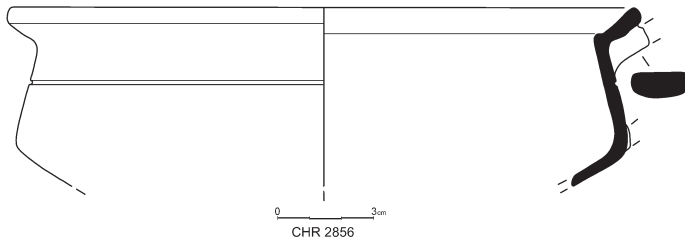


Fig. 6. Lopas CHR 2856 from cooking installation (L. Bonga).

clay floor surface was preserved immediately to the north of the stove/hearth installation and likely served as a work/food preparation area.

The greatest amount of Hellenistic material, including a significant selection of 1st century pottery, as well as some roof tiles, was recovered from disturbed fill and/or dumped deposits, as found in the eastern part of Neopalatial Room 1 (immediately to the south of the lighthouse) and the northern part of Room 10 (Fig. 7). In the western part of Room 9, a thick fill with Hellenistic roof tiles and pottery was sealed below the plaster surface of a very poorly preserved likely Late Roman/Early Byzantine room. Late Hellenistic vessel shapes recovered from these fills include the lopas, chytra, lamp, lagynos, and amphora, a noteworthy example of which is a stamped Knidian handle, dated to 107-98 BC, reading “ΕΠΙ ΔΑΜΟΚΡΙΤΟΥ ΘΡΑΣΩΝΟΣ.” Numerous vessels also occur in East Cretan Cream Ware (Hierapytna’s characteristic fabric), such as jugs, bowls, carinated and echinus bowls and plates, and other shapes including the unguentarium and tall cup (see e.g. Vogeikoff-Brogan 2014, 27-47).

