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Early Iron Age Knossos and the development of the city of the historical period

ABSTRACT

Knossos is widely considered one of the most prosperous Aegean communities in the Early Iron Age, particularly on the basis of finds from its cemeteries. Because of later disturbance, it has not been possible to document the accompanying settlement very clearly. This paper revisits the evidence for the nature and extent of the settlement, integrating recent fieldwork with evidence from earlier excavations in the settlement and cemeteries.

The Knossos Urban Landscape Project (KULP) recovered an unusually rich assemblage of ceramics from the Early Iron Age, a period that is typically under-represented in Aegean surveys. The abundance of data provides a relatively strong basis for a detailed understanding of the size and organization of the community and its development for nearly half a millennium. The surface exploration documented a wide scatter of ceramics, including in areas not previously intensively investigated. The site is shown to have been considerably larger than previously assumed already in the Protogeometric period (10th-9th centuries BCE). The continuous distribution of material also demonstrates the expansion of a large nucleated community from a smaller core, which almost certainly survived from the Late Bronze Age. Survey in the areas of some of the dispersed cemeteries revealed no evidence for dispersed villages associated with each cemetery, refuting the model of polis formation through synoecism for Knossos. This new understanding of the settlement corresponds much better with the significance given to the site through its burial evidence, and challenges previous interpretations of the nature and extent of the settlement during the Early Iron Age.

KEYWORDS: Knossos, Crete, Aegean, Early Iron Age, Sub-Minoan, Protogeometric, Geometric, Orientalising, urbanism, urbanisation, surface survey, urban survey

INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Aegean palaces at the end of the Bronze Age is traditionally associated with a range of gloomy phenomena, including depopulation and settlement fragmentation, poverty in material culture, and the demise of contacts within the Aegean and the Mediterranean (e.g. Kotsonas 2016, 241-242). Research in Knossos of the Early Iron Age has long challenged this impression and suggests that the site remained prosperous (Coldstream 2004; 2006; Hatzaki

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and Kotsonas forthcoming). Indeed, Knossos is the only Early Iron Age Aegean site with imports ranging from the Middle East to Sardinia (Kotsonas 2008, 295). However, past fieldwork has not documented enough the nature and extent of the settlement of Early Iron Age Knossos. Sandwiched between the thick Minoan and Roman levels, the Early Iron Age remains largely consist of partly preserved rooms and wells. On the contrary, defensible sites on Cretan hilltops, established in the transition to the Early Iron Age, are much better understood, and attract most attention in discussions of the island's settlement patterns (Nowicki 2000; Wallace 2010, 49-166). By integrating the results of previous archaeological fieldwork at Knossos with the new evidence from the Knossos Urban Landscape Project (KULP), we can revisit traditional ideas about the site and the period, and address questions concerning the size and urban development of the city in the early historical period.

KNOSSIAN POTTERY OF THE EARLY IRON AGE

The Early Iron Age material collected by KULP is basically limited to pottery, and includes some 2.000 sherds from a total of ca. 90.000 diagnostic pieces. This meagre percentage is very large in relation to the amount of material of this period collected in other Aegean surveys (Stissi 2011), and provides a relatively strong basis for reconstructing the development of the community.

The study of the Early Iron pottery collected by KULP is based on the authoritative chronology and typology built by Humfry Payne (1927-28), James Brock (1957), and especially Nicolas Coldstream (1996; 2001). The fabrics of local and imported wares have been studied through chemical (Liddy 1996; Tomlinson and Kilikoglou 1998) and petrographic (Boileau and Whitley 2010; Whitley and Boileau 2015) analyses. Considerably less attention has been given to the macroscopic identification of fabrics, which is, however, essential for the study of survey material.

Macroscopically, past research has identified two or three fabrics in Knossian ceramics of the period (Coldstream 1996, 412-414; 2001, 61), but the macroscopic study I have conducted has identified nine distinct fabrics (Kotsonas *et al.* forthcoming; cf. Kotoώvας *et al.* 2012, 200-221), which correspond to a considerable extent to the fabric groups proposed through petrography (Boileau and Whitley 2010). This correspondence is illustrated in Figure 1, which necessarily simplifies a more complex picture to be fully discussed elsewhere.

