

Preface

The excavation at Petras started in 1985, initially as a small-scale test dig. In the late 1980's it was granted the status of a "systematic research project" by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture. It is a happy coincidence that the 25th anniversary of the excavation and the studies of its finds is marked by the presentation to the scholarly community of this monograph which constitutes the final publication of the hieroglyphic archive that came to light in a MM IIB destruction deposit of the palace of Petras. Ever since my very first visit to the site in 1983, I was, for various reasons – some of them not even conscious – convinced that Petras was hiding much more than its first excavator, R.C. Bosanquet, had thought. Frequently over all these years I asked myself the type of rhetorical question that often tortures archaeologists: what would our knowledge of Minoan archaeology, or at least of Minoan eastern Crete be, had the British archaeologist stayed in Siteia to excavate Petras, at the beginning of the 20th century, instead of moving on to Palaikastro. Would the site today look somewhat like Gournia? I doubt it, as I believe that the urban plan of Petras was different. Yet I will never be able to learn more about it. This is a void, not only for our general knowledge of the Minoan period, but also for my own soul. What I was able to investigate of the Minoan urban settlement during the past 25 years, in the course of the systematic, and also several test excavations, is very fragmentary.

In the last quarter of the 20th century, especially within the framework of the Greek Archaeological Service, it probably would not have been possible to accomplish much more. However, if one were to start the excavation today, the research methods would be superior and many more archaeometric studies would be conducted on various categories of artefacts. Fortunately, the excavation and study of the settlement's cemetery, which started in the 21st century, offer us this opportunity.

During the excavations at Petras I have known moments of incredible happiness as well as experienced emotions that I was not even able to fully understand at the time, on account of the pressing need to continue the work in the best possible way. Since the beginning of my research, I dreamed of finding administrative documents. I have always expressed this wish to Erik Hallager, an old friend, who used to tease me, saying "since you are not personally interested in publishing documents, why do you want them so badly?" Of course he knew very well, as I did, that the documents would provide the necessary proof of the importance of Petras as an administrative centre.

Just after the end of the symposium on the Minoan Villa organised by the Swedish Institute in 1992, I had the opportunity to show Petras to the participants. The excavation of the "central building" on the plateau had just started. The baulks were still in place, but the continuation of the long walls

was very clear in the successive trenches. I was holding my breath, in anticipation of the comments from my much more experienced colleagues. And it was Erik, after me, who first proclaimed, very clearly and loudly, the magic sentence, "You have a central court here!"

The preservation of the palatial building of Petras was less than perfect. It was very close to the surface, on a flat surface. Furthermore, the construction of 33 Byzantine graves had caused serious damage to the Neopalatial walls and architectural features. The whole south part of the palace is not preserved, and we do not have any indication of its original size. The finding of the first Linear A tablet, just below the surface in a disturbed layer containing many Byzantine sherds, in the west part of the building, and soon afterwards of a second one, in the same layer, suggested that the building had a certain administrative function, although it was not possible to establish the exact type of administration they represented. The Linear A tablets constituted important evidence, but they were not sufficient to prove the building's function as the centre of a wider geographic area (constituting what is usually called a "palace"). We will never know whether Petras was equipped with a Linear A archive which was not preserved.

It was several years before I understood the history of the building, and more importantly, before I realised why the "palace" of Petras, although it shared various features with other buildings of this type, still looked somehow atypical. This was mainly due to the Protopalatial core of the building which had been preserved until the final destruction in LM IB. A series of stratigraphical trenches were excavated to investigate the early history of the building and to reveal what had preceded the Neopalatial phases and plans. It was established that the Petras "palace" was a Protopalatial construction, with a long history and various reconstructions and modifications, which in Neopalatial times maintained a highly symbolic character.

The hieroglyphic archive came to light as the result of the stratigraphical trenches. Trench Z1, had already revealed in previous seasons, the two Linear A tablets, in an LM IB destruction level disturbed by Byzantine graves. The same trench contained, in a slightly deeper level, a LM IA destruction deposit with a very large number of conical cups. In order to fully document this LM IA deposit and the dense concentration of pottery, it was excavated in 0.50 × 0.50 squares. After the end of the Neopalatial level we continued excavating in the small squares. This fortuitous coincidence helped us to notice immediately the particularly fragile hieroglyphic documents. A second happy coincidence was that the very first document that came to light was the clay bar **PE Hh 016**. Even an inexperienced person would not have overlooked it. I was conducting the excavation in the area, with the valued assistance of Dr Michael Wedde, and the very experienced foreman of the Petras excavation Mr Pandelis Kampanos. Soon after finding the first hieroglyphic tablet, I called Erik (and this was before mobile phones), who arrived at Petras before the end of that day's work. At the same time Alekos Nikakis, the very experienced conservator of the 24th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities came from Aghios Nikolaos to Siteia to assist with the *in situ* conservation.

How one deals with the strong emotions engendered by the discovery of unique finds is a very complex process, as I had the opportunity to discover. These become even more difficult to come to terms with since the responsibility towards the finds is always demanding and the realisation that mistakes need to be avoided is overwhelming. Today, in 2010, so many years later, all I can remember is that I must have eventually realised and accepted, the importance of the discovery of the hieroglyphic archive at Petras, probably after the end of the excavation. What was important at the time of the field-work was to do our best as far as the excavation and the documentation were concerned. Furthermore less than a month later, Erik and I were able to give a first presentation of the hieroglyphic archive of Petras at the Cretological Conference in Heraklion.

Furthermore, the pressure on me was enormous when I realised that it was not possible to finish the excavation of the destruction deposit containing the archive in 1996. We had to cover the soil of the destruction deposit with a plastic sheet. On many occasions I returned to Petras during the winter of 1996–1997 to check up on it, full of anxiety and concern. I wanted to make sure that the plastic sheet was still in place, and that the rainwater did not go through it. When the summer of 1997 finally came, the Ministry of Culture decided to interrupt all systematic excavations, in order to promote the studies. This was one of the most difficult moments in my life. I am grateful to Alexandra Karetsoy, Acting Director of the 24th Ephorate, who realised the importance of the find, and the need to continue and finish the excavation of the deposit containing the archive. She supported me and asked Alekos Nikakis to continue his work at the excavation and on the conservation of the documents.

The publication of the hieroglyphic archive of Petras is presented to the scholarly community, and is open for review and criticism. Allow me to finish this brief introduction by saying that the present volume is less than I would have wished it to be, but I did my best, with the precious assistance of an experienced team of co-workers, who I am happy to mention below and to whom I wish to express my deep gratitude.

East Crete
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