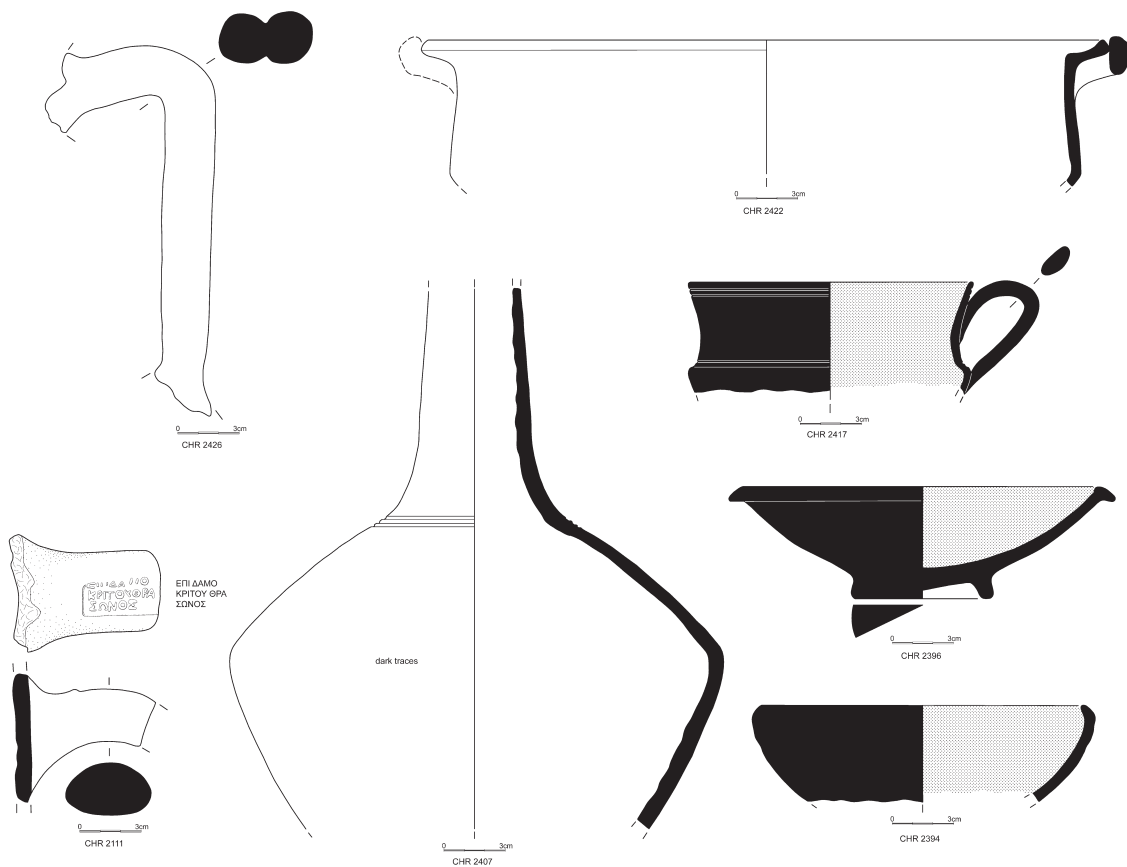


Fig. 7. Selection of Hellenistic pottery from B.2 (L. Bonga and D. Faulmann).

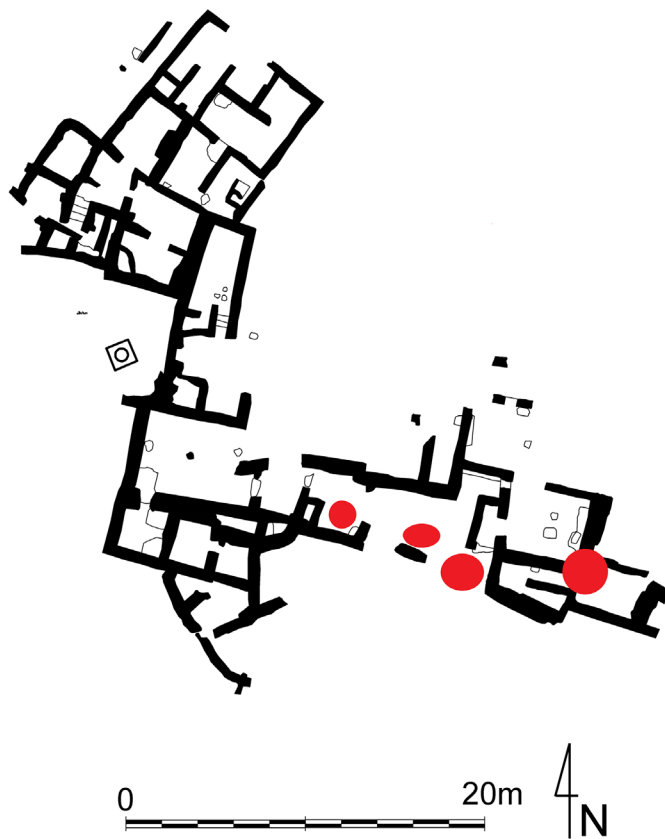


Fig. 8. Location of pits with Hellenistic material (D. Faulmann and M. Eaby).

Also interesting but of a different nature were a series of three pits which had been dug into collapse and/or fill in the area of trenches B900 and B2100 (Fig. 8). These pits, not yet studied, contained darker soil than the surrounding space and were full of small (roughly fist-sized) angular, potentially non-architectural stones. The pottery found within these pits appears to be primarily Late Hellenistic, and animal bone was also recovered from some of them, though they do not appear to represent simple refuse pits. As preserved, the pits were not particularly deep (ranging from 10-30 cm) and were an estimated 1.50 x 1.0 m, 1.80 x 0.80 m, and 2.0 x 2.5 m in size. Another possible pit (potentially as large as 2.10 x 2.50 m) was excavated in 2021 at the corner of trenches B2600 and B2700, and it

contained many intact spondylus shells (likely food debris), a fair amount of animal bone, plaster/eroded lime fragments, and fragmentary Hellenistic pottery, including amphora, kantharos, lamp, echinus bowl, plate, and tall cup fragments, as well as a bronze nail; some gray ashy soil was also found in part of that pit, which unlike the previous examples, may have been a refuse pit.

