

6 EXPLORING THE TOPOGRAPHY OF KNOSSOS AREA IN CRETE: A MEDITERRANEAN LANDSCAPE

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INTRODUCTION

Knossos's cultural landscape has a unique history of at least 8000 years and hosts on its premises the most elaborate palatial complex of the Minoan civilization, which is the most ancient literate culture of the European continent. Knossos lies in central Crete just 5 km south-eastern of Heraklion on the outskirts of the modern city. It should rather be identified as a rural landscape of agricultural character since development in the wider environment is prohibited or restricted for the sake of the monuments' protection (Archaeological Zone class "A"). Life in the area still follows the perpetual circles of nature that in the Mediterranean context are the seasonal circles of the olive and the vine.

The cultural landscape of Knossos has a history of intense transitions, going through phases of prime, desertion, oblivion and finally recognition in modern times. Today the archaeological site receives one million visitors per year under conditions of high-pressure tourist development in the surrounding area and provision of the minimum standards for the gathering, parking, circulation and recreation of the visitors from the side of the state. Nevertheless, the antiquities of Knossos are considered among the largest cultural assets of Greece and an everlasting resource for the local history of the place and the people.

In the agricultural environment of Knossos human civilization left traces of glorious and humble origin at different periods of time: the Minoan palace and many other buried vestiges; historic settlements and modern tourist facilities; Roman villas and Arthur Evans's home (*Villa Ariadne*); a Venetian aqueduct and small Christian chapels; ancient tombs in necropolis and small country houses with gardens and yards. The anthropogenic influence dates back to the beginning of the Neolithic period and has continued almost uninterruptedly during the prehistoric, historic and modern times.

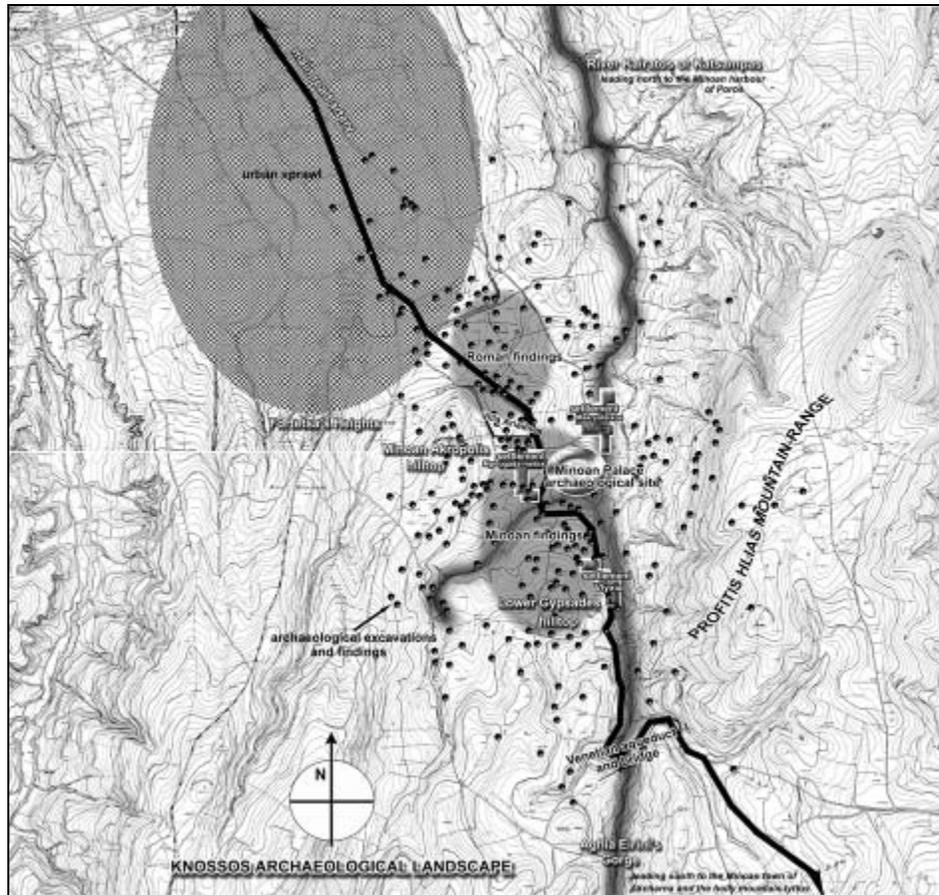


Figure 1: Significant historic and contemporary elements characterise Knossos's cultural landscape.

