

Pseira VI

The Pseira Cemetery 1. The Surface Survey



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The archaeological excavations at Pseira, Crete, were sponsored by Temple University, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, by the Archaeological Institute of Crete, and by the Archaeological Society of Crete.

PREHISTORY MONOGRAPH 5

Pseira VI

The Pseira Cemetery 1. The Surface Survey

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Preface

Cemeteries in Minoan Crete were always outside the towns. Both adults and children were buried in communal graves in the early centuries of the Minoan era, but individual burial, often in jars or other containers, gradually became more popular during the Middle Minoan period. In eastern Crete, as elsewhere on the Minoan island, the cemeteries were an important aspect of Bronze Age culture. They provided the society with an essential part of its self-cognition, and those who had their final repose there were clearly a focus of community life both at the time of burial and in later years.

Because cemeteries were such an essential aspect of Minoan culture, they provide a useful series of documents in the reconstruction of Minoan belief-systems. The evidence demonstrates their persistent role in Minoan life, and it shows that the religious practices that occur in the towns of the Late Bronze Age were often a development from practices that had been associated with cemeteries in earlier periods. Many of the most persistent Minoan religious symbols, like

horn-shaped objects, women holding snakes, and humans grappling with bulls, are first known to us through objects found in cemeteries.

Investigation of the cemetery was an important aspect of the research plan for Pseira Island. Although Richard Seager almost completely excavated the burial ground in 1907, the absence of a final publication on the early work has seriously hampered our understanding of the island's history. The settlement on Pseira Island can only be understood if the important evidence from its cemetery is described as fully as possible, so that the information it provides can be integrated with the other knowledge we have about the site's people and their history. The cemetery investigation was conducted over a period of several years, and it involved work by many individuals. In addition to the excavation of the tombs, the methodology required an intensive examination of the surface of the cemetery and the collection and recording of objects visible above ground. This volume presents the results of that surface survey.

Philip P. Betancourt

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The archaeological investigation of the cemetery on Pseira Island was a part of the Pseira Project, an American-Greek collaboration (*synergasia*) directed jointly by Philip P. Betancourt and Costis Davaras. The project was sponsored by Temple University, the Archaeological Institute of Crete, and the Archaeological Society of Crete, under the auspices of the Greek Ministry of Culture and the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. Additional financial assistance for the work published in this volume was given by the following: the Institute for Aegean Prehistory; the National Endowment for the Humanities, an independent federal agency; The Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada; the Society for the Preservation of the Greek Heritage; the Arcadia Foundation; the Mellon Corporation; Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario; The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology; and other donors.

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The survey of the cemetery began with preliminary examinations of the island of Pseira in 1985 and 1986, followed by an intensive walking survey carried out in 1988 and 1989. Mapping and

surveying was by David D. Day (1987–88) using a Topcon DM-A2 EDM (Electronic Distance Meter) generously loaned to the excavation by Don Anderson, of the Anderson Instrument and Supply Company, Canton, OH, to whom the project is greatly indebted.

In 1993–94, a team of surveyors prepared a topographic map of the cemetery site. Participants included Joan Beaudoin (Supervisor, 1993), Hilary Brown (1993), William B. Hafford (1994), Leigh-Ann Bingham (1994), Sheila Lin (1994), James L. Wilson (1994), Katherine May (1993–94), George Mitrakis (1993–94), and Lada Onyshkevych (Supervisor, 1994). Field photographs are by Michael W. Betancourt (1986–91), Philip P. Betancourt (1986–94), and Richard Hope Simpson (1986–91). Profile drawings are by Michael W. Betancourt (1990), Leigh-Ann Bingham (1994), Senta German (1989), Krista Gustafson (1990–91), Jenny Hope Simpson (1989, 1991), Teresa Howard (1986–91), Sheila Lin (1994), Marie T. Naples (1990–91), Jeanne Pond (1990), Sharon Rathke (1989), Chrysostomos Theodorou (1989), Eleni Velona (1990), and Philip P. Betancourt. Assistance with editing was provided by Joan Beaudoin, Hilary Brown, Katherine May, Andrea Powers, and Louise Langford.