Near that pit (in trench B2600) at a shallow depth were the single-coursed remains of a double-faced possibly Hellenistic wall (or walls), potentially belonging to the corner of a very poorly preserved room. A nearly complete, large, spouted shallow bowl or basin was recovered from the space between these two walls, and possible traces of a poorly preserved floor surface were revealed (Fig. 9). Note that a short section of wall preserved just below the modern surface immediately to the south of the lighthouse could also belong to the Hellenistic period. In addition,



Fig. 9. Spouted shallow bowl in situ (M. Eaby).

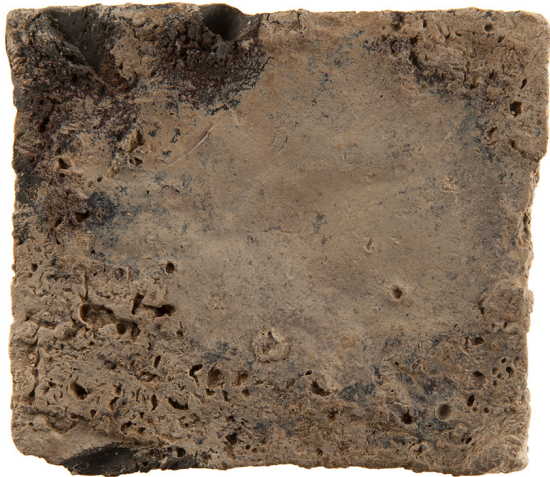


Fig. 10. Lead weight – CHR 2318
(C. Papanikolopoulos).



Fig. 11. Lead buckle – CHR 2319
(C. Papanikolopoulos).

stones of a possible paving, platform, or perhaps merely destroyed walls of this date were revealed in a test trench (B1500) excavated to the south of B.2; these stones were found just below the modern surface level, again making their exact nature difficult to determine. However, finds of note from this space include a large Hellenistic rectangular lead weight (5.4 kgs.; cf. Robinson 1941, 447-471), a lead buckle, bronze nail, clay juglet and other jar fragments (Figs 10, 11). Possible evidence also exists for the reuse of Minoan spaces at this time (specifically, Rooms 2 and 6 in Building B.2), though these contexts have not yet been fully studied.

Possibly also dating to Late Hellenistic, though likely in use for a long period of time, is a barrel-vaulted cistern (C100) located between the church of Agios Nikolaos and the lighthouse (Figs 12, 13). The lower part of the cistern consists of a rectangular chamber (~2.20 x 3.25 m; 2 m deep) cut into the bedrock, and it appears to have accessed an underground reservoir, which was likely also used in the Minoan period. A small leveling course of flat stones was placed directly above the cut bedrock upon which was constructed a vault of finely cut slabs of local beachrock limestone (e.g. 0.95 x 0.45 x 0.14 m); a staircase provided access from the east. The cistern continued to be used in the Roman period (and later). During the Roman period, a stone-built channel (~0.53 m wide and 2 m long) was constructed on the upper west side (for bringing in