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING

The area's geomorphologic relief is rather mild with gentle slopes and rivers of periodical flow that traverse Knossos valley. To the east, the palisade of Profitis Hlias spreads out along the horizon. To the north rises the hill of Aghios Ioannis and to the northwest the Fortetsa's heights, which were both ancient burial ground places. To the west of Knossos archaeological site the Minoan town sprawled over the hill of Acropolis to the hill of Gypsades towards the southwest. The stream of Vlychia intersected the valley, where nowadays the homonym settlement lies, while the river Kairatos (or Katsampas) flew to the east of the palace towards the sea in the north. The Minoan palace itself was organized on the low hill of Kefala over the ruins of an antecedent Neolithic settlement.

The river Kairatos discharges at the area of Katsampas or Poros, east of the Heraklion city center where the harbors of Knossos were established in the Bronze Age. The

river's catchment area leads to Knossano gorge in the south that is the speculative northern continuation of Giouchtas mountain range, namely the holy mountain of the ancient town Akcharna. The gorge nowadays leads to the traditional village of Archanes, which is the location of the Minoan town of Akcharna, on the ancient track that connected Knossos to the plain of Messara and the Minoan palace of Phaistos in southern Crete.

HISTORY AND LANDSCAPE TRANSFORMATIONS

The area of Knossos is considered to be the first location on Crete inhabited by Neolithic groups at the end of the 7th millennium B.C. Under the main Court of the Minoan palace, 10 continuous phases of human settlement (that is, structural layers) were revealed in a total depth of seven meters. The settlement appears to have been extended in size as it covered an area approximately equal to that of the descendant palace (Michailidou, 2002). On the outskirts of the site, cereals were cultivated and animal husbandry was practiced. The natural environment of typical lowland Mediterranean vegetation (broad-leaved evergreens), which was lush in place due to the existence of stream water, retreated as human action took over the natural habitats.

The combination of agricultural Neolithic economy and the technological specialization that was brought about by the introduction of metals during the Bronze Age resulted in great economic and cultural progress at the beginning of the 2nd millennium B.C. (Foundation of the Hellenic World, 1998-99). Around 1900 the first or older palace of Knossos was built. The Minoan town was established around the palace with additional farmhouses, sanctuaries and burial grounds in the wider area. Following two successive destructions, the older palace of Knossos as well as all the Minoan palaces on Crete were completely destroyed at 1700 B.C. due to severe earthquakes. At the same location new palaces were built, which are the ancient ruins that visitors see nowadays in the Minoan archaeological sites.

During the new-Palace period, Minoan civilization reached its highest peak. The Minoan town of Knossos spreads around the palace to an area of at least one square km. It is considered that the original name of the Minoan town was Ako (Vasilakis, 2002). The palatial center ruled over other dependant towns like Akcharna (Archanes) to the southeast, at the foot of the holy mountain Lyttos (or Giouchtas) and Tylosos to the northwest, on the outskirts of the mountain-range Idi (or Psiloritis), and also controlled coastal settlements with harbor stations (like Poros, Amnisos and Nirou), rural farmhouses, peak sanctuaries, burial grounds and worship caves. Knossos connected to all those locations as well as to the other Minoan palaces of central and eastern Crete through a competent road system and sea routes. The palatial complex was connected to the town and wider natural environment through various entrances: the north-western gate led to the northern part of the town on the hill of Acropolis and the south-western gate to the southern part of the town on the hill of Gypsades; the north and south entrances (named the Propylaea) led to the central Court of the palace.

After two partial destructions in 1600 and 1500 B.C., the Minoan palaces were completely ruined at about 1450 and were never rebuilt. The town of Knossos was not deserted and was soon occupied by mainland Mycenaean troops. Sections of the Minoan palace were remodelled and the new Mycenaean Knossos (named Konoso) transformed into a trade, gathering and transport centre that had the whole island of Crete under control. The landscape gradually changed as it lost its urban monumental character and past glory of the Minoan times.