Several of these fabrics were used from the Middle Minoan to the Roman period and remain unhelpful with reference to dating undiagnostic survey material. Nonetheless, local vases of the Early Iron Age often show a surface which fires to a dull brown-red colour and this provides a useful aid for dating. Coarse and cooking wares are more helpful with dating: the typical Minoan cooking fabrics do not outlast the end of the 2nd millennium BCE and two new, micaceous fabrics are introduced in the Protogeometric period. The shift in cooking pot fabrics is particularly interesting because it may be related to changes in food preparation and the mobility of populations, which characterized the transition to the Early Iron Age (e.g. Karageorghis and Kouka 2011).¹ Additionally, there are two pithos fabrics which were found to be typical of the

¹ The micaceous fabrics are introduced early in the Protogeometric period (Coldstream 2000b; Kotsonas 2012, 161), not in the Protogeometric B period as many scholars believe (Coldstream 1996, 346-347; Τσιποπούλου 2005, 59 no. HΔ2, 121 no. H3694, 358; Ρεθεμιωτάκης and Εγγλέζου 2010, 135; Boileau and Whitley 2010, 238, 241; Karageorghis

Basic macroscopic characteristics of fabrics commonly seen in Early Iron Age pottery from Knossos	Fabric codes used for KULP purposes	Corresponding fabric groups used in the petrographic analysis by Boileau and Whitley 2010
Light red, fine fabric	А	Fabric group 6
Light red, with grey-bluish inclusions	В	Fabric groups 2 and 5
Light red to pink, with grey-bluish and white inclusions	С	Fabric group 1
Light red to pink, with few grey-bluish and white inclusions and much organic tempering	D	Fabric group 1
Light red to red, with much silver mica, some dark grey and off-white inclusions, and few schist flakes of varied colour	E	Not sampled
Grey, fine fabric (fired in reducing conditions)	F	Loners nos 182-183
Light red to red, with much silver mica and dark, white and dark (red-)brown inclusions	G	Fabric group 4
Light red, with off-white, grey, dark grey and rarely red and white inclusions	Н	Not sampled
Light reddish brown, with white and dark inclusions and little silver mica	I	Fabric group 7

Fig. 1. Basic macroscopic characteristics of fabrics commonly seen in Early Iron Age pottery from Knossos, including the correspondence between the fabric codes used for KULP and the fabric groups defined in the petrographic analysis by Boileau and Whitley (2010).

Orientalizing and Archaic periods: one is characterized by extensive use of organic tempering, the other is micaceous and probably originates from the Pediada region, southeast of Knossos (on Archaic pithoi from Pediada, see Brisart 2007).

This work on fabrics enables the assignment of dates to many sherds that preserve no diagnostic characteristics of shape or decoration, the kind of material that is usually discarded and is systematically excluded from study and publication in most excavations and surveys. The dating of this kind of material is mostly quite broad, but it is relevant to the understanding of long-term patterns and processes. The quantity and quality of data available from KULP, in addition to earlier fieldwork, are highly significant for the study of the development of Knossos in the Early Iron Age.

et al. 2014, *passim*; Whitley and Boileau 2015, 84-85). The provenance of the micaceous fabrics remains unsettled, and has been traced as far as East Crete (Coldstream 2000b) or the Cyclades (Boileau and Whitley 2010, 233-234; Whitley and Boileau 2015, 84-86). I believe that these fabrics are local to central Crete, and perhaps come from the vicinity of Lyktos (Kotsonas 2008, 65; 2012, 160-165). The relevant clay beds will not be located without dedicated prospection.



Fig. 2. City and environs, EIA identified pottery and known EIA tombs.

Fig. 3. Clusters of EIA tombs in the Knossos valley and Alexiou's model of "dispersed villages".

THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF THE SETTLEMENT

The distribution pattern of material from this period was recognized as surprisingly extensive since preliminary study of the pottery by Whitelaw in the first years of the project (Grammatikaki *et al.* 2005-06, 108; Bredaki *et al.* 2006-07, 108; Whitelaw *et al.* 2006-2007, 30; Bennet *et al.* 2007, 106-107; Μπρεδάκη *et al.* 2010, 296; Κοτσώνας *et al.* 2012, 221-224; Kotsonas *et al.* forthcoming). Fairly dense scatters of sherds from this period extend over a wide area, from the west bank of the Kairatos river to the west slopes of the Acropolis hill, and from the north slopes of the Gypsadhes hill to roughly midway between the Minoan palace and the Kephala hill (Fig. 2). This area is very extensive relative to the norm for Aegean sites of the Early Iron Age. Although this distribution pattern includes both domestic and burial contexts, which must be distinguished (see below), it suggests that Early Iron Age Knossos was a large and nucleated settlement.

