

Notes from the Field: An Island off an Island - Understanding Bronze Age Society in Mochlos, Crete

Luke Kaiser

School of Anthropology, University of Arizona

I pushed a wheelbarrow up over the berm of my trench and rolled it down the narrow walkway that Vassilis had finished earlier that day. We had been working since seven o'clock in the morning, and by this point it was hour six of a seven hour workday. We had been at it now for eight weeks. The first two weeks we spent cleaning the site and hauling all our gear to the island by our boat, Potnia. We would get very familiar with Potnia as we rode in her to and from the island every day. The following six weeks, we worked from six in the morning until two in the afternoon five days a week and every other Saturday. We were nearing the end now. Everyone could feel it, both tired from the long season and downcast that the seemingly eternal summer was indeed coming to a close. We had become close to each other due to the fact that we were all in a similar situation: young, educated, and adventurous. However, we had also become close to the community that hosted us--our landlords, shopkeepers, restaurant owners, waiters, and barmen--as well as the workers that we labored with in the sun, sharing water and meals to get through the day. As I shoveled the wheelbarrow into the sieve, I looked up across the Mochlos landscape: the clear, blue water I couldn't wait to swim home in and the rolling hills that quickly led up to the steep, rugged Ornos Mountains that created this micro-ecosystem. I soaked up the awe that this place generates as it took me back four thousand years to the culture that made the tiny obsidian blade Vassilis picks up and jokingly pretends to use to shave my face.

The site of Mochlos lies in the Bay of Mirabello in East Crete. It was first discovered by Richard Seager, who excavated

various parts of the island in 1908. Of particular note was his attention to the house tombs on the northwest corner of the island, which were full of beautiful vessels and prestige objects made of gold, bronze, silver, and precious stones. Seager did great things for Cretan archaeology, but, after visiting the tomb of Tutankhamen in Egypt, he died at sea on the way back to Crete. Mochlos received little attention for the next six decades until Dr. Jeffrey Soles arrived in 1970 to re-examine the house tombs for his dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania. A decade later, Soles returned to begin the investigation which has continued unimpeded for over twenty-five years.

Since its inception the Mochlos excavation has had four primary goals. The first goal has been to obtain a stratigraphic sequence on the island for the Early, Middle, and Late Bronze Age culture of Crete known as the Minoans. Second, Soles sought to complete the excavation of the house tombs and their adjacent tomb structures in order to uncover an entire cemetery of the 3rd millennium BCE. Third, we continue to pursue an understanding of the Prepalatial town contemporary with the house tombs as well as the Late Minoan (hereafter referred to as Neopalatial) town that replaced it. The Neopalatial town is contemporary with the Thera eruption and the final widespread palatial phase of Minoan culture. Finally, Soles also planned to complete an investigation of the adjacent plain so that the entire regional sphere of Mochlos could be understood. These goals focus on the Bronze Age of Crete, specifically that of the Minoans, but much happened between the time of the Minoans and Seager's arrival on the coastline of Mochlos. The island was originally connected to the Cretan mainland by an isthmus which was almost continuously occupied from 3100-1200 BCE but which later sank, due to tectonic activity. After this period there is spotty evidence of Archaic material culture until two occupations during the Hellenistic era, one during the 2nd century BCE and another in the 1st century BCE, during the reign of Cleopatra in Egypt. The last significant occupation

occurred during the Byzantine period and kept mainly within the walls on the acropolis that remained from the Hellenistic occupation. This lengthy set of occupations by a wide variety of cultures provides a rare opportunity to explore the evolution of land use patterns within the region, but it does make exploration of the deeper layers, the focus of our four project goals, more difficult.

I began to work at the site of Mochlos in 2012. Mochlos' reputation as a site blossoming with the opportunity for groundbreaking research had long-been established. Soles had already produced two extensive publications, one on the adjacent Minoan sites of the Mochlos plain and one on the Mycenaean layers dating from 1400-1200 BCE. Soles also published a book on the Prepalatial cemeteries of Mochlos and its neighboring site of Gournia. The research we are undertaking now focuses on our first and third goals--obtaining stratigraphic sequences for the entire Bronze Age at Mochlos and pursuing town plans for both the Prepalatial settlement as well as the Neopalatial settlement that marks the end of Minoan culture. A Minoan town is a particularly rare discovery. The excavation of not only a Neopalatial town but also a Prepalatial one is a one-of-a-kind opportunity. Much is left to be excavated, but our primary focus is on publication. This has given me an opportunity to gain a wide scope of knowledge concerning macroscopic ceramic analysis.

For the past two summers, I have assisted the Mochlos project by characterizing every well-defined pottery assemblage from each Neopalatial context we have excavated since 1989. These will be published in two separate volumes. Additionally, for this upcoming summer I will spend time examining the Prepalatial pottery assemblages for my own thesis and dissertation. My research will assist the Mochlos project in addressing its two remaining goals, both of which examine a wide scope of Minoan culture that spans nearly 1,500 years.

The Mochlos project is greatly assisted by the Institute

for Aegean Prehistory's Study Center located in East Crete and established by Malcolm Wiener. It gives us a location to analyze and store all of our material from excavation. It also has a dedicated staff consisting of several conservators, a petrographer, an artist, and a photographer, all of whom come to the aid of not only Mochlos but many other sites located in East Crete. To work at such an impressive institute, independent of both museums and universities, is truly an honor.

The most difficult aspect of working at both a site and an institute of such outstanding reputation is how to best utilize each of the opportunities that we are given. At Mochlos, we often speak in terms of three competing elements of research--time, money, and science--and joke that we work in the middle of a Venn diagram, where the three overlap. As I have gained in experience during my time in Crete, almost nine months in the past three years, I have entered a position in which I must address these dynamics more and more. Now that my own research is tied to this site, I face new questions. I have to make decisions on how to best identify the chronologies I am trying to understand. Should I rely mainly on relative dating? If I do want absolute dates, how many samples should I use to acquire these dates and are they worth the expense? What are the best scientific methods for the goals I am trying to achieve in my own exploration of this material? How much material should I invest myself in? How do I plan to move through it efficiently so that it receives both the time and science it deserves? How do I attain the money that it will cost to spend the proper amount of time performing the appropriate level of scientific analysis on that material? Fortunately, I have great mentors both in the field and here at the University of Arizona who can help to guide me through these decisions. However, at the end of the day, the final decisions regarding my own research fall to me alone and must be made based on the experiences I have garnered over my time in the field.

On the last day of the first summer in Crete, my alarm

sounds. I turn it off. I've been up for a while now. I go down to the dock where we get on Potnia to ride across to Mochlos, right as the sun begins to rise above the horizon. I promise myself that this will not be the last time I am standing here seeing this. That scene still drives me to this day, although this motivation is not all that keeps me going back each summer. What I have learned about Bronze Age culture, and the field of archaeology in general, leads me back every June. That knowledge, supplemented by lectures, seminars, conferences, and presentations, is gained in the lab and on site. Each time I return, I know more than the last time, and it is my obligation to use that knowledge to progress both my own research as well as the goals of the Mochlos project.