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# The Rise of the Polis in the Mirabello Region, Crete: Sites and Settlement Patterns (10th-7th c. B.C.)

Florence Gaignerot-Driessen

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**UNIVERSITY OF THESSALY**  
**DPT OF HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY**  
**AND SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY**

**aristea**

# **REGIONAL STORIES TOWARDS A NEW PERCEPTION OF THE EARLY GREEK WORLD**

**Acts of an International Symposium in honour  
of Professor Jan Bouzek**

**Volos 18-21 June 2015**

**EDITED BY  
ALEXANDER MAZARAKIS AINIAN  
ALEXANDRA ALEXANDRIDOU & XENIA CHARALAMBIDOU**

**VOLOS 2017**

**REGIONAL STORIES  
TOWARDS A NEW PERCEPTION  
OF THE EARLY GREEK WORLD**

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# THE RISE OF THE POLIS IN THE MIRABELLO REGION, CRETE: SITES AND SETTLEMENT PATTERNS (10<sup>TH</sup>-7<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES BC)\*

*Florence Gaignerot-Driessen*

Located at the maritime crossroads of the Aegean, Sicily, South Italy, the Levant, Egypt, and Libya, Crete is mostly famous for being the island of King Minos and the place where Minoan civilisation bloomed. More than five centuries after the destruction of the Palace of Knossos, probably around 1350 BC if not later, Crete also offered the first civic laws of the Greek world, which explicitly mention the existence of the polis and its tribes. Indeed, in 1936, Henri van Effenterre and Pierre Demargne found Archaic inscribed blocks fallen in a Hellenistic cistern in the urban centre of Dreros, in the Mirabello region (Marinatos 1936, 227; Demargne & van Effenterre 1937a; 1937b; van Effenterre 1946; van Effenterre & Ruzé 1994; Perlman 2004, 181-182; Gaignerot-Driessen 2013, 289-290). These blocks, which have been dated to 650 BC, were probably initially part of the eastern façade of the Geometric temple, which is located immediately west of the Hellenistic cistern. They attest to the existence of a polis at Dreros from the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards.

## **Description of the case-study region**

The region that surrounds the Mirabello bay, a transitional area between central and eastern Crete, owes its unity to the small piece of sea shared to the north (the Mirabello bay) and the natural borders which define it to the west (the Lasithi Mountains), east (the Siteia Mountains) and south (the Schinavria ridge and the Episkopi watershed). For consistency, this region should also include the coastal plain of Sissi (2),<sup>1</sup> since it forms a natural outlet for the Mirabello valley starting at Agios Nikolaos (**fig. 1**). Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this area has been intensively explored through archaeological surveys and excavations and numerous sites dating from LM III to the Archaic period have been brought

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\* I would like to warmly thank Professor Mazarakis Ainian for his great hospitality in Volos during the conference and for inviting me to contribute to this volume.

1. The numbers in brackets refer to the archaeological sites located on the maps (**figs. 1-3 and 9**). I am very grateful to Dr. A. Sarris for sharing the digital resources of the Institute for Mediterranean Studies – Foundation for Research and Technology, Hellas (IMS-FORTH). See Sarris *et al.* 2008.

to light. Among them, the urban centres of seven poleis can be identified, namely Milatos, Dreros, Olous, Lato, Oleros, Istron and a last one (perhaps Larissa) located on the Azoria hill (for literary and epigraphic sources attesting the civic status of these cities, see Perlman 2004 and bibliography; on the archaeological remains attesting the civic status of the community established on the Azoria hill, see Haggis *et al.* 2007; 2011a; 2011b). This makes the area most suitable for examining the rise of the polis. Although the formation process of the Greek city-state in this region of Crete should be sought in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, the present paper primarily focuses on the 10<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup>-century developments, when major economic, social, and political changes took place.<sup>2</sup>

### **Research methodology**

Due to the absence of literary sources contemporary to the period under study, scholars attempted to clarify the history of the Early Greek world in general, and of Crete in particular by using written sources from the previous and the following periods, i.e. the Mycenaean archives written in Linear B and inscriptions and texts in alphabetic Greek of the Classical and Hellenistic periods. Although these attempts have often resulted in brilliant and useful syntheses (e.g. Carlier 1984), they have also occasionally led to confusion, misconceptions and anachronisms. A characteristic example is the following: on the basis of inscriptions and literary descriptions by Hellenistic historians mentioning specific buildings called *andreia*, which would have housed communal meals (*syssitia*) shared by male citizens (on these written sources see Prent 2005, 441-476; Whitley 2014, 147), archaeologists tried to identify architectural structures, dating to 1200-1100 BC with evidence of symposia as predecessors of such “*andreia*” (see e.g. Tsipopoulou 2005, 322 about the “*megara*” at Chalasmenos (98), the discussion about Building A at Vronda (107) in Day *et al.* 2009, 61-63, and in general, Koehl 1997). The practice of common meals (*syssitia*) in *andreia*, however, is intimately connected to the social institutions of the Greek city-state and it is therefore misleading to call *andreion* or *proto-andreion*, a building where a comparable way of use is attested, but there is no clear indication that it served the same political ideology. Without ignoring earlier and later written sources, the present analysis is solely grounded on archaeological remains, the only contemporary source available for the period.