This impression that emerges from KULP calls into question previous interpretations of the nature and extent of the settlement of Early Iron Age Knossos. Stylianos Alexiou was the first to consider the question in 1950 (Fig. 3; A λ ɛ{(ou 1950, 296-297). To account for the different cemeteries and burial plots found around the Knossos valley, Alexiou suggested that Knossos in this period was small in size and was surrounded by a number of villages, each with its own burial ground. In his view, habitation in the Knossos valley was scattered, and the later polis emerged through synoecism, as Aristotle explains (*Politics* 1252b).



Fig. 4. Coldstream's estimate of the extent of the EIA settlement, EIA material recovered by KULP and known tombs.

No evidence for such villages was identified by KULP in the vicinity of the Fortetsa cemetery, nor has any such evidence been recognised in the area around the North Cemetery that was available to be surveyed. More distant satellite sites were not identified in the area surveyed by KULP, and those known to date lie further away (Ρεθεμιωτάκης and Εγγλέζου 2010, 198-199). It therefore appears that the spread of cemeteries in the Knossos valley is not connected to the nature of habitation but depended on landscape morphology and the availability of favourable locations for the cutting of chamber tombs in the soft limestone hill slopes, a similar pattern to

the Late Bronze Age. At the same time, the creation and long-term use of distinct cemeteries surrounding the site seem likely to represent social divisions within the community (cf. Kotsonas 2011; Antoniadis 2017, 46-49).

A different interpretation of the character of the settlement of Early Iron Age Knossos emerged among the British excavators in the late 20th century (e.g. Hood and Smyth 1981, 16-18; Coldstream 1984). According to this, the Knossos of the period in question was nucleated and served by the surrounding cemeteries, but remained small in size. Satellite settlements, including a coastal site under modern Herakleion, were located at a considerable distance. The principal proponent of this view, Nicolas Coldstream (1984; 2000a, 260-261; 2004, 59-61; 2006, 584-588), envisaged a nucleated settlement extending from the area of the Minoan palace to the east slopes of the Acropolis hill (Fig. 4), and believed that the site expanded considerably to the north in the late 8th century BCE. One could relate this argument to the rise in the number of burials that is attested in 8th century BCE Knossos (Cavanagh 1996, 659-664; scepticism is expressed in Antoniadis 2017, 51-53). Population estimates for Coldstream's "small Knossos" vary considerably, but concur on a peak in the 8th century BCE (Whitelaw 2000, 225, Table 1; Morris 2006, 74; Hall 2014, 75).

Coldstream's rejection of Alexiou's case for dispersed occupation is convincing, but his argument for a relatively "small Knossos" is questionable. Indeed, it is challenged by the recent excavation of evidence for Protogeometric occupation in a small test trench under the central part of the Roman Villa Dionysus. In Coldstream's view, a distinct Protogeometric hamlet is represented by

this site, which lies less than 300m north of the northern limit of his reconstruction of Early Iron Age Knossos (Coldstream 2000a, 299; Coldstream and Hatzaki 2003, 299-300). However, this find can now be seen to lie well within the wide scatter of Early Iron Age – including Protogeometric – material revealed by KULP.

The argument for a "large Knossos" fits the picture of prosperity that is indicated by the rich discoveries made in its extensive cemeteries (Brock 1957; Coldstream and Catling 1996; Antoniadis 2017). Indeed, Coldstream has observed that: "if the size of a community were measured by its cemeteries, then Early Greek Knossos would be by far the largest city of its time in the Aegean world" (Coldstream 2006, 584; cf. 1984, 312; 2004, 62). The Homeric epics also suggest the authority of the site by having Idomeneus, the king of Knossos, lead the large Cretan contingent that sailed to Troy (Kotsonas 2018). Lastly, the conception of Knossos as a center of considerable economic and political influence over north central Crete pervades many recent interpretations of sites like Eltyna, Prinias, and the Idaean Cave (Matthäus 2000a, 274; 2000b, 541-542; Rizza 2008, 302; Γκαλανάκη and Παπαδάκη 2009, 272; Ρεθεμιωτάκης and Εγγλέζου 2010, 197-200).