Knossos was reduced in size during the historic periods. In Classical times (that is in the second half of the last century B.C.), it only extended to the north of the palatial complex while in the following period, the Hellenistic, it was converted into a town-state according to the new administration system and participated in the historic Commonwealth of the Cretans (Michailidou, 2002). After 67 B.C. Crete was taken by the Roman Empire and Knossos became a Roman colony by the name of Colonia Julia Nobilis Cnossus. For the first time it lost its primership to Gortyna in the southern valley of Messara. Roman Knossos was grand, flourished until the 4th century A.D. and expanded to the north of the former town. It is the archaeological phase of Knossos that has been mostly researched in recent times. West of the contemporary roadway, building remains of private and public structures have been unearthed while to the east lay vestiges of the Roman Forum, a Basilica and a Roman amphitheatre.

During the Roman dominance Knossos was still a trade centre and an important transit station for agricultural products. From the end of the 2nd until the beginning of the 3rd century A.D., Roman Knossos goes through its most important period when the Villa of Dionysus, a Roman mansion with mosaic floors of Dionysian motives from the reign of Hadrian's successor Antoninus Pius, is being built (Paton, 2004). Decline starts from the 3rd century onwards when strong earthquakes happened. In the first Byzantine period (that is in the second half of the first century A.D.) Knossos became an Episcopal see and measured the same area with the Roman town northern of the Minoan palace. The landscape retained its agricultural character. Three Basilicas were founded but only the remains of one paleochristian three-aisle Basilica are preserved to the east, owing to the nature of buildings that had frail masonry of plinths (University of Birmingham & BSA, 2004).

In 823 A.D., Crete surrendered to the Arabs of the Iberian Peninsula and the administration standards changed radically. The port of Heraklion was fortified and the new town became capital by the name of Chandax. The area of Knossos was abandoned in the 9th century and the population was scattered. The successive towns of the prehistoric and historic times became ruins and the natural environment recovered after human evacuation. Native flora regenerated and took over the former urban landscape. The ancient ruins were used throughout the long-lasting Venetian period for the construction of the city fortification walls (Sakellarakis, 1996). The same method was practised for the creation of the provincial settlement Makrys Teixos, meaning Long Wall, which is adjusted to the archaeological site in the northeast. The small village was

inhabited in the Middle Ages and took its name in the 13th century after Roman remains in the area.

The neighbouring historical town of Knossos and the city of Heraklion, which gradually changed its name to Chandax, Candia and Kastro (castle), present a reverse course in time: the foundation and development of the latter marked the decline and desolation of the former. Knossos landscape of the medieval and later ages, with few farmer inhabitants, presented no element of glory but had a rather humble identity, characteristic of most Cretan environments. People cultivated tiny plots of land and provided for their families through agriculture until the beginning of the last century. In 1864 the English painter Edward Lear, famous worldwide for his watercolour landscapes, travelled across Crete, still dominated by Ottomans, and painted Knossos that he described as “a boring landscape with scattered brickwork” (Padel, 2000). Following few attempts of archaeological excavations by amateurs and scientists, Sir Arthur Evans discovered the Minoan palace and traces of the historical town of Knossos in 1900. He has recently been accused of investing personal beliefs and Victorian ideologies of his time in the excavation and restoration works and that he was not scholarly enough in the documentation and publishing of the archaeological findings.

CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Thus was born the archaeological site of Knossos, which occupies the top of Kefala hill and includes the premises of the newer Minoan palace in a restricted area of land. The visitors reach the site easily from the adjacent parking lots via a roadway and, as the organizing of the archaeological site is reckoned introvert, the experience and perception of the wider cultural landscape is very limited. The particular characteristics of diversity, multiformity, versatility, mystique and symbolism are being overshadowed by the intensity and dynamics of the monuments’ presentation.

Today the settlements of Makryteixos and Mpougada Metoxi, west of the palace, comprise suburbs to the city of Heraklion. The area, although protected by the prohibitive regulations that stand for Archaeological Zone class “A”, is subject to considerable pressure for development. On the other hand, the archaeological landscape retains a contemporary character as it challenges a place on the outskirts of the urban landscape. This characteristic of “contemporarity” of the landscape should be based on a critical objective for the site’s management policy, or, otherwise, private initiative around the antiquities could act independently and unorganised. To the west of the archaeological site, along the main road artery, various small tourist establishments are crowded due to the lack of public space. This aspect of the entrance into the Knossos palace forms the frequented, bustling social façade of the archaeological monument. However, a different story appears in the wider landscape: quiet settlements with small houses and narrow pathways; traditional Mediterranean cultivations of olive trees and vines; flower gardens; scattered remains of historical periods in open spaces; ravines,

streams and tiny Christian chapels. This, on the other hand, is the everyday informal picture of the familiar landscape that visitors are not encouraged to experience.