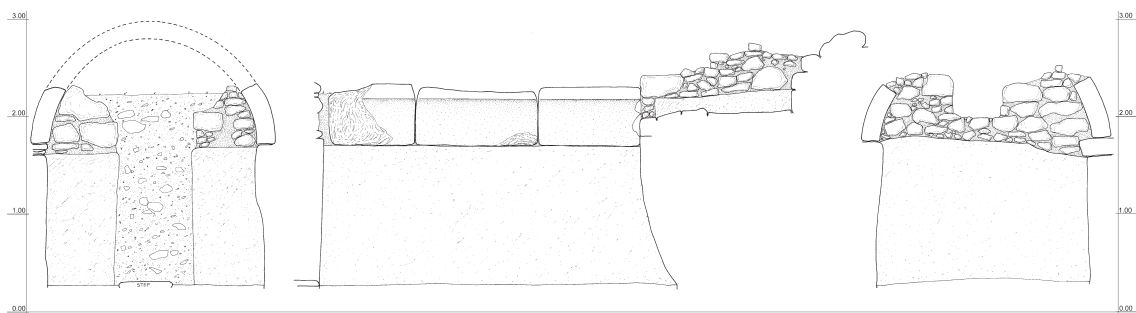


Fig. 12. Plan of cistern (K. Chalikias).



Fig. 13. Vaulted cistern
(M. Eaby).



Fig. 14. Marble hand resting on pillar – CHR 857
(C. Papanikolopoulos).

rainwater or as a window for light and air), and the cistern was enclosed or covered by a poorly preserved rectangular structure (averaging est. 6.20 x 4.80 m) constructed of unworked fieldstones bonded by a cement mortar containing many small sea pebbles. The feature was also placed within a larger enclosure wall (~120 m long, 1 m wide with a 10 m wide opening at the southeast), the stones of which were also bonded with cement mortar. The cistern was initially thought to be a vaulted tomb, a type that was in use for a long period of time, starting as early as the 4th century in Macedonia; first century BC examples have been found at Knossos and on Rhodes, and other examples have been excavated in Ierapetra, dated from the mid-1st to 3rd century AD (Apostolakou 2011). Two marble statuette fragments (probably Hellenistic) were found among material outside and dumped into the Chryssi cistern, consisting of the hand of a seated figure resting on a post, and the lower leg of a nude figure (Figs 14, 15); Late Hellenistic, Neopalatial, Roman, and Late Roman/Early Byzantine pottery was also identified on the surface around the cistern (Chalikias 2013, 58).

Limited Hellenistic remains have also been excavated beyond the area of the Minoan settlement, including a small building (K100) on the eastern end of the island at Kephala Site 18 (Fig. 16; Chalikias 2013, 65-66). The structure is roughly rectangular (averaging approximately 7 x 6 m;

~40-45 m² on the interior), constructed of large bedrock boulders with smaller stones used to fill the gaps; the walls are double-faced and 0.75-0.90 m thick. It is comprised of two rooms, a larger room entered through an approximately one-meter-wide doorway in the west wall and a smaller, eastern room (perhaps a storeroom) accessed through a second meter-wide doorway aligned with the entrance to the building; it was built against the slope of the hill, just below the summit. The building appears to have been abandoned and thoroughly emptied of finds.



Fig. 15. Marble statuette leg – CHR 879
(C. Papanikolopoulos).



Fig. 16. Aerial view of K100 tower
(D. Faulmann).

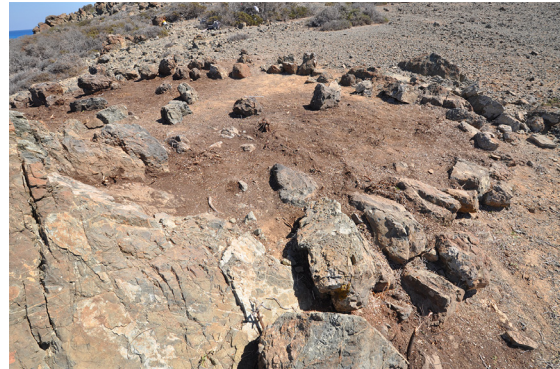


Fig. 17. Possible fire beacon
(M. Eaby).

