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## A new ceremonial centre at Sissi (Nomos Lassithiou)

### ABSTRACT

Since 2007 the Belgian School at Athens has been exploring the hill of *Kephali tou Agiou Antoniou*, east of the village of Sissi, on the north coast of the island. The site is only three kilometres east of the palace at Malia. This paper presents evidence, mainly architectural, to claim the existence of a ceremonial complex of the Neopalatial period on the hill.

KEYWORDS: Coastal settlement, Court Centre, Santorini, Selinari Gorge, Malia, Palace

Since 2007 the Belgian School at Athens has been exploring the hill-site of *Kephali tou Agiou Antoniou* or *Bouffos*, east of the village of Sissi, on the north coast of the island. The site is only three kilometres east of the palace at Malia and seven campaigns have thus far shown how both Sissi and Malia's site histories run pretty much parallel, with both settlements founded in the middle of the 3rd millennium and deserted at the end of the Bronze Age. Ongoing studies are clarifying the similarities and differences in the production and consumption of material culture between the two sites, but, taking into account the theme of movement and mobility, in this paper only the discovery of a new ceremonial complex is considered because of its obvious importance as a destination for the gathering of larger groups of people whose origin is, however, for the moment unclear.

Our story in fact starts already in 1992 when the author noted a large, white-plastered sandstone ashlar block on the south-eastern lower terrace of the summit plateau of the hill in the area which would later be called Zone 6.<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1) This block was intriguing but nothing in the immediate area then provided clues as to its function. From 2008 onwards, the area east of this ashlar block has been under excavation under the supervision of Dr. Simon Jusseret, later joined by Dr. Maud Devolder, Dr. Sylviane Déderix, Thérèse Claeys and Ophélie Mouthuy. Excavation first concentrated on the easternmost part of this lower terrace where a few large blocks were visible on the surface. These blocks subsequently were seen to form part of the Postpalatial

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\* The present paper is based on information kindly provided by the different area supervisors responsible for the excavation of the ceremonial complex: S. Jusseret (2008-2011; 2015), M. Devolder (2015-2016), S. Déderix (2015), T. Claeys (2016) and O. Mouthuy (2016). Plans are by E. Zografou, aerials by N. Kress. References to earlier work in this area can be found in *Sissi* I, II and III. We thank the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and the Archaeological Service of East Crete for making this work possible. Financial aid came from the Institute for Aegean Prehistory, the ARC 'A World in Crisis?', the Belgian School at Athens, the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (Recherche), the Belgian FNRS, the Gilles Hondius Foundation, the Andante Travel Archaeology Award 2015, and a series of private sponsors, to whom we are most grateful. More detailed information can be found in *Sissi* IV (forthcoming).

<sup>1</sup> *Sissi* I, 41; *Sissi* III, 22, fig. 1.4.



Fig. 1. Aerial view of the Kefali or Buffo at Sissi at the end of the 2016 Campaign (N. Kress ©Sissi Project).



Fig. 2. Kernos against the west façade of Building F (J. Driessen ©Sissi Project).

reoccupation of the area.<sup>2</sup> This reoccupation, which probably formed a domestic construction, called Building F, eradicated some of the earlier plan and most of the earlier deposits within. Moreover, it was here that, in 2009, we came across a live mortar grenade which interrupted the work and forced us to invite the Greek Army to conduct demining activities before we could resume the exploration in 2010. It was only in 2011 then that the west façade of this Building F could be cleared. This façade, however, was surprising because of several features: not only did it form a straight line of more than 20 m long, only interrupted by two entrances with substantial thresholds, but it also preserved a foundation of fine flat limestone slabs originally meant to carry an ashlar elevation, fragments of which were recovered. Most remarkable was the presence, immediately south of one of the entrances, of a large stone *kernos* formed by an oblong limestone block, set on its own low platform. (Fig. 2) Although its top is somewhat eroded – it more or less formed the modern surface here before we started excavating – at least 19 small oval hollows along its edge and at least nine larger hollows in its centre are preserved. Both its position and the fact that it was given permanency seem to suggest it played a significant role, not unlike the finer example at nearby Malia.<sup>3</sup> We assume it dates back to the Neopalatial period, an assumption afterwards confirmed by tests in the court and inside Building F. Moreover, during the same season, we came across a large deposit of cups of various types and rhyta within Building F. This was interpreted as a building deposit by Dr. Ilaria Caloi and dated to the advanced MM IIIB phase.<sup>4</sup> During the 2011 excavation campaign we also explored the immediate