Apart from the archaeological site of the Minoan Palace, there are also other ancient and historic monuments around that compose a complete picture of the history of the place. The Royal Way on the northwestern border of the archaeological site once connected the Palace of Knossos to the Small Palace and the so-called Unexplored Mansion. A large area to the north of this archaeological site, along the roadway, belongs to the estate bought from the Turkish regimen by Sir Arthur Evans. In the primarily rural landscape of olive trees and cypresses - vegetation that in symbolism refers to the Roman ruins revealed in the site - are found various cultural elements of great historical importance that describe the multiple dimensions and evolution of landscape. Villa Ariadne, which was Evans's home during the excavations, has lately been refurbished along with the surrounding supplementary buildings and the historic gardens of Edwardian style. To the north, successional habitation layers have been discovered from the middle Minoan (contemporary to the old palace period; around 2000 B.C.), Roman (mainly 2nd to 4th century A.D.) and early Christian or Byzantine period (4th to 8th century A.D.) (University of Birmingham & BSA, 2004). Within this area, the visitor can see part of the town-plan of Roman Knossos, the layout of private and public buildings and a full stratigraphic analysis of the archaeological remains.

The whole area of Knossos is rich in ancient remains, and vestiges of historical periods can be found all over the place. Even shards of ancient origin bestrew in the surrounding olive tree fields or lay built-in the shell of newer structures. The historic agricultural settlements of Knossos and Vlychia border the archaeological site with patterns of traditional Cretan architecture and place-making. The village houses are small, have low ceilings and usually present a single structural arch. The pathways are very narrow and typically winding. The Christian chapels in the area are found outside the inhabited places on the slopes or the rise of surrounding hills. They are quiet places of serenity and recollection. In the countryside towards the south an imposing Venetian aqueduct raises, as well as the adjacent Byzantine church of Aghia Eirini, in an environment with dense woodland and hydrophilous vegetation.

But there is certainly more to this cultural landscape than monuments and their intimate history: there is the land, the people, nature and the changing factor of evolution. Generally, the percentage of natural vegetation and the rate of biodiversity of the species and ecotopes in the area are considered pretty high due to the fertility of the land and the protection regime implemented. As different cultivations are practiced side-by-side and alternate with parts of nature, the landscape presents the picture of a multicoloured puzzle where the scale of space and objects comes down to the familiar human scale. Although Knossos neighbors the city of Heraklion, it retains a pure agricultural character and exhibits a traditional Mediterranean landscape of slower pace and old-fashioned traditions.

CONCLUSION

The northern part of Knossos area is the most plain as the landscape features low hills of gentle slopes. In fact, the geomorphology of the land gives a sense of enclosure to the landscape, a feeling also reproduced within the archaeological site. The management of the vegetation in thick volumes along the boundaries of the Minoan antiquities does not allow contact with the surroundings except to the east, where the hilly formation of Profitis Hlias further spreads along the horizon. Restricted vistas are only possible to other directions by chance. The visitor supposes that the margins of the archaeological site include the total area of ancient and historic Knossos and therefore limits his exploration to the organized space. In this way, the perception of the archaeological landscape is incorrect as sightseeing regards only the area of the Minoan palace.

The lack of public open space, informative signs, general information and a network of exploratory pathways around the archaeological site hamper a holistic understanding of cultural landscape. Visitors are not encouraged to explore the wider landscape that concentrates a crowd of heteroclite, discernible or secret elements. Knossos comprises an interesting typical picture of Mediterranean landscape that offers a wide spectrum of historicalness, culture, naturalness and human impact. The “opening” of the archaeological site of Knossos to the gentle wider landscape will certainly add to its importance, value and perception. Considering that the character and physiognomy of the landscape have not been historically transformed to a great degree, the visitor is able to comprehend the natural and symbolic characteristics of a place that hosted some glorious civilizations. What is to be fulfilled is the reunion and correlation of the different monuments that stand as living witnesses of history with the natural environment and contemporary space.

The landscape of Knossos is not only about the Minoan palace of the organized archaeological site. There are still people in the area that live, work the land, worship their deities and bury the dead in a familiar, very old and, at the same time, contemporary and everyday landscape. It is a living world of common and special features that tends more towards countryside than town and does not correspond to the neutral environment of an archaeological museum. A comprehensive management of the cultural landscape could promote both characters (archaeological and contemporary) of the place and enhance the perception and understanding of local history and ancient tradition.

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