Knossos was considerably larger than previously assumed, but gaining a finer impression of its size depends on distinguishing between domestic and burial contexts. The distinction between the two types of context is facilitated by the well-known custom of the Cretans of this period of burying their dead outside settlements. This custom is clearly identifiable in the case of Knossos, where almost every single Early Iron Age tomb known from previous fieldwork lies beyond the habitation area (the very few exceptions are questionable in their own right, since they only concern pots fitting for burial contexts, but no tomb or associated human bones).²

The distinction between settlement and cemeteries can be approached on the basis of the pottery recovered by KULP. A subtle but variable indication distinguishing between settlement and burial areas is provided by the density of surface material. Generally, the settlement is represented by relatively even and continuous scatters covering broad areas. In contrast, disturbed tombs can result in localized, high-density patches of material located beyond the continuous scatters (see Fig. 2).

In other cases, the properties of the material recovered are suggestive of a burial context (Koto ω vaç *et al.* 2012, 222-223; Kotsonas *et al.* forthcoming). Two cases in point are located high on the west slopes of the Acropolis hill, overlooking the Early Iron Age cemetery of Fortetsa (Brock 1957). In the first case, abundant material, along with the good state of preservation of the surface decoration of these ceramics, suggests a fairly recently disturbed burial context. Another nearby location produced a comparable concentration of material, including the fragment of a clay stand, a shape that is mostly found in tombs.

² Coldstream 2000a, 260, 295-296; Antoniadis 2017, 37-38. Based on some unspecified literary sources of the 4th century BCE ($\Sigma \tau \alpha \mu \pi o \lambda (\delta \eta \varsigma 1994, 48$) or Plato's *Minos* 315D ($\Sigma \tau \alpha \mu \pi o \lambda (\delta \eta \varsigma 2004, 116$), Nikolaos Stampolidis has argued that the Cretans of the historical period buried their dead *intra-muros*. The passage of *Minos*, however, does not make any reference to Crete, and there is hardly any archaeological support for this practice on the island in the Early Iron Age to Classical period, during which domestic and burial areas were typically physically separated.



Fig. 5. Distribution of pithos sherds from KULP.

Fig. 6. All EIA surface pottery and excavated deposits with suggested limit for Early Iron Age settlement.

The distributions of shapes that are typically connected with domestic contexts, such as cooking pots and pithoi, are not of much help in distinguishing between settlement and tombs, because these shapes also occur in Knossian tombs in the Early Iron Age (Coldstream 2001, 61-63). Indeed, the spread of the sherds from pithoi (Fig. 5) extends from areas that are clearly residential to known burial sites. With cooking pots, the problem is of a different nature: apparently the micaceous, low-fired, soft fabrics used in this period, which are easily distinguished from the Minoan and Roman cooking wares, do not survive well on the surface and have a very poor recovery rate.

Determining the use of the area with fairly dense EIA sherds on the Lower Gypsadhes hill as either the south end of the settlement or as burial space is uncertain, perhaps because the two different uses were in close proximity, or may even have shifted back and forth during the long period (at various stages in the MM and LM periods we can document a shifting boundary between occupation and burial, as occupation expanded or contracted). The on-going excavations of the Knossos Gypsadhes project have not yielded enough evidence for any use of space in the area east of the Sanctuary of Demeter (Coldstream 1973), but an Early Iron Age chamber tomb has been found further east (Coldstream *et al.* 1981).

By this process, we can begin to (re-)define the nature and extent of the settlement of Knossos for the period in question. Apparently, this extended from at least the upper east slopes of the

Acropolis hill to the Kairatos river, and from the Vlychia stream until roughly midway between the Minoan palace and the Kephala hill. This estimate (Fig. 6) gives a settlement that is nearly three times larger than Coldstream's Knossos and does not involve the surrounding villages proposed by Alexiou. In its 50-60 ha., the settlement would have housed a population that was substantially larger than previously assumed. The density of occupation cannot be easily estimated. The few well-explored Cretan sites of the earlier or later part of the Early Iron Age are densely built (*e.g.* Wallace 2010, 104-113, 233-260, 271-284). However, in Knossos the excavations in the area of the Unexplored Mansion and the Little Palace North have indicated the existence of unbuilt areas of considerable extent (Coldstream 1992; Hatzaki *et al.* 2008). As Coldstream noted: "Long and continuous stratified sequences in any given trench are unknown; the site of a house in one period could often become open ground in the next – and *vice versa*" (Coldstream and Hatzaki 2003, 299; cf. Coldstream 2006, 587). Depending on where one draws the boundary between settlement and cemetery, occupation will have covered some 50-60 ha., and if occupation densities were in the range of 50-100 people/ha., this would represent 2.500-6.000 inhabitants.

Knossos in the Early Iron Age was considerably different than its predecessor of the Late Minoan (LM) III period. A comparative glance at the plots of the material from the survey suggests a comparable focus for overall occupation, though the site had contracted very considerably in the LM IIIB-IIIC phases (see Cutler and Whitelaw 2018, this volume). The contrast in the quantity of material that is attributed to the two broad periods is exaggerated by problems in the diagnosticity of the LM IIIA2 to IIIC survey material (and by its currently incomplete study). However, other finds, including previous fieldwork, suggest that this picture is not entirely misleading (e.g. Hatzaki 2005). Another big change since the LM III period is the shift in the burial locations from surrounding the city on all sides, to primarily the north and west of the settlement.

The notable increase identified in the size of Knossos in the Early Iron Age begs the question on the decisive moment of expansion. Coldstream (1984, 319; 2000a, 260; 2004, 61; 2006, 587) assumed a considerable expansion to the north, and especially the northwest, in the Late Geometric period, with continued increase in the Orientalizing period. The current degree of chronological resolution does not allow for firm conclusions on the matter, but the plotting of the closely datable material of the Subminoan and Protogeometric periods (Fig. 7) on the one hand, and the Geometric and the Orientalizing periods (Fig. 8) on the other, is interesting in several respects. First, it suggests that the settlement was extensive already in the Protogeometric period, i.e. the 10th and 9th centuries BCE. There is a tendency for sherds of this date to be clustered on the eastern slopes of the Acropolis, raising the question whether this might have been the focus of the earliest post-BA settlement. On the contrary, the material of the 8th and 7th century BCE is denser in the northern half of the site (especially in the northeast section), possibly indicating a shift of focus to flatter land, which is better attested for other Cretan sites, such as Gortyn and Phaistos (Wallace 2010, 234-238).

The growth of the settlement at the beginning of the Early Iron Age is very comparable to the Late Prepalatial growth both in scale and rapidity. While human populations can grow that rapidly, when colonising new territory, this is less likely in an already populated landscape. So



Fig. 7. All Sub-Minoan and Protogeometric pottery, surface and excavated, and excavated tombs, with suggested limit for settlement in this period.

Fig. 8. All Geometric and Orientalising pottery, surface and excavated, and excavated tombs, with suggested limit for settlement in this period.

we may be seeing multiple processes at work, both internal population growth, but also some pulling-in of rural populations to the new opportunities offered by a developing urban economy.

There is some evidence for continuity in the layout of the settlement of Early Iron Age Knossos. Indeed, the area of the Roman Villa Dionysus has yielded walls of the 10th to 9th century BCE that show similar orientation to walls of the late 8th century BCE (Coldstream and Hatzaki 2003, 300). The burial locations used by the Knossians in the Early Iron Age also do not change considerably between the Protogeometric period on the one hand, and the Geometric and Orientalizing on the other (Antoniadis 2017, 29-38). Large clusters of tombs occur to the north and the west, and only isolated finds to the east and the south.

CONCLUSION

The picture that emerges from KULP, integrated with data from excavations conducted in the Knossos valley for over a century, has the settlement of Knossos occupy a fairly extensive area of some 50-60 ha. during the Early Iron Age. This picture best explains the data available and ties in well with many current interpretations. Unlike previous assumptions, the settlement was strongly nucleated and very large by the standards of the period. More distant satellite sites were not identified in the area surveyed by KULP and any that exist must be located further away. The

proposed re-evaluation of the extent of Knossos in the Early Iron Age is particularly important for the diachronic study of the site, as well as the study of the settlement history of Crete and the Aegean of this period. It appears that Knossos recovered quickly from the upheavals of the late 2nd millennium, grew rapidly in size, and flourished as a cosmopolitan hub of the Aegean and the Mediterranean in a way that revolutionizes our understanding of the Greek Early Iron Age.

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