In a more general way, archaeological sources have long been considered as ancillary to history, as if they only could constitute a material illustration of written sources. This has sometimes resulted into historical preconceptions skewing methods of investigation and interpretation of archaeological data. The so-called “refuge settlements”, sites newly established in mountainous areas of the Aegean after the collapse of the Mycenaean palaces, are a good example of this tendency. Since Egyptian and Ugaritic sources suggest that the late 13<sup>th</sup> century BC was a troubled period with population movements, it was assumed that Aegean people would have fled from the coasts and settled down in inaccessible, defensive sites. Settlements established ca. 1200 BC on remote peaks on Crete were consequently considered as material evidence for such a historical scenario and therefore interpreted as refuge or defensible sites (see e.g. Nowicki 2000; for a critical discussion on “refuge settlements” in LM IIIC Crete, see e.g. Haggis 2001). Yet a systematic and detailed methodology to identify these sites on the basis of archaeological parameters still needs further de-

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2. This paper presents some results from my PhD dissertation (see Gaignerot-Driessen in press).

veloping. It can be noticed that some of the sites interpreted in this way in the Mirabello region, although naturally defensible, show evidence of relative prosperity. Rather than reflecting fear or a precarious situation, their high visibility in the regional landscape suggests they may have acted as identity and land markers in a context of social, political and economic reorganisation in the aftermath of the palatial collapse (Gaignerot-Driessen 2015). Without seeking to dissociate archaeology and history, as done by the “New Archaeology” in the 1970’s, this paper will consider archaeological remains as an independent source and archaeology as a history of material culture autonomous of written sources.

If we want to report on a complex political evolution, we also need to consider the archaeological data in a holistic perspective, taking simultaneously into account and comparing the religious, funerary, residential and political remains. In addition, the archaeological sites should not only be examined for the material culture they reveal, but also contextualised in their natural and cultural environment in order to reconstitute a valuable archaeological landscape. In this sense, and in addition to the collection of archaeological data, a field investigation allowing the completion or reconsideration of published data was conducted.

On the basis of the remains of ancient occupation (archaeological sites surveyed or excavated, historical administrative borders), natural boundaries (relief, water courses, plains), economic resources available (water supplies, arable land, pasture, sea outlets), ways of communication (by land, by sea, and also on the basis of intervisibility), cultural patterns (religious or funerary practices, material culture, dialects), and landscape phenomenology, it is possible to define micro-regions in the Mirabello area. This frame allows presenting what first appears as a cloud of points as settlement patterns.

### The PG nucleation

Following this methodology, a turn in the history of the region is detectable in PG times, as noticed as a general trend on Crete by Saro Wallace (2010). Most of the sites founded in the previous period, LM IIIC (**fig. 2**), are now abandoned but inside each cluster of sites of the LM IIIC period, a selection process leads to settlement nucleation (**fig. 3**). It appears that at this moment the most distinctive acropoleis offering the largest suitable space for living and building were selected for settlement. An economic reorientation may explain this nucleation phenomenon: regrouping the small communities of a cluster was certainly a good way of centralising the exploitation of the natural resources and thus increasing the production and sustaining the population. This hypothesis seems to be confirmed by the development of a network of rural sites around the polarising settlement site (**fig. 3**). The PG period is poorly documented in the region, because the only important PG settlements known in the Mirabello region were continuously occupied at least until the Proto-archaic period, the most recent phases of occupation occulting the earlier ones. A new research programme comprising an archaeological, topographical and geomorphological survey has been initiated by the French School in Athens on the Anavlochos ridge (5), above the village of Vrachasi, since July 2015. During the first season of investigations, the presence of PG material, most notably skyphoi, was noticed over an area of about 10 ha, forming a settlement established in the central canyon.<sup>3</sup> The massive terrace walls, which structure the slopes of the settlement, however,

3. The results of this first season will be published in the *BCH* by the author.

can securely be dated to the LG period, on the basis of the excavations carried out in 2012 (Zographaki, Gaignerot-Driessen & Devolder 2012-2013, see also *infra*).

In general, it remains difficult to reconstruct PG settlements in terms of urban planning and socio-political organisation. It can only be assumed that during Geometric times, a complex settlement pattern existed, reflecting a site hierarchy and complementarity, which is clearly based on a settlement nucleation that already existed in the PG period. The nature of the PG political system cannot yet be deduced from this settlement pattern: the definition and stabilisation of micro-regional entities should not be confused with state formation and does not predicate the interpretation of these micro-regional entities as (civic) polities.