Several staff members participated in the walking survey of the cemetery, under the direction of Richard Hope Simpson: Diane Dunn (1989–90), Tom Fleming (1989), George Harrison (1990), David Marko (1988), George Mitrakis (1988–90), Meryn Scott (1988–90), and Catherine Wolfitt (1988).

Additional survey and data processing was accomplished by Harrison Eiteljorg II, Katherine May, Lada Onyshkevych, and William B. Hafford. Data processing was conducted at the Department

of Art History Archaeological Laboratory, Temple University, and at the Center for the Study for Architecture, Bryn Mawr College. Louise Langford prepared the graphic layouts.

Part I
Introduction

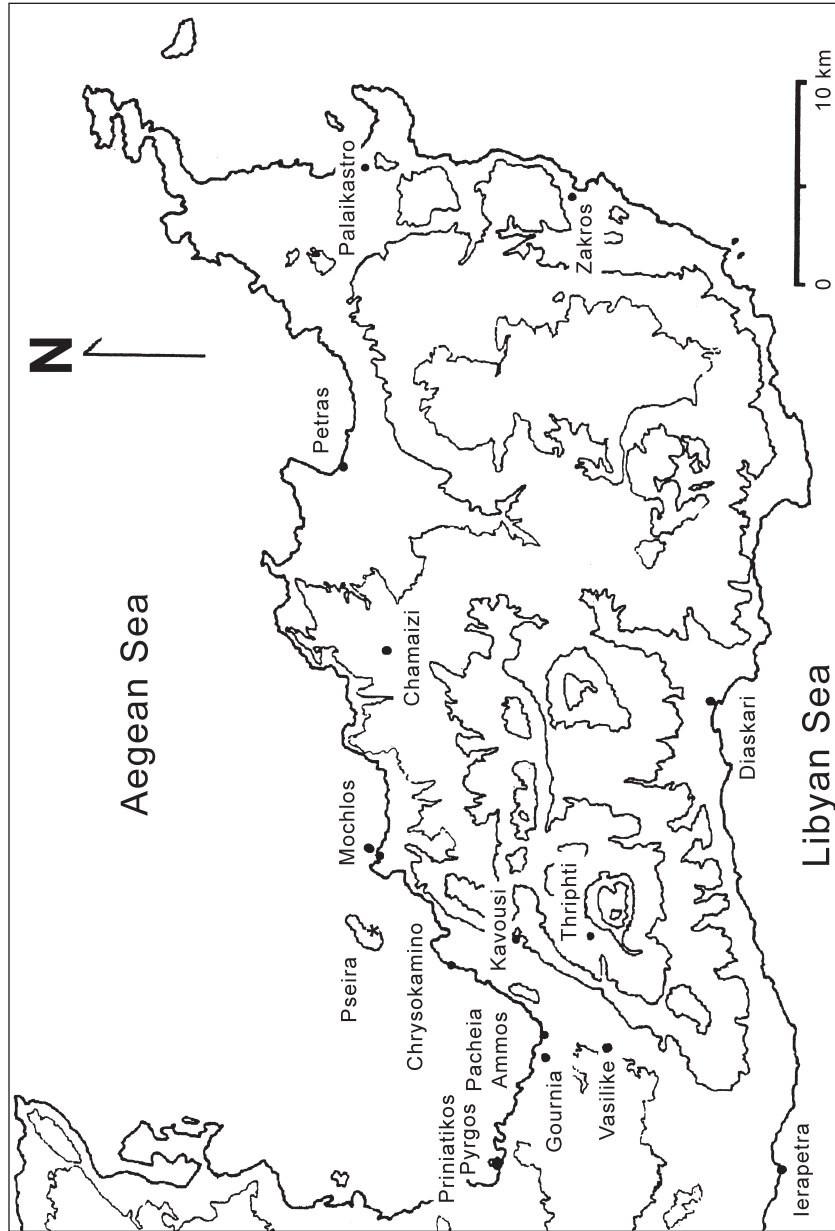


Illustration 1. Map of eastern Crete.

Introduction to the Cemetery Investigations

*Philip P. Betancourt, Costis Davaras, Julie Ann Clark,
William R. Farrand, and Carola H. Stearns*

Pseira is a small island on the eastern side of the Gulf of Mirabello in northeastern Crete (Ill. 1). The island is a little over two kilometers at its greatest dimension, with a maximum width of one kilometer (Ill. 2). It is oriented northeast-southwest. The island's northwest side, facing the open sea, is steep and almost inaccessible, while the opposite side, toward Crete, is lower and more inviting. Pseira's human settlement began in the Neolithic period when new residents to this part of Crete settled on the offshore island (Betancourt 1999a). They built houses of stone and mud brick on a low peninsula that faced toward Crete, establishing a community that would last, with a few interruptions, until almost the end of the Bronze Age (Ill. 2, Site M 1). Their dead were buried in a nearby cemetery during the earliest phases of the community.

The cemetery on Pseira Island is about 100 m west of the Minoan town on the southern slope of a hill overlooking the sea (Ill. 2, Site Q 1). The lower slope of the burial place is not visible from the town because it lies beyond an intervening low hill, on the south side of the small islet (Pl. 1A). No major natural barriers lie between town and cemetery, but the topography is rocky and uneven (Pl. 1B), and two small ravines are present along the way to the burial ground. The tombs can be reached from the houses either by a climb over

this rugged terrain or by a quick trip by boat. A small landing place for boats and ships is at the east of the cemetery area where rocks provide a landing-spot at the present time; in the Bronze Age, when the sea was lower, the coast will have been different, but it was undoubtedly still accessible from this spot. The landing-spot was necessary for the unloading of building stones.

The cemetery itself is on a steep slope. In the grid established by Richard Hope Simpson for the investigation of the island by surface survey, it is in grid-square Q, Site Q 1 (Ill. 2). The map reference on the Greek military maps for the center of the cemetery is -9700E -7575N. The area of the tombs extends ca. 160 m from east to west and ca. 70 m from north to south (almost 8,000 square meters). Approaching along the coast from the town, small man-made caves in the ravine just south of the boundary between grid-squares M and Q are the closest tombs to the houses (designated Site Q 4, Ill. 2). An area with EM-MM coarse sherds but with no visible stone features is called Sites Q 31 and Q 32. The Final Neolithic to Minoan built tombs begin southwest of the two Byzantine threshing floors called Sites Q 3 and Q 22 (Pls. 2, 3), and they extend along the slope of the hill overlooking the sea for about 150 meters. This part of the hillside, where the tombs begin, can be seen from the town because it is high