<sup>2</sup> *Sissi I*, 157-161; *Sissi II*, 163-172; *Sissi III*, 135-154. These reports should be consulted for details.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapouthier 1928 for the Malia example and Cucuzza 2010 for a recent appreciation of such slabs.

<sup>4</sup> I. Caloi, 'Feasting or not? A Neopalatial ceramic deposit from Sissi (North-central Crete)', *2015 AIA Meeting (New Orleans)*.



Fig. 3. Bench with hollows against the north façade of the court (J. Driessen ©Sissi Project).

area in front of Building F's west façade and found a pebble-and-plaster surface, unusual as street cover but quite common where open courts are concerned. Moreover, façade and court continued both to the north and south. We then opened a trench perpendicular to the northernmost part of the west façade of Building F and found an east-west wall of large limestone boulders with a bench against it. (Fig. 3) Strangely enough this bench has 12 artificial oval hollows, each ca. 10 cm in diameter, the purpose of which remains

unclear; our ground stone specialist, Dr. Christina Tsoraki, confirmed the intentional act that led to their creation and identified possible grinding traces within them (pers. com.). By the very end of the 2011 campaign – which was also the last of our first 5-year programme – this east-west wall was found to abut to the west against a north-south running sandstone ashlar façade parallel to the north-south west façade of Building F. It was only then that we started to conceive the possibility that we were in fact, unexpectedly, excavating a court-centred building. In view of the presence of a major palatial centre with large central court at nearby Malia and taking into account the size of the Sissi settlement – never more than 3 ha – we remained sceptical.

When we returned in 2015 to start our second five-year programme, we intended to continue the excavation of the court and surrounding areas, expecting a rectangular court and a right-angled building complex. We asked Dr. Apostolos Sarris (Laboratory of Geophysical-Satellite Remote Sensing & Archaeo-environment, I.M.S.-FORTH, Rethymno) to conduct a geophysical survey of the area during the first days of the excavation. Because earlier geophysical surveys at Sissi, presented in our first excavation report, had been unsuccessful<sup>5</sup> and because, on Crete, GPR surveys had thus far only had limited results, we were somewhat reluctant. To our surprise, the combined GPR, magnetic and resistivity surveys of Zone 6 produced a very clear signal, suggesting the presence of a large, more or less rectangular open area which, however, did not comply with the orientation of the court we expected since the presumed court was sitting somewhat diagonally on the visible remains. (Fig. 4) The radar also hinted at the presence of individual rooms to the northwest and of a rectangular structure with differing orientation to the southwest. The following excavations during both 2015 and 2016 have confirmed the hypothetical plan suggested by the radar and the results are here briefly summarised, pending details once the architecture and pottery deposits have been properly studied.

For the moment, we are still hesitant to talk about a single complex which is why the different wings around the court have been given different labels (F to L). (Fig. 5) The court itself is made of plaster and pebbles. It is quite well preserved and can be traced easily, connecting the different structures up until now on three sides. It is, for the moment, at least 40 m long but no southern limit has thus far been found. Since, however, the edge of the terrace in this direction is only

<sup>5</sup> *Sissi I*, 25-26, fig. 1.6.

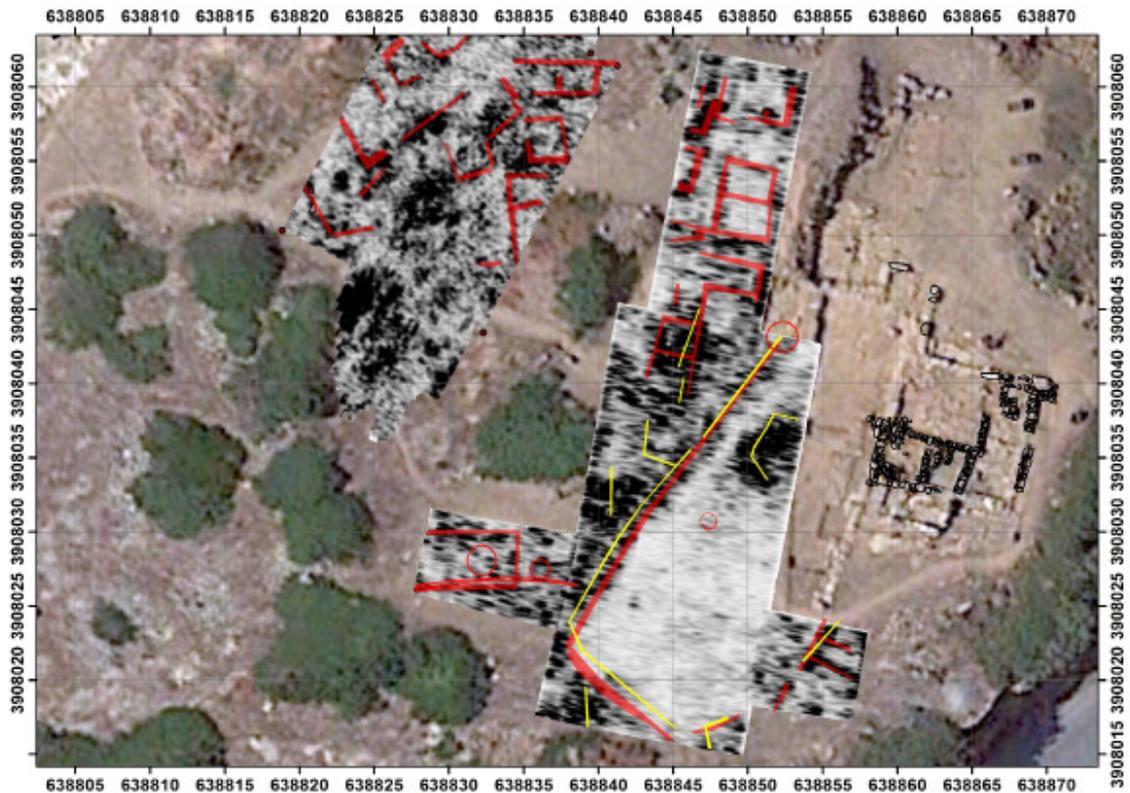


Fig. 4. Combined geophysical results for Area 6 at Sissi showing outline of central court (A. Sarris, IMS ©Sissi Project).

3 m further to the south, the court cannot be much longer and needs some kind of retaining wall. This also means that, if there were constructions to the south of the court, they must have been built on the lower terrace, which then also implies that the view south from the court may have been largely open, to the Selena Mountains. The width of the court varies from only 9.60 m, to the very north, up to 15.30 m somewhere in its centre, opposite the south corner of the east façade of the court. It may even be wider to the very south. In any case, it seems to have had a trapezoidal shape. *In toto*, its surface approaches 430 m<sup>2</sup>.<sup>6</sup> Using Gerry Gesell's numbers to obtain a vague idea of the number of people the court could have contained, we arrive at 537 people standing close together or 172 people milling about.<sup>7</sup> We had no problem, for example, fitting the 2016 excavation team of 70 people in a small part of it! Despite careful digging and apart from isolated sherds, nothing of interest was found on the court's surface although we have hopes that, once processed, the archaeobotanical, phytolith and micromorphological samples taken may still provide information. What we did find about 30 m south of the north bench and more or less in the centre of the court was a quite well preserved circular structure of burnt clay. It has a diameter of a little bit less than 90 cm and is preserved for a height of less than 30 cm. (Fig. 6) There is no entry hole and apart from burnt earth and ashes within, only a few large stones which had been placed in it afterwards were found. No burnt sherds or slag were

<sup>6</sup> Incidentally, this makes it larger than the court at Galatas (35×15 m), Zakros (30×12 m) or Petras (13×6 m).

<sup>7</sup> Gesell 1987.

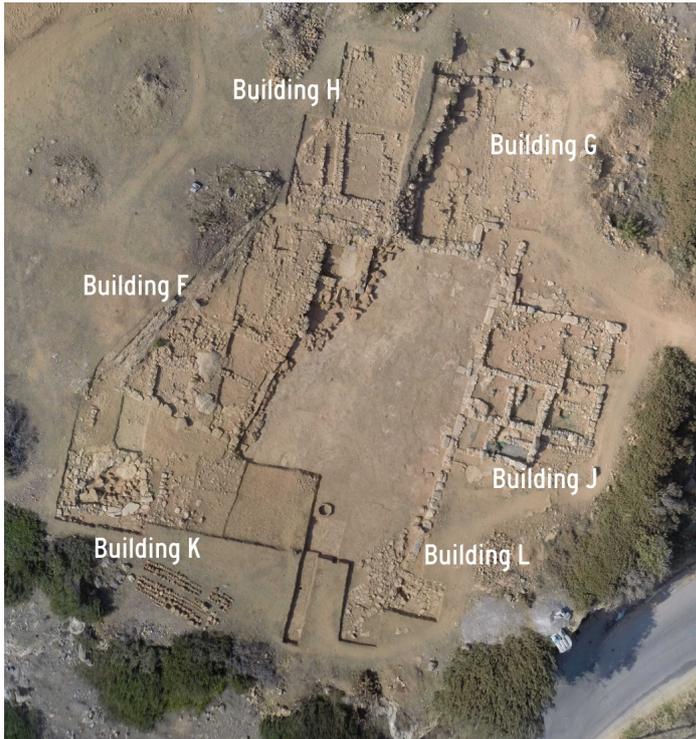


Fig. 5. Aerial view of the Ceremonial Complex at Sissi (N. Kress ©Sissi Project).

found nearby and there is no indication that the structure was domed. In shape and size, it resembles Levantine tabuns or tannurs, bread ovens in which the loaves were stuck against either the outside or the inside.<sup>8</sup> It could also simply be some kind of lighting device which could mean that the court was also used at night. If this last interpretation is correct, we may wonder whether the structure in the court at Malia had a similar function.<sup>9</sup> In the silt layers above the court, we came across a few exceptional objects at two specific spots: to the very northwest, in the corner formed by the sandstone ashlar façade and the bench bordering the court to the north, a series of fragmentary terracotta animal figurines was collected, including parts of hollow horses and a solid bull figurine. (Fig. 7) Since these are not painted and they are not associated with pottery, they are difficult to date, but their clay seems Postminoan rather than Minoan. The least this suggests is a later Postminoan visit to this particular part of the site and as such it is unique where Sissi is concerned. It also underlines the role of the area as a place of remembrance in collective memory. Apart from certain Postminoan



Fig. 6. Circular burnt structure on the court at Sissi (J. Driessen ©Sissi Project).

<sup>8</sup> I thank J. Haywood and L. Hitchcock for providing comparative material.

<sup>9</sup> The structure found in the Malia court was sunken and comprises several small pillars. It did contain, however, charcoal and ash. It is usually interpreted as a *bothros*, *eschara* or ritual hearth (cf. Pelon 2002, 115 with references). As to the Sissi installation, there is disagreement amongst us whether the structure was built on the court or whether it was dug into the later levels, stopping on the level of the court.



Fig. 7. Figurines from the northwest corner of the court; cat. N° 10-06-2061-OB004 (leg), 11-06-4083-OB001 (horse's body), 11-06-4061-OB001 (horse's head) and 15-06-1061-OB004 (bull) (C. Papanikolopoulos ©Sissi Project).

sherds – including Hellenistic and Early Byzantine – that were found in later levels of the court, we also have some odd finds that need further study of their contextual associations to decide whether they could be Minoan. This includes the head of a figurine with stuck-on hair braid and a collection of several dozen miniature kylikes that originally probably formed a composite kernos. Although early Archaic Gortyn has yielded such composite kernoï, our miniature goblets find a good parallel in examples from the peak sanctuary at Vrysinas where they are dated to the Neopalatial period.<sup>10</sup>

The court hence forms an important part or even, if we consider its proportional size, the essence of the complex. We have already mentioned how Building F, the presumed east wing, was largely reused during the Postpalatial period and from here come some fine LM IIIB vases. This is, for the moment, the only area which was reoccupied after the Neopalatial period, since the other wings, which we have provisionally labelled Buildings G to L, seem already to have been abandoned in Late Minoan IA, and perhaps rather early during this phase. Building G, the north wing, was badly preserved because of agricultural activities and very little pottery was retrieved since the floor levels had often been removed. The amount of plaster found in the west part of this wing, however, was impressive and suggests that the entire building was amply plastered. The scanty architectural remains allow the identification of a double staircase and a long, wide corridor, originally paved. In one space there is a potential column base (or the foundation for one) as well as part of a floor made of terracotta slabs, similar to floor panels encountered at Malia, Palaikastro and Zakros.<sup>11</sup> There is almost a 2 m difference between this floor panel in Building G and the floor level to the west, in Building H, which is on a higher terrace. Only one large room here has been partly explored, however, and some Neopalatial cups retrieved. All the other spaces here, from the very northwest to the southeast in Building J, have yielded extensive Prepalatial remains, sometimes quite well preserved, which suggests that the Neopalatial structure was simply placed on top of and around existing ruins of the Early Minoan IIB phase.

<sup>10</sup> Tzachili 2016, eik. 4; Flevari 2016, 178-180, pin. 57.

<sup>11</sup> Shaw 2009, 139-140, fig. 242.



Fig. 8. West façade of the court showing a collapsed stepped platform and potential Prepalatial terrace wall in the middle, stretches of ashlar façades to the north and south, as well paved room 6.17 behind the north stretch of the façade (N. Kress ©Sissi Project).

Most of the Neopalatial structure, however, has disappeared apart from the wall lines. These Prepalatial contexts include at least one obsidian deposit (we found more than 700 tiny flakes within an area of less than 1 m<sup>2</sup> suggesting that these may originally have been in a perishable container) but also many goat horn cores, some gold foil, much pottery and several examples of mottled wares.<sup>12</sup> These deposits seem stratified against an impressive terrace wall made of large boulders which seems to have played an important role in the architectural development of the court complex as a whole. Rather than being torn down when the Neopalatial complex was constructed, it was maintained and structured the rest of the construction. It formed the core of the Neopalatial reconstruction in this area. Although architectural phasing still has to be refined, it is almost certain that the north and south parts of the, originally plastered, east façade of the West Wing or Building J were constructed at the same time (Fig. 8): both parts have a 45 cm lower course of cut hard dark grey limestone and a 40 cm second course of sandstone ashlar. But both parts do not form a single façade: the north part starts off in a north-south line, parallel to the west façade of Building F, for a distance of less than 4 m. Then there is an opening taken up by the collapse of what we believe was not a normal staircase but rather a stepped structure which served to provide access both to a single room (6.17) and to a raised platform built against the Prepalatial terrace wall. At least four wide steps can be reconstructed, some of which were plastered. What was standing or who was sitting on the ca. 1 by 1 m wide platform remains a mystery but stepped platforms are frequent in Minoan religious iconography and architecture.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> These were presented at the 12th International Congress of Cretan Studies by Ilaria Caloi.

<sup>13</sup> Good examples exist at Nirou Chani, Kastelli Pediada, Chania Splantzia, etc.

In view of the straight façades surrounding the court at Sissi, this stepped platform must have been quite an eye-catcher. Square room 6.17 next to it was accessible both from the outside as well as from within the building but, apart from a large fragmentary lamp, it did not yield any finds. It surprises because of the refinement of its execution with walls brightly painted with orange-red painted plaster, as were the benches against its west and north walls; a plaster basin was set into the floor in the southwest corner but the rest of the room was paved with one very large yellow slab and a mosaic floor of dark blue slabs, again lined with coloured plaster. This room perhaps formed some kind of preparation area and a transition between the inside of the building and the stepped platform. To some degree it also reminds one of the so-called Loggia at Malia. Stepped platform and paved room 6.17 were placed in front of the Prepalatial terrace wall which, more to the south, is abutted by the continuation of the limestone and ashlar façade which runs for another 12 m before turning west. Parts of the sandstone second course of this south stretch are preserved but in the centre it is gone. The rooms behind this façade are badly preserved but in one instance a white plastered floor and some Neopalatial cups remained. The south façade of this west wing or Building J can be followed for a length of about 9 m till it stops against the rising bedrock to the west. Now it has become clear that the plastered ashlar block already noted in 1992 in fact comes from this façade but became slightly displaced. Much of this southern façade is still plastered. As to the rising bedrock, it is very likely that the entire building was in fact placed within a large depression in the plateau of the hill and that the upper bedrock ledge once served as foundation for the west façade of the complex. Only a single block of this original façade seems to be preserved, unfortunately. South of the south façade is another structure, already located by the Georadar, here labelled Building K. Its excavation is unfinished but it is evidently an underground construction in which plenty of sandstone ashlar had fallen. Its south façade too had ashlar blocks. Perhaps its sunken nature implies a link with water storage, similar to structures found in and near the Zakros palace. The orientation of Building K differs again from that of the other structures and it could conceivably be somewhat later, but the ashlar used is identical to that used for the façades of the main complex. Excavation here is unfinished but a test between the south façade of Building J (the West Wing) and the sunken building K yielded a dense layer of redeposited material which included much pottery associated with tephra lapilli from Santorini.<sup>14</sup> These tephra lapilli and the assorted LM IA sherds represent, for the moment, the most western attested case of pure wind-deposited tephra on Crete. No tephra has thus far been found within the buildings, however, so we cannot yet be absolutely sure whether the eruption did in fact cause the abandonment of the complex, which, on the basis of some of the remaining cups that survived the abandonment, could already have happened somewhat earlier. Finally, we have started to explore the area to the southeast of the court which we have provisionally labelled Building L. Its west façade is differently constructed from that of the spaces to the north, our initial Building F, but the pebble-and-plaster court also stops against this façade. Moreover, a test within also yielded Neopalatial pottery, including a small askos with spiral decoration. But it is clear also that its façade starts turning west, forming almost a rounded edge to the court on this side, as was suggested by the GPR survey. (Fig. 4)

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<sup>14</sup> I thank Prof. Christine Lane of Cambridge University for this identification.

It must be clear from this brief description that there is surprisingly little evidence that helps us to understand the function of the complex apart from an obvious public ceremonial one. This is alluded to by elaboration of the court, the stepped platform, the ashlar façades, the presumed fire pit or oven but also by the stone kernos and the bench with hollows. The figurines and terracotta kernos may also point in the same direction, as does the potential feasting deposit from within Building F. If its interpretation as a building or foundation deposit commemorating a major construction event in the history of the building is correct, the variety of cups which can be classified in half a dozen specific groups suggests the participation of around 130-150 people in the ceremony which led to the structured deposition of the vases.<sup>15</sup>

As far as we can judge for the moment, the complex dates to the late Middle Minoan IIIB and early Late Minoan IA phase, i.e. to a moment during which the palace at Malia was also in use. It hence duplicates to some degree the ceremonial function of the latter which, at the least, suggests some regional decentralisation during the early Neopalatial period. How to interpret this remains to be seen: was it a political move facilitated by one of Malia's competitors (i.e. Knossos) or an initiative by local Sissiot groups to claim some kind of independence from their mighty neighbour? The somewhat diverging orientations of the various wings and the absence of a clear master plan as well as the importance of the Prepalatial terrace wall in the structure, all suggest that it was a local, perhaps stepwise initiative, betraying some kind of provincialism with a general reference to an existing palatial model. The rapid abandonment of the complex is as interesting as its construction. Was this again a local decision or enforced by the mighty neighbour? Or did the Santorini eruption play a role in its demise?

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<sup>15</sup> Caloi (supra n. 6).

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