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Resilient urbanism in the Bronze Age of east Crete: the case of Palaikastro

ABSTRACT

Multiple upheavals beset east Crete through the course of the Bronze Age. These range from environmental challenges and catastrophes, such as the 4.2 ka climate event and the Theran eruption of the mid 2nd millennium BCE, to the political turmoil experienced at the end of LM IB and then again in LM IIIB. Nevertheless, some settlements in east Crete see broadly continuous occupation throughout, from at least the mid 3rd millennium to the late 2nd millennium BCE. One such site is Palaikastro, which grows into one of the largest towns on the island around 1700 BCE. How are we to account for this resilience, where we might instead expect rupture and discontinuity? Here I suggest that an approach seeking to identify the institutional features of a settlement like Palaikastro could be one way forward. What were the institutions that enabled successful collective responses to the various environmental and political challenges posed over the long course of its occupation? While institutions are difficult to identify in prehistoric contexts, settlement structure can provide some clues, as can various categories of material culture. When Palaikastro develops into an urban settlement, it appears to have a unique arrangement into blocks, as well as so far showing no signs of any palatial court-centred building. One argument is that this structure manifests a strong example of Minoan ‘House’ society. Was this an institutional form that provided particularly resilient forms of collective action, contributing to the long-term persistence of the settlement? What then of other urban sites in east Crete that do seem to have had court-centred buildings and their associated institutions, at least for some periods of their existence, such as Petras and Zakros? Were ‘palatial’ institutions less capable of generating resilient collective action in east Crete?

KEYWORDS: Upheaval, resilience, institutions, urban, Bronze Age, Palaikastro, palace, House

In this paper I address the theme of upheavals, ruptures, and discontinuities in relation to the Bronze Age of east Crete – where these phenomena are well represented. If we briefly scan the whole Bronze Age sequence, from the Prepalatial to the Postpalatial, we can trace various

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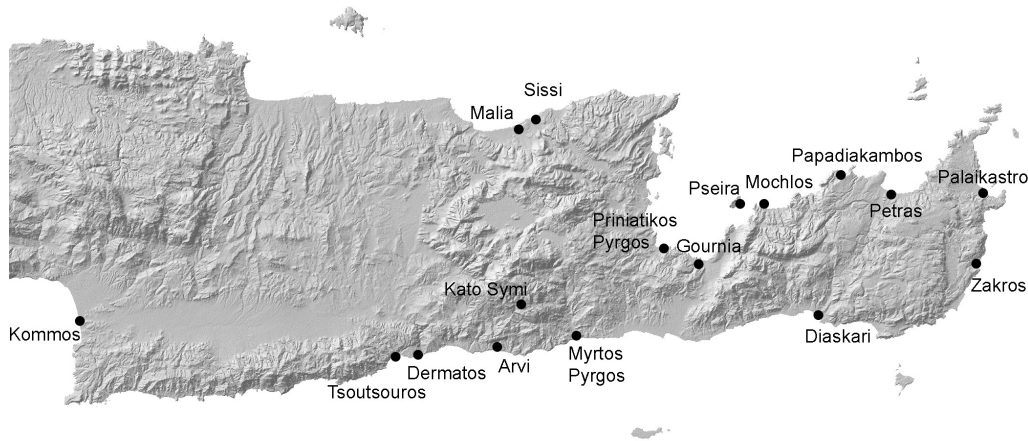


Fig. 1. Map of east Crete.

upheavals throughout. First, for the Prepalatial period we can evoke the major changes in settlement pattern, possibly due to incoming populations at the end of FN and start of EM; and the supposed decline in EM III, a local corollary of the ‘4.2 ka’ event argued by some to affect much of the Near East and east Mediterranean (Weiss 2017; though see Middleton 2018). Second, for the Protopalatial period, we can refer to the fire destructions that mark the end of the period at many sites, not least Quartier Mu at Malia, and a subsequent ‘gap’ of some kind in early MM III (Cadogan 2013). Third, in the Neopalatial period, there are the much-discussed disruptive effects of the Thera eruption in LM IA (e.g. Driessen and MacGillivray 2011; Driessen 2019), and the widespread fire destructions bringing an end to LM IB (Brogan and Hallager 2011). And finally, during the Postpalatial period, evidently the site abandonments at the end of LM IIIB are a major rupture (Langohr 2017), with the end of LM IIIC the final Bronze Age upheaval.