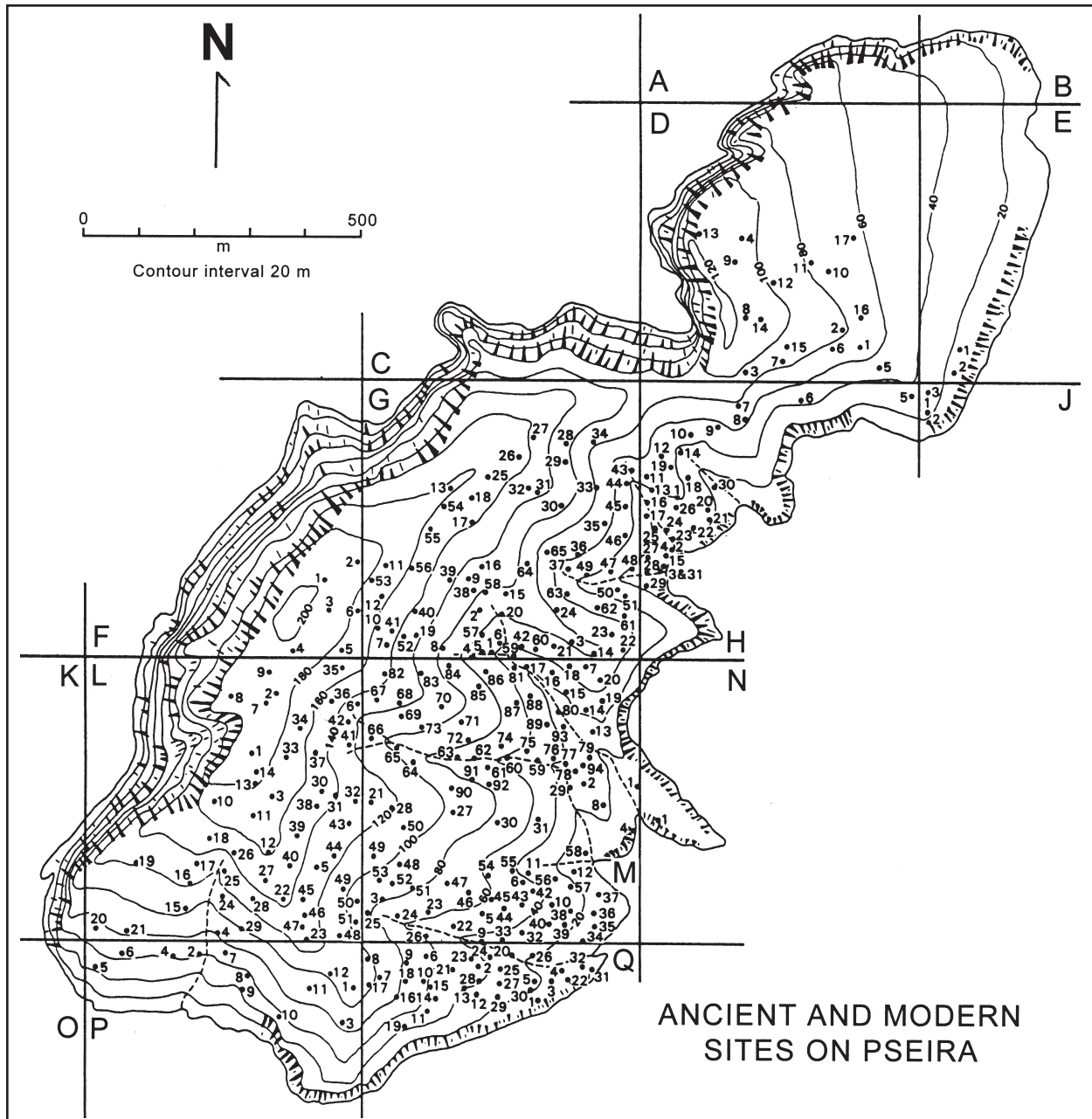


Illustration 2. Ancient and modern sites on Pseira Island. The cemetery is in grid-square Q (Site Q1), on the coast south of Sites M 34 to 37.

enough to be visible beyond the lower intervening hill; the town, of course, can also be seen from this part of the cemetery (Pl. 2A).

Several different types of bedrock are exposed on this part of Pseira Island (Ill. 3). Crete is part of the Hellenic Arc, a major tectonic feature that curves from the Peloponnese through Crete to the Taurus Mountains of southwestern Turkey. The Hellenic Arc is at the collisional junction of the

African and European tectonic plates where portions of the Earth's crust formerly situated in what is now the central Aegean have been thrust (shoved) southward over a thick section of marine platform limestones. On the southern part of the Pseiran coast near the Minoan cemetery, the phyllite close to the small ravine is a part of the European lithospheric plate that was thrust over the local limestone. The ravine formed at a junc-