### **Changes in the LG period**

During the LG period, the communities which had grouped through coalescence had become sufficiently powerful and organised to carry out major urban projects, sometimes entirely modifying earlier settlement structures. Although it is still barely excavated, the settlement located on top of the Anavlochos (5) ridge is probably the most significant and impressive example in our study region. The site was first investigated by the French archaeologist Pierre Demargne in 1929 (Demargne 1931). He uncovered a votive deposit on the northern slope of the western peak (Kako Plaï), containing material dating from the PG to the Classical period (for a recent restudy of the material from Demargne's excavations at Kako Plaï, see Pilz & Krumme 2011; 2013). Below, at the foot of the Kako Plaï slope, he also excavated some tombs of a large funerary area in which LM IIIC-PG tholos tombs and Geometric burial enclosures were found together. Finally, he identified massive terrace walls overlooking the central canyon which would have supported large houses. In 2012, a rescue excavation was undertaken by the Ephorate of Lasithi (Zographaki, Gaignerot-Driessen & Devolder 2012-2013). Two terraces (A and B), not disturbed by old excavations or recent agricultural work, and where the level of ancient occupation could have been partly preserved from erosion, were excavated. Parts of two houses (A and B) were uncovered (**figs. 4-5**). House B was found almost empty, except for some sherds dating to the LG or, at the latest, Early Orientalising period (**fig. 6a & k**), and the fill of Room B1, provided with two column bases, yielded LG sherds (**fig. 6j & l-m**). Fragments of two LG-Early Orientalising kotylai were found on the floor of House A (**fig. 6b-c**). The terrace fill of the latter house contained mixed material from the LM IIIC-PG to the LG (**fig. 6d-i**), as well as debris of a metallurgical workshop. It seems thus clear that at some stage during the LG period, a major urban program was carried out on the Anavlochos, during which the LM IIIC terraces were enlarged and massive terrace walls were built. The remains of these walls are still visible today over an area which extends for roughly 10 ha. For some reason, the settlement seems to have been progressively abandoned at the very beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. The votive deposit at Kako Plaï, however, which overlooks the cemetery, remained visited until the Classical period. For topographical and archaeological reasons, it is very plausible that the inhabitants of the Anavlochos moved down to the sea, to the Milatos settlement (4), which seems to have developed from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period. This could imply that the Anavlochos was actually the first urban centre of the polis of Milatos. The question remains whether the community established on the Anavlochos can already be called a polis. Thus far we failed to find clear evidence for the existence of public space or for architectural remains, which could have housed civic institutions, nor did we come upon inscriptions.

Although much smaller, the LG settlement on the Kastro of Kavousi (111) seems to illustrate the same situation, as documented by the intensive excavations conducted by the American School early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and again in the 1990's (Coulson *et al.* 1997; Mook 1998; 2011). Although the settlement was also entirely modified in LG times, the residential architecture continues showing the traditional Cretan LBA/EIA agglutinative and replicative pattern of extension, reflecting a society organised in kinship groups (**fig. 7**): distinct co-residential blocks sharing semi-public space can be recognised in the final stage of the settlement (for social analyses of the settlement on the Kastro (111), see Mook 2011; for social analyses of the LM IIIC settlement at Vronda (107), see Glowacki 2002; 2004; 2007; Day *et al.* 2009; Glowacki & Klein 2011; Day & Glowacki 2012). The Kastro also seems to have been abandoned in the Proto-archaic period, in favour of the lower Azoria hill (110).

It is thus observed that large urban centres were created in the LG period, bringing together organised and powerful communities. However, the social structures seem to remain more or less the same as before and so far there is no clear evidence for a political and centralised authority that would have stood above the different negotiating social groups.

This observation is further confirmed by funerary practices. In LG times, small burial enclosures (for an overview on this type of grave, see Eaby 2007, 324-332; 2011, 180-182) are built around pre-existing LM IIIC-PG tholos tombs, linking Geometric communities to mythical ancestors. This is clearly illustrated by the Anavlochos (5) (Demargne 1931, 369, 372, 374-379; Marinatos 1931-1932) and Dreros (11) (van Effenterre 2009) cemeteries, for instance, as well as by the ones located in the Kastro (111) (Boyd 1901), Vrokastro (57) (Hall 1914, 154-169), and Meseleri (85) (Hayden 1995; 2005. Site Catalogue 122-123, 124-125) regions. It is striking that these burial enclosures are typical for the Mirabello region in the Geometric period and have thus far always been found in the vicinity of LM IIIC-PG tholos tombs.