Based on the very limited ceramic remains from the eroded floor surfaces, the structure itself dates to the Hellenistic period (with the pottery of mixed date, 3rd/2nd and 1st century BC), while Roman material (possibly 2nd century AD) was later dumped into the space (possibly from a building on the summit of the hill, rather than representing a later reuse). The Hellenistic finds were few and do not aid in identifying the function of the building; they consist of two stone tools, a pumice tool, and a concentration of spondylus shells, while the remaining pottery consisted primarily of fine ware, including fragments of a small lekythos, krater, cup, amphora, and painted jar. The pottery observed in this area during the survey was also scarce, typically dated to LH, and included transport amphoras, roof tiles, lopades, and other cooking ware, though with some late 3rd/early 2nd century black glazed pottery also noted (Chalikias 2013, 65).

The building has been identified as an isolated Hellenistic guard/watch tower, and such structures with round or square plans have been found at numerous sites on Crete, such as Mochlos, Azoria, and Trypitos (Vogeikoff-Brogan 2004, 2014; Haggis et al. forthcoming; see also Coutsinas 2013). The Chryssi building also appears to have been surrounded by an enclosure wall similar to that observed near the lighthouse. Although a second possible building was identified to the northwest during the survey, excavations did not confirm the presence of a structure, though some large stones appear to have been used to roughly enclose the area, which could have been used for burning signal fires, if the main building was in fact part of a fort (Fig. 17). The Chryssi tower is positioned so that it overlooks the passage between the island and Mikronisi and could have controlled the passage between Crete and Chryssi, while also forming the southern border of the city-state of Hierapytna; it is worth noting that a 2nd century treaty between Hierapytna and Itanos includes Hierapytna's claims to the nearby island of Leuke (today Koufonisi), and a tower on Chryssi could have served to assert a similar claim (Chaniotis 1996, 307-310; Chalikias 2013, 33-34; Sofianou forthcoming). The island of Koufonisi also preserves the remains of a fort, and defensive works have been noted on Gavdos (Papadakis 1976, 201-204; Kopaka 2000, 77; Chalikias 2013, 69-71; Coutsinas 2013, 447).

As shown by the brief overview of the excavated Hellenistic remains at Chryssi, the nature of the activity in that period, especially in the area of the Minoan Faros settlement, remains uncertain. It is possible that there was a settlement there, or else the activity could have been associated with Site 4 to the south; a significant water supply was, however, found nearby at the cistern and in various potentially contemporary rock-cut wells. In some instances, the preserved Hellenistic remains were found relatively close to the modern surface and may merely not have survived due to natural processes, or later agricultural and other activity in the area, while in other instances the material is part of heavily disturbed deposits of mixed date. On the other hand, in the area to the southeast of the lighthouse, the deposition of the Hellenistic material was often unusual, occurring in pits full of small stones (but not obviously refuse pits) and alternately dumped on a Minoan floor and sealed below a later plaster surface. Although the architecture is better preserved, a similar situation was potentially observed in the Kephala building, which had been completely cleaned out, with only a few datable sherds remaining on the floor surface. Given the extensive preservation of the Minoan remains at the Faros site, the extremely poor preservation of the Hellenistic remains (considering the large quantity of pottery recovered) is perhaps striking, as the nature of their deposition often is. While the Hellenistic activity does not appear to have drastically affected the Minoan remains at the site, later activity did drastically alter/destroy the Hellenistic remains in the same area. Is it possible that this destruction occurred deliberately, in a selective manner? The pottery does typically date to the period leading up to the Roman conquest of Crete... The evidence thus far has been unable to indicate whether the Hellenistic activity, both on the island in general and specifically in the area of the Faros, was seasonal or year-round, whether connected to settlements or primarily to herding or the collection of materials such as salt, juniper berries, sponges, etc. Is it possible that the activity near the Faros (or at least some of it) was connected to a particular event, such as a brief use of the island during a campaign by either side? Regardless, the remains represent a major change in activity with resettlement of the island after a long period of abandonment – roughly 1,300 years – and thus a topic well-suited to the subject of the conference. The excavated remains presented here have thus far been only preliminarily studied, and further examination will likely clarify the nature of the Hellenistic activity at the site.

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