

MONOGRAFIE

DELLA

SCUOLA ARCHEOLOGICA DI ATENE

E DELLE

MISSIONI ITALIANE IN ORIENTE

XXX

AN ISLAND IN PREHISTORY

NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGES FINDS FROM
KALYMNOS DODECANESE

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SCUOLA ARCHEOLOGICA ITALIANA DI ATENE

2020

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Redazione: redazione@scuoladiatene.it

Comunicazione: comunicazione@scuoladiatene.it

Sito internet: www.scuoladiatene.it

Le Monografie sono sottoposte a valutazione del comitato scientifico-editoriale e approvate da *referees* anonimi.

Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene

Parthenonos 14

11742 Atene

Grecia

Per le norme redazionali consultare la pagina web della Scuola alla sezione Pubblicazioni

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Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene

ISSN 1970-6146 (cartaceo)

ISBN 978-960-9559-23-2 (cartaceo)

Per l'acquisto rivolgersi a / orders may be placed to:

All'Insegna del Giglio s.a.s.

via A. Boito, 50-52 - 50019 Sesto Fiorentino (FI)

www.insegnadelgiglio.it

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Alla memoria di mia madre

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful to the Greek Archaeological Service for giving me the permission to study the Kalymnos materials brought to light by the Italian archaeologist A. Maiuri in the early twenties of the past century. I feel also deeply indebted for their continuous support and hospitality to the Ephoroi of Antiquities for the Dodecanese Yannis Papachristodoulou, who was Ephoros at the time I started working on the Kalymnos material, and to Melina Philimonos and Mania Michailidou, who succeeded him.

I am also deeply indebted to all those who worked in the Ephoria during my yearly stays in Rhodes and Kalymnos from 2000 to 2015. My very special thanks go to my friends Toula Marketou and Vasso Patsiada, for their support and hospitality and for their help in solving a number of problems concerning the material, which was partly stored in the storerooms of the Rhodes Museum and partly deposited in the Vouvalis Mansion in Kalymnos. It is not possible to list by name all those who gave me help and support in the difficult task of retrieving the Kalymnos material but I am particularly pleased to record my indebtedness to all the members of the restoration team of the Rhodes Museum.

I am also deeply grateful to the attendants of the Vouvalis Mansion and the new Archaeological Museum in Kalymnos for their continuous assistance and collaboration in the course of my stays in Kalymnos. I am particularly pleased to record my indebtedness to Paschalis Alahiotis and his family for their friendly help, hospitality, and continuous support during my stays in Kalymnos.

I am also deeply indebted to Matilde Cante, who made a large part of the drawings and to Toula Marketou and Maria Chalkitis who made a number of photographs of the material.

A large part of the present study was carried on in the library of the Italian School of Archaeology at Athens. For this I think warmly the former director of the school prof. Emanuele Greco and the current director prof. Emanuele Papi for their generous hospitality in the guest rooms of the school and their support and encouragement.

Drawings and photographs have been digitally processed by Mario Epifani, F. Gabrielli and E. Taccola technicians of the former DPT of Scienze Archeologiche of the University of Pisa, and especially by my personal friend and freelance artist Cesare Maccioni based in La Spezia.

1. THE PREHISTORIC EXCAVATIONS ON KALYMNOS

The earliest prehistoric excavations on the island took place in 1887, when W.R. Paton discovered Mycenaean chamber tombs in the side of the torrent bed, which runs into the harbour of Pothia to the east of the hill of Perakastro, where the Late Bronze Age settlement stood¹. Most of the vessels found from Paton were presented to the British Museum while others are preserved in other European Museums².

The first systematic excavations, however, took place only in the early twenties of the past century when the Italian archaeologist A. Maiuri director of the archaeological exploration of the then Italian islands of the Dodecanese, excavated the three prehistoric caves of Ayia Varvara (1920), Choiromandres (1921), and Vathy-Dhaskalio (1922), which are the object of the present study.