In some cases, small structures, occasionally with evidence for communal meals or toasts but not clearly turned towards specific deities, were built in the immediate vicinity of the cemetery. I would provisionally call them "mortuary chapels". Such buildings may be recognised in Lato (36) (Temple House) (Gaignerot-Driessen 2012), Dreros (11) (*Dépôt R*) (van Effenterre 2009, 78, 84, 119-120, 138-139, 143, 145-146, 151-152), Karakovilia (58) (Hall 1914, 170-172) and more recently in Azoria (110), where an EIA hearth-building was excavated, opening out onto a courtyard, and beyond it, a LM IIIC-PG tholos tomb, still visible during the 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries (Haggis 2014a, 129-131). The courtyard yielded a substantial deposit of burned animal bones and pottery. According to the excavator, the condition of the material, animal elements, pottery shapes and breakage are consistent with sacrificial (hearth pyre) and dining debris. Interestingly, in the Archaic period, the stomion of the tholos tomb was blocked off, the space to the west was turned into a room used for food processing and both the tomb and the building were covered – not to say sealed – by a street.<sup>4</sup> Finally, on the Anavlochos (5), the votive deposit, excavated by Demargne in 1929 on the Kako Plai slope, has been relocated in July 2015. This area is actually not visible from the settlement and immediately overlooks the cemetery. The location, topography, architectural remains and collected surface material (drinking and pouring vessels, spindle whorls and figurines not clearly attributable to Olympian deities), as well as the evidence for an ancient source nearby seem to indicate that Demargne's deposit was actually part of a spring sanctuary that could be another example of a mortuary chapel.

4. I am very grateful to Donald Haggis for generously sharing information on Azoria and fruitfully discussing the question of these "mortuary chapels" with me.

In general, the careful reuse of the LM IIIC residential and funerary spaces made by the LG communities betrays a clear attempt of legitimation of both their origin and possibly their land property. A LG house designed for sympotic activities was, for example, built on the remains of the main building of the LM IIIC settlement of Chalasmenos (Tsipopoulou 2004); ancient graves were visited and received offerings, as in Mochlos (116) (Soles 2001, 230; 2008, 130, 177-179, 195), the region of the Kastro (111) (Boyd 1901, 137, 143-150), or Lato (36) (Gaignerot-Driessen 2012). Geometric burial enclosures were also built in the ruins of the LM IIIC village of Vronda (107), following a familial pattern: members of a same Geometric family were buried in rooms of the same LM IIIC residence (**fig. 8**) (Day 2011; Liston 2007). Interestingly, Building Complex AB, considered a communal structure by the excavators (Day *et al.* 2009, 59-63), was not reoccupied for funerary purposes in Geometric times. One can notice that the Vronda case could be also considered as a peculiar instance of long-term cemetery associating Geometric burial enclosures to LM IIIC-PG tholos tombs, since the latest were also attested at Vronda. If the regional funerary pattern is taken into consideration, the reuse of the LM IIIC settlement of Vronda for burial practices during the Geometric period may be seen as incidental and primarily consecutive to the presence of LBA funerary remains. In any case and despite nucleation, kinship-based groups – or here clans – were still very active or even (re)activated in LG times, claiming their identity, real or more probably invented. It is indeed highly unlikely that the people who buried their deceased in Vronda during the Geometric period were certain for having a blood connection with the residents of the LM IIIC houses, destroyed or abandoned 300 years earlier. But by doing so, they were able to recreate and appropriate their past.

In addition, the existence of separate enduring cemeteries around a single urban centre and their internal organisation gives the impression that larger social groups were trying to define themselves. This phenomenon is well-illustrated around the settlement of Vrokastro (57), the region of the polis of Istron, but also in the region of Azoria (110) and Oleros (85), and probably also around Dreros (**fig. 3**), since it is hardly likely that the small and long-term cemetery excavated by van Effenterre was the only one for the entire settlement from LM IIIC to LG times. If what happened one or two generations later is considered, the most probable explanation for the existence of such separate, enduring cemeteries is that the civic tribes were then already in formation, on the basis of clanic groups. Yet we lack thus far evidence for the existence of a supra-household political authority, which could be labelled polis in the LG period.

**Consolidation or final relocation of urban centres, territorial fragmentation, institutionalisation of social groups and practices: the rise of the polis in the Proto-archaic period**

It is the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC that marked the final and decisive turn in the regional history. Only then the existence of the polis and its institutions can be clearly attested by the Dreros inscriptions. At this time, the centuries-old cemeteries and mortuary chapels are deserted, graves become invisible in the landscape, and “Greek temples” develop within urban centres (Dreros [11], Lato [36], Azoria[110]), as well as in extra-urban (Dreros) and rural locations (Sta Lenika[21]) (**fig. 9**). Ancestor veneration seems then to have been abandoned in favor of an Olympic god cult, as if the polis authority had finally surpassed the supremacy of the clans (Snodgrass 1980, 52-54, 99; Whitley 2001, 99, 245). In EIA Crete,

where independent bench sanctuaries already existed in LM IIIC, it is hard to identify rulers' dwellings preceding Greek temples (Prent 2007): the Mirabello region seems rather to illustrate a move from ancestors' graves or mortuary chapels to temples.

Civic buildings and spaces were also created at that time. Although the results of the new excavations in Dreros (11) undertaken by the Ephorate of Lasithi in collaboration with the French School in Athens questioned whether the well-known steps of the agora could already be dated to the Archaic period (Zographaki & Farnoux 2010; 2011; 2014), the inscriptions clearly indicate the existence of an agora somewhere in this site during the Archaic period. This might have simply taken the form of an open-air area in front of the temple, before the Hellenistic cistern was constructed.

On the hill of Azoria (110), in the shadows of the Kastro (111), the Monumental Civic Building and its Service Building, as well as the Communal Dining Complex, may respectively have had the functions of both a prytaneion and an andreion (Haggis 2014a; 2014b; Haggis *et al.* 2007; 2011a). The plan of the residences is fixed, since their origin, their construction being structurally connected with the spine walls circuit, which structures the urban planning of the hill. These large houses, which did not yield traces of food preparation or conditioning, but from which giant relief storage pithoi were recovered, are considered by the excavator to be emblematic for multi-local households, capable of producing, storing and redistributing goods following the civic institution of the *syssitia* (the traditional common meals) (Haggis 2013; 2014a; 2014b; Haggis & Mook 2011; Haggis *et al.* 2011b).

From a geographical point of view, the beginning of the Archaic period is also a moment of consolidation or ultimate relocation of settlements. When the land surrounding the Geometric acropoleis was rich enough to sustain an ever increasing population, the settlement survived throughout the Archaic period and civic buildings were constructed in the urban centres, as best illustrated by the two Archaic sites of Dreros (11) and Lato (36). It is worth stressing that the Archaic political centres of both Lato and Dreros are located inland, in a saddle between two peaks, overlooking a landscape of karst relief (**fig. 9**), particularly favorable for cultivation and pastoralism, but also for industrial activities: the clay which accumulated in the bottom of the enclosed depressions (sinkholes and *poljes*) was very suitable for pottery production, as confirmed by the discovery of Archaic ceramic kilns at Lato (on Cretan karst relief, see Siart *et al.* 2009; on Archaic kilns at Lato, see Ducrey & Picard 1969). In contrast, Geometric acropoleis overlooking a land with fewer natural resources, such as the Anavlochos (5), Vrokastro (57) or the Kastro (111), were then abandoned most probably in favour of their one-time sea outlet (Milatos [4], Istron [53]) or the hill closest to the sea (Azoria [110]), where three civic urban centres clearly developed.

Finally, the urban centres of the Archaic cities were established on hills that were only distinctive on a micro-regional scale, as if the rise of the polis also meant the final and definitive fragmentation of the region in different and independent territories, of which the boundaries would be endlessly disputed until the Roman conquest.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, after more than five centuries of negotiations, kinship-based group claims seem finally to have ceased or at least to have been silenced by the supra-household political authority of the polis (Whitley 1991; 1997; 2009, 285-286). In this sense, the rise of the polis in the Mirabello region certainly does not constitute a social revolution, as it has been

suggested for the case of the Greek mainland (e.g. Morris 1987, 22-23, 204-205; 2000, 273-280; 2009, 70-77), but a remarkable stabilisation of a power balance, a mere institution-alisation of the ancient aristocracy, an integration of the old clans in the tribes of the civic body, perhaps through new civic practices, such as common meals and political meetings in the urban centres. So, if the emergence of the polis in the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century is a major and unseen political break in the history of the region, it is also based on very traditional social structures and cultural elements inherited from the end of the LBA. It remains to understand and explain how the old clan group entered into the specific relationship of citizenship, and how and why they reorganised themselves in the tribes of the polis.

Further field research, notably on the Anavlochos, should allow us to highlight the most crucial LG transitional moment and lead to a better understanding of the formation process of the polis in this area of Crete. The results of this survey may in particular help us to define more precisely the social and political organisation of the community established on the Anavlochos in LG times.

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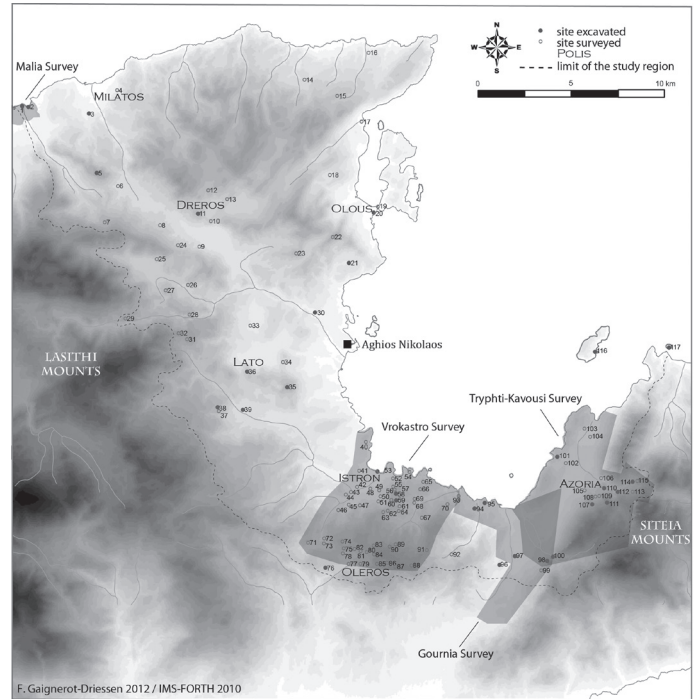
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## **THE RISE OF THE POLIS IN THE MIRABELLO REGION, CRETE: SITES AND SETTLEMENT PATTERNS**

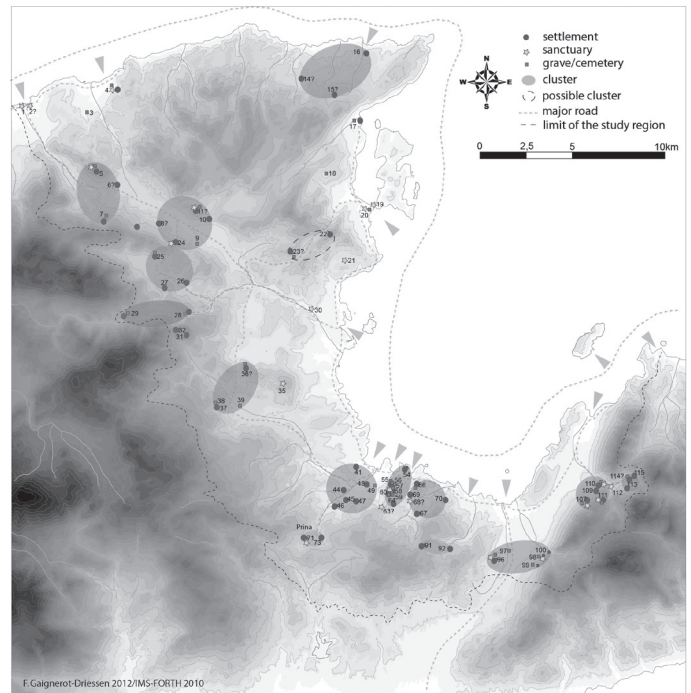
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**THE RISE OF THE POLIS IN THE MIRABELLO REGION, CRETE: SITES AND SETTLEMENT PATTERNS**



**Fig. 1.** Archaeological investigations and LM IIIA2-Archaic sites in the Mirabello region (author/IMS-FORTH).



**Fig. 2.** LM IIIC sites in the Mirabello region (author/IMS-FORTH).

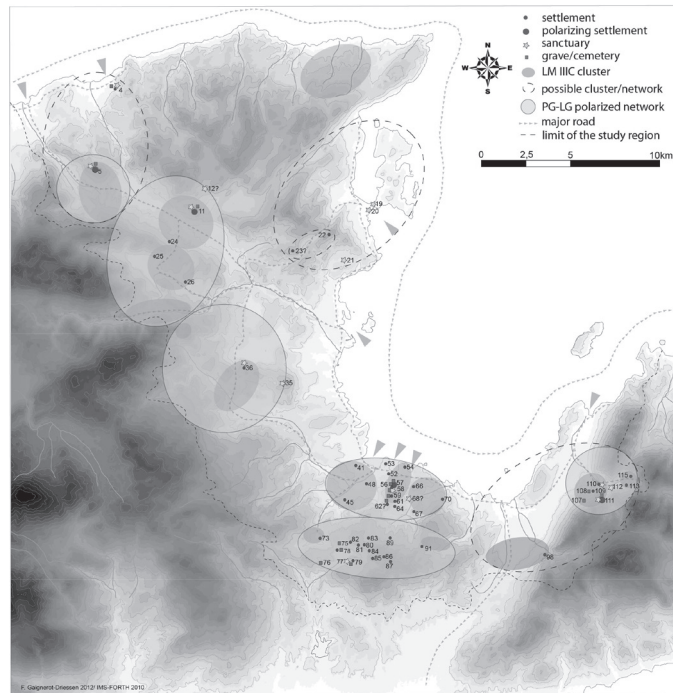


Fig. 3. PG-LG sites in the Mirabello region (author/IMS-FORTH).

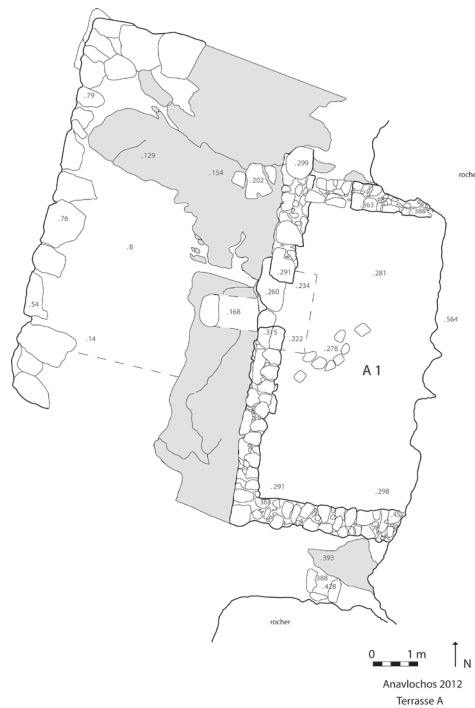


Fig. 4. Anavlochos. Plan of House A (Drawing: M. Devolder/Infography author).

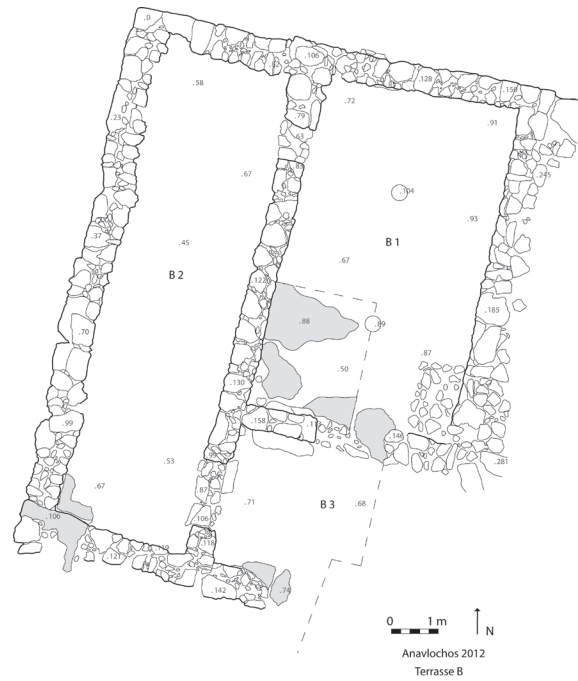


Fig. 5. Anavlochos. Plan of House B (Drawing: M. Devolder/Infography: author).

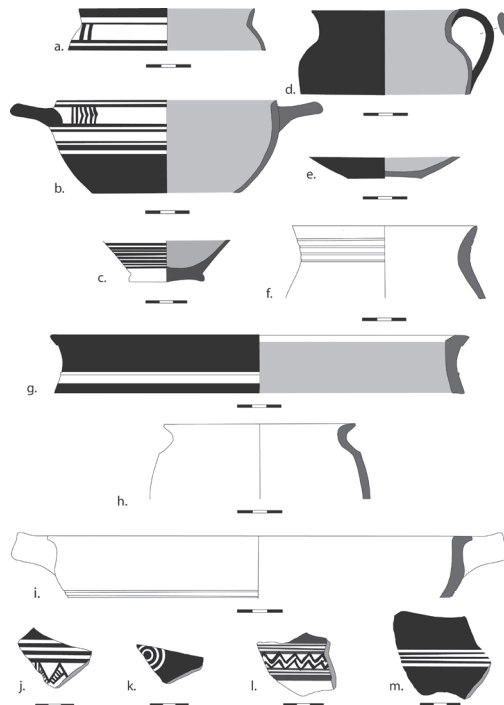


Fig. 6. Pottery from Anavlochos. a. & k. from floor deposit in House B. b.-c. from floor deposit in House A. d.-i. from Terrace A fill. j. & l.-m. from Terrace B fill (author).

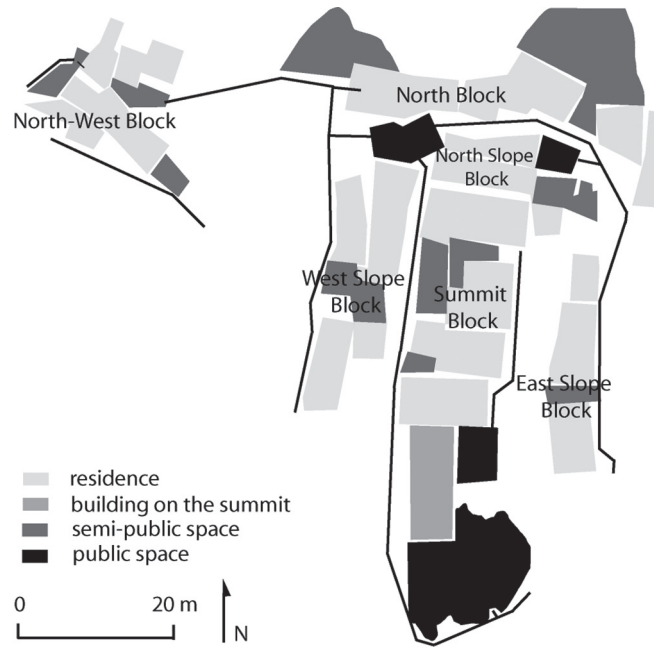


Fig. 7. Spatial organization and circulation in the LG settlement on the Kastro (adapted from Mook 2011, 478, fig. 12).

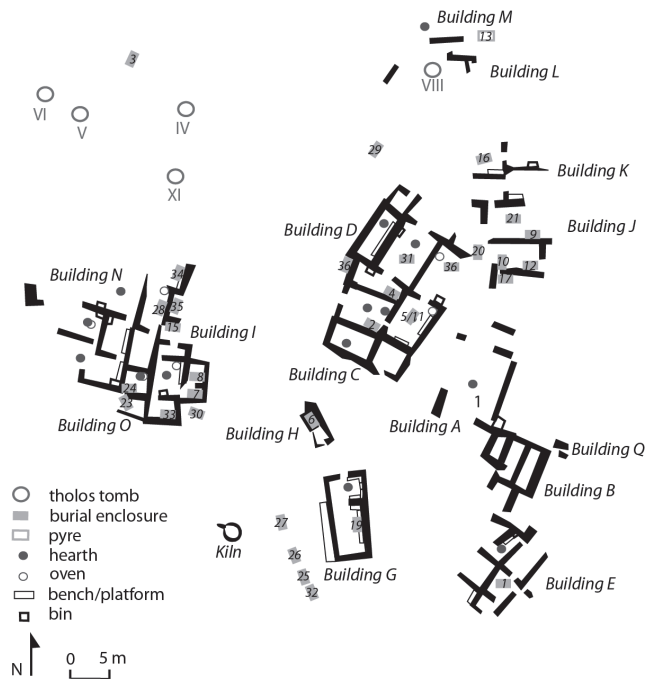


Fig. 8. Geometric burial enclosures in the remains of the LM IIIC village of Vronda (adapted from Day et al. 2009, fig. 2).

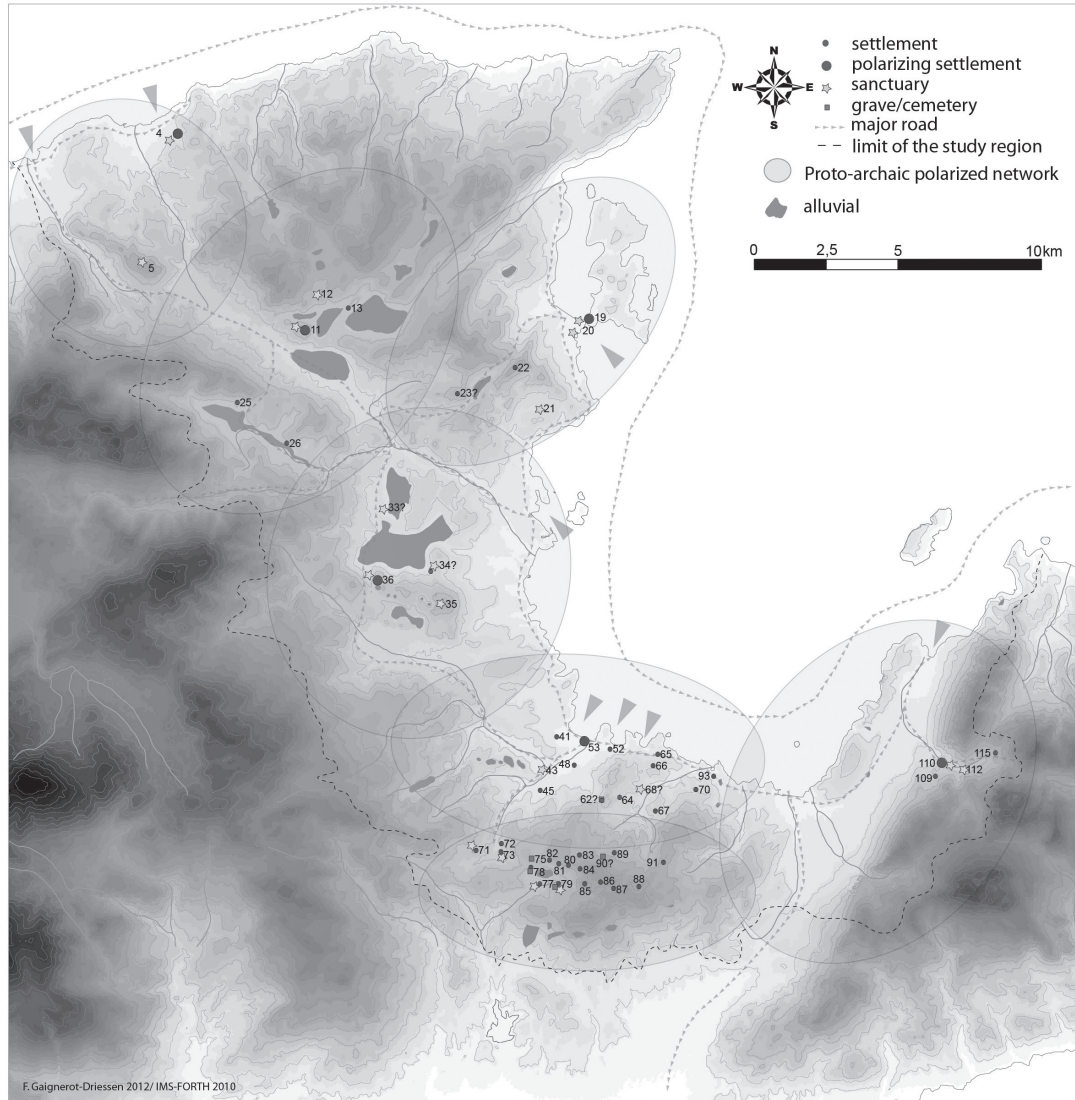


Fig. 9. Archaic sites in the Mirabello region (author/IMS-FORTH).