These phenomena across such a timescale are difficult to address in a short paper, especially for all of east Crete (Fig. 1 – map), so I confine myself to the far east of the island. I will not say much about the Prepalatial period, but will look principally at the palatial periods. In which case, let us then begin with the palatial sites of Petras and Zakros (see Fig. 1) to see how each experiences these phenomena.

At Petras, following the construction of a small palace in MM IIA, there is a destruction in MM IIB, followed by what were likely immediate repairs – “though excavation failed to produce stratified, early Neopalatial deposits” (Tsipopoulou and Alberti 2011, 463). LM IA brought a further destruction, with the palace then operating at a reduced scale in LM IB – with the excavator suggesting that this phase “was a period of stress and uncertainty” (Tsipopoulou and Alberti 2011, 463). Following LM IB, there is no occupation during LM II anywhere on the site (Tsipopoulou 2012, 53), and the palace area remains unoccupied until LM IIIA1. Although the excavator concludes that the building functioned as a palace from MM IIA through to LM IB, one might also see here evidence for rupture, both in MM III, and LM IB.

At Zakros, it has recently been noted that “a palace existed in the valley undoubtedly already from the Protopalatial period, since trial trenches below the level of the new palace Central Court... brought to light an earlier large, plastered court, which could not belong to any other

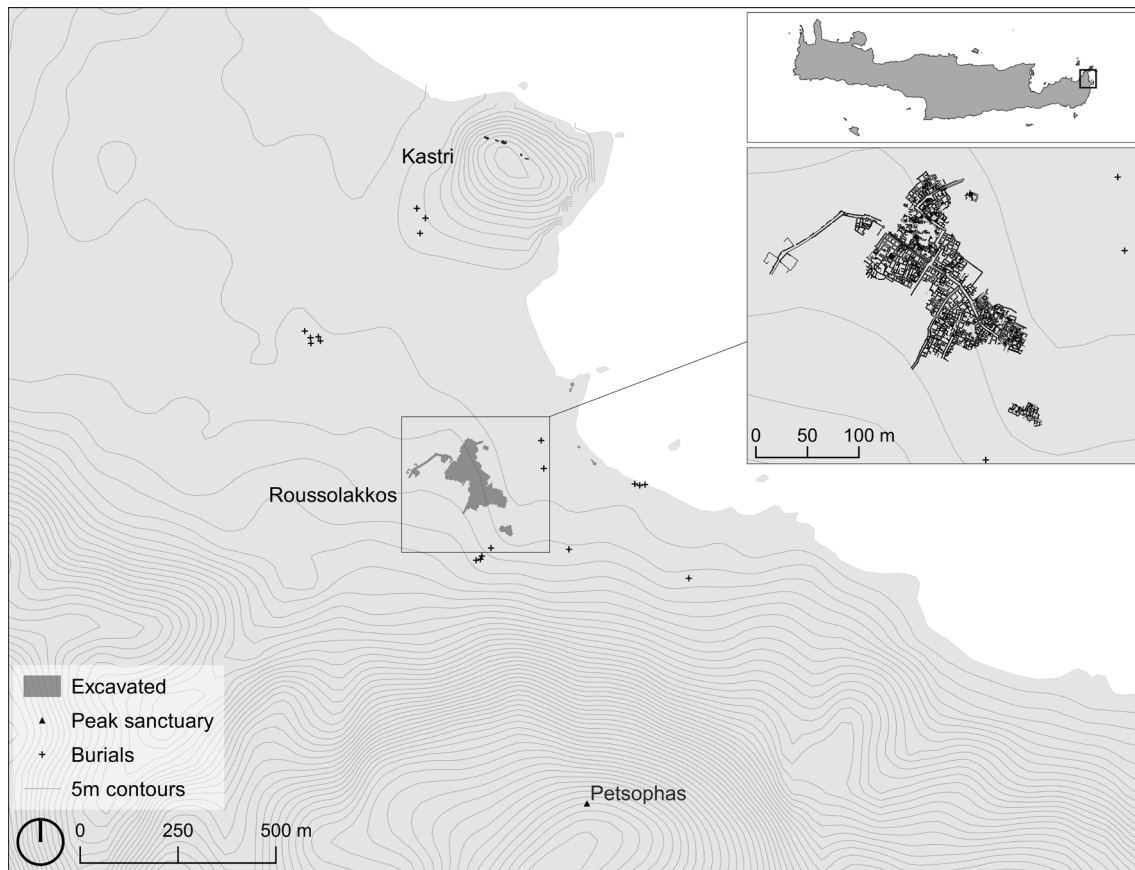


Fig. 2. Plan of Bronze Age settlement of Palaikastro (by Christine Spencer).

kind of structure” (Platon 2022, 66). Where once it was unclear if any layer at the site could be clearly assigned to MM IIB, it now seems that both earlier (MM IB-IIA) and later (MM IIB) Protopalatial phases exist at the site (Platon and Tsiboukaki 2017). Between the Protopalatial and LM IA it does look as if there is MM III, such as the MM III(A) deposit of Room B Building Epsilon (Platon and Gerontakou 2013). LM IA also has clear evidence for occupation, but if LM IB sees the first palace at the site, then this would constitute a major change. Then following the well-documented LM IB fire destruction at Zakros (Platon 2011), it had always been assumed that there was a gap; the recent work of Michalis Zoitopoulos suggests otherwise, though the position of Zakros is much diminished in the Final Palatial period (Zoitopoulos 2018).

But what about another major site in the far east, Palaikastro (see Fig. 1)? Should we not include this in our narrative? If we think this was a palatial site, then yes. But was it? So far excavations have not revealed such a structure. For most observers this has simply been a question of it being elusive. More recently, however, some have begun to wonder if there ever was a palace at the site. This idea – of Palaikastro as palace-less – has been expressed in print recently by Jan Driessen in the AEGIS volume in honour of Hugh Sackett (Driessen 2022). But what has this got to do with rupture, upheaval, and discontinuity? Surely, we should just include it in our discussion here as another urban site in the far east of Crete – all the more so because of the size of its town (Fig. 2), larger than either Petras or Zakros. Why should the presence/



Fig. 3. Plan of Buildings AM1 and AP1, Palaikastro.

absence of a palace have anything to do with the degree of upheaval? Would we not expect any site of a certain size in this environment to be affected similarly by global events, such as the Theran eruption?

But what if the degree of upheaval and discontinuity is very much related to the presence or not of a palace? Because, in fact, we can show that Palaikastro sees a high degree of continuity, arguably more so than either Petras or Zakros. For instance, MM III is very well represented at the site: we see a whole series of deposits, particularly in Block M, from both MM IIIA and IIIB phases (Knappett and Cunningham 2012). These deposits likely result from destructive earthquake episodes, particularly in MM IIIB; but they do not appear to have created any significant disruption to the community, as occupation continues in most houses. These periods also show continuity from MM IIB, which does not appear as a major destructive and disruptive episode, as it does at many (palatial) sites. Moreover, LM IA is not followed by any kind of reduction in scale. Yes, the Theran eruption had some impact: we find tephra in quite some quantities in various locations in the settlement (Kulick and Westgate 2021). But there is ample evidence for rapid adaptation. A very good example comes from the 'PALAP' excavations in 2013-15, where Building AP1 goes out of use but is simply replaced by AM1, constructed next door in LM IB (Fig. 3; Knappett et al. in press). And then there are the LM IB burnt destructions, which do not lead to any significant contraction it would seem. Indeed, the site is quite affluent in LM IIIA2-B, with many of the Neopalatial houses 'reoccupied', such as Building 1 (MacGillivray

and Sackett 2019). This pattern is also clearly observed in the 2013-15 excavations, and even in our latest collaborative excavations on the Chiona promontory and East Beach.

So, what if this continuity – this resilience – is precisely because Palaikastro did not have a palace? What we must immediately ask concerns the palace as institution – what did the palace bring as institution to a settlement, and what did it offer economically that might have brought rich rewards? The growth that it likely catalysed might have come at a cost, one that could not be foreseen – the cost being long-term resilience. Then we might go on to ask if there were other institutions available to a settlement for organising its economic affairs – and whether those alternatives were somehow more conducive to resilience (if not growth).

Beginning, then, with the palace as economic institution, we can import a few insights from New Institutional Economics (NIE), which has been quite influential for two decades now in the study of later ancient economies (e.g. Scheidel et al. 2007; Terpstra 2019). The basic idea to adopt here is that economic activity takes place within institutions, which of course vary widely from one society to another. What NIE has been particularly interested in is growth, and how certain kinds of institutions might facilitate it. Key here is the capacity for institutions to reduce transaction costs. For growth to occur, the cost of doing business has to come down. This focus on growth evidently holds appeal for economic historians of Greece and Rome, trying to account for seemingly substantial economic growth while also foregrounding ancient institutions such as markets and legislatures capable of reducing transaction costs. Growth is not a parameter often discussed for the Bronze Age Cretan economy, but we might broadly agree that the palatial period saw economic growth. We might then also agree that palatial institutions provided the means to reduce transaction costs. We can imagine bureaucratic methods that utilised scripts and sealings as one means. We might also consider the use of balance weights for what they offered in establishing equivalencies of value (see Michailidou 2011). Perhaps there were myriad other ways in which craftspeople, farmers and merchants all had clear roles and means of transacting that were facilitated by certain palatial institutions (see Murray 2022).

But perhaps the pursuit of growth – and we might agree that if Knossos was an economic powerhouse, its leaders must have been interested in expansion for the purposes of economic growth – is inconsistent with resilience. It may lead to unsustainable production in the interests of increased trading. Perhaps we do not need to elaborate on how growth and resilience may be misaligned. What we can instead do is return to the east Cretan evidence and see what it tells us. If we think that palatial institutions were adapted to facilitating trade, then when we look at a site like Zakros, with its rich finds and indications of long-distance trade, we can believe that the palace as economic institution had quite an impact on the site – if only, and rapidly, in LM IB. It may have had a wider impact too, on the surrounding territory (as seen in changes at Choiromandres), and indeed in relations with neighbouring sites. As recently presented by Leonidas Vokotopoulos (Vokotopoulos 2022), cave sanctuaries at the borderline between Palaikastro and Zakros suggest an antagonistic relationship; this scenario one can easily imagine if Zakros was newly palatial while Palaikastro was not, and all the more so if this palatialization happened as an intrusion from Knossos.

And we can perhaps also imagine how palatialization could have had a destabilising effect that was anything but resilient. Curiously, Palaikastro in the palatial periods has far less evidence for traded imports than one might guess (Driessen 2020). Is this because it simply did not buy into those palatial institutions – such as bureaucracy – that were designed to facilitate such trading? Certainly, as Driessen points out in his recent paper, there is quite a lack of administrative evidence from the settlement (Driessen 2022). Maybe the community was satisfied with its existing institutions for conducting economic transactions.

If we follow this line of reasoning, then the next step is to recognise that Palaikastro must have had some other institutional framework for its economy. One option would be to argue that the site generated its own unique institutions while palatial sites developed theirs. But perhaps it is more realistic to follow another option – which is that the site simply continued with long-lived, tried-and-tested institutions. We could even say that such institutions might have stretched back to the Prepalatial period. What might such institutions have been? We can draw here again on the work of Driessen, this time on ‘House’ society. In a recent paper with Quentin Letesson he suggests that the ‘House’ emerged as a corporate group from the beginning of Minoan society – saying that “during the Prepalatial period, Minoan Houses may be considered as existing in their purest form” (Letesson and Driessen 2020, 13). So perhaps the House offered the economic institution(s) that endured at Palaikastro. While Letesson and Driessen then see the Protopalatial emergence of palaces – effectively, a new kind of institution – as a move to consolidate cohesion, perhaps at some sites this path was not taken. At Palaikastro the famous blocks are a point of difference from other sites on the island – and these could have been distinct ‘Houses’. Although we need better data on the timing of their emergence and development, it could be that these Blocks developed in a way that obviated the need for the new kind of cohesive institution that the palaces represented.

So perhaps this form of enduring organisation provided economic institutions that differed from those of the palaces. Here we can usefully explore what form they may have taken by following Letesson and Driessen’s argument on the economic roots of the House. They maintain that this kind of corporate group was an efficient economic solution to the simultaneous and intergenerational demands on labour investment; the former referring to the simultaneity of short harvesting periods and seasonal herding movements in a mixed agropastoral economy, and the latter to the multi-year investment required for olive and vine yields. So, with this reasoning, it seems that the House was adapted to agropastoral production. But how did it manage other aspects of the Bronze Age Cretan economy – such as luxury craft output and long-distance trade? Perhaps this was a weakness that led to the emergence of the palace as an economic institution better able to accommodate the requirements of craft and trade – at least on the scale eventually required by bronze production.

While Letesson and Driessen do stress the economic roots of the House in the Prepalatial period, as discussion moves to Protopalatial and Neopalatial periods their focus falls more on the social aspects. The palaces are seen as social extensions of House society, created from within. Nevertheless, they do admit that the changes that occurred, particularly those during the Neopalatial period whereby Houses may have been increasingly set against each other as

factions, could have created tensions that were sufficiently destabilising to contribute to the LM IB collapse (Letesson and Driessen 2020, 16). If we acknowledge rather than downplay the full impact of these tensions, especially at the economic level, it may be that the economic strategies of palaces were at odds with those of Houses. The palaces – with their mechanisms for reducing transaction costs – may have been able to generate growth. But at what cost? House economic institutions may have had higher cost for less benefit, in comparison to palatial ones; but they may also have been more sustainable over the long term. This could then be one form of explanation for the greater resilience of palace-less Palaikastro.

We might then expect to see some evidence for economic continuity and resilience. The agropastoral economy of Palaikastro seems to have been particularly focussed on the combination of olive growing and ovicaprine management – and these subsistence activities can be traced quite early into the EM period (Cănellas-Boltà et al. 2018; Livarda et al. 2021). If the House as a form of organisation also existed from the EM period at Palaikastro (and here we might note the substantial Block Chi building in EM IIB – see Driessen 2007), and was well adapted to this kind of economic setup, then if this agropastoral economy continued over the long-term at the site, and was somewhat particular to east Crete, as Livarda et al. 2021 argue, might we not also expect the accompanying form of social organisation to be quite resistant to outside change?

At the same time, Palaikastro clearly does participate to some degree in wider exchange networks, given that it is a consumer of metals, with various bronze finds recorded (e.g. Bosanquet and Dawkins 1923, 115-24, pls. XXIV-XXV). But perhaps access to such resources did not require palatialization – as the site of Mochlos indicates quite well. Recent work on the production and consumption of gold also indicates a decentralised system (Legarra Herrero and Martinon-Torres 2021). Even if the economic institutions of the House may not have been well suited to the scaling up of this area of the economy, they may have been sufficient for modest requirements.

As well as looking back in time, we can also look forward – which is to say, into the Final and Postpalatial periods. In LM II to early LM IIIA2, the Knossian administration appears to reach much of the island but not the far east of Crete (Bennet 1987; Knappett and Cunningham 2022). The site sees very little ‘Knossian’ material culture, such as the kylix. This pattern can then simply be seen as a continuation of Palaikastro’s long-term disinterest in the socio-economic strategies of palatial centres.

To conclude, the inhabitants of Palaikastro may have chosen a different path from other sites, one which allowed them to live together in an urban centre while resisting some of the economic strategies of the palaces that may have been destabilising. The jury is still out on whether Palaikastro truly was palace-less, though there are various indications to suggest it is a distinct possibility. At the very least, if we heed recent calls to free ourselves of the chains of social typologies and to acknowledge the institutional creativity of ancient societies (e.g. Graeber and Wengrow 2021), we may eventually arrive at more satisfying interpretations of ancient Cretan society in all its diversity.

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