1.1 THE VATHY CAVE (PLS. 1-2)

The most important and the richest in finds was the cave of Dhaskalio, above the Rhina harbour in the valley of Vathy³, facing the western coast of Anatolia. The Vathy valley, which is reputed one of the most fertile part of Kalymnos, is a long strip of land running west east and ending in the Vathy bay. The bay has towering, overhanging cliffs and looks like a miniature fjord. The cave opens into the northern cliff, some 12 m above the present day sea level⁴ and about 100 m from the present shore of the Rhina valley. The narrow entrance leads straight into the main chamber, which has a length of 25 m and a maximum width of 12 m. The ceiling rises to a height of 10 m⁵. On the east side of the main chamber, the floor slopes down gently to a sort of lower chamber with impressive stalagmites (**Pl. 2b**). From the lower chamber the floor slopes down abruptly to a water collecting hollow. Today the pond contains salt water but at one time most likely contained drinkable water dripping from the ceiling. The only access to the cave is from the sea through a narrow climbing path. At the time of the excavation some poorly preserved built steps leading up to the entrance were dated by the excavator to the Byzantine period on the much questionable basis of their building technique (**Pl. 2a**). In fact no traces of Byzantine occupation were found except for a fine marble fragment⁶, and a number of rough drinking vessels described as Byzantine, but most likely conical cups of Minoan type (**VA 204-VA 212**) (**Pls. 15b-e; 39p-q; 40a-c**). According to the preliminary reports, the Late Bronze Age pottery (mixed with earlier material) was found in the unstratified surface layer. The only safe traces of post Bronze Age occupation are the marble fragment referred to above and the fragment of a bronze lion figurine⁷. Both are now impossible to identify. In front of the entrance and along the west wall very mixed finds were recovered from a number of cavities in the bedrock. A deep and apparently undisturbed deposit was excavated along the back wall where the bedrock slopes down. A first sounding from -1 to -1.60 m below the surface produced many sherds

¹ See PATON 1887; HOPE-SIMPSON - LAZENBY 1962, 172; MOUNTJOY 1999a, 1125.

² FORSDYKE 1925, A 1001-A 1024; MOUNTJOY 1999a, 1125-1138; LANGLOTZ 1968, 2-5, pl. 2: 25, 28, 30, 32-33, 35-37, 40-44; CROUWEL 1972; 1984.

³ MAIURI 1928, 110-117.

⁴ *Id.* 1923/24, 234, fig. 1; 1928, 111-112, figs. 90-91.

⁵ *Id.* 1923/24, 234, fig. 2; 1928, 113, fig. 92; 116, fig. 94 (duck-vase

VA 122).

⁶ *Ibid.* 114 «Si notò alla superficie del terreno un frammento marmoreo di lavorazione bizantina appartenente probabilmente ad una transenna».

⁷ [6011] Italian Inventory: «Piede di leone in bronzo, che si appoggia su sostegno a forma di colonna ionica, con gola molto incavata. Frammentario. H. 0.037. D. base 0.032».

described as “Neolithic” (but also one of the two EBA III duck vase, most likely **VA 122**). A large storage jar with its lid (a round pumice slab) still *in situ* was deeply sunken in the “Neolithic” deposit; other three storage jars were found at about the same level in the second sounding. Though sunken in the “Neolithic” layer, they are likely to date to the Late Bronze Age (**VA 221-VA 224**) (**Pls. 15k-l; 16a-b**). In the second sounding, a floor of clay and beaten earth was met at -1.50 and traces of a hearth were found at -1.60 m below the surface layer. Abundant “Neolithic” pottery and grinding stones were apparently lying on the floor. Further down at -2/2.30 m was discovered a thick (30 to 50 cm) layer of grey, soapy earth mixed with ashes and food remains (including a large amount of seashells and a few sheep bones), ground stones and again a large amount of “Neolithic” pottery, but the only vessel mentioned by Maiuri is a bowl with handles surmounted by warts, most likely the deep cup or bowl **VA 44** (**Pls. 6b; 28f**). It is however unknown how many levels were in fact detected and which materials came from each level.

1.2 THE AYIA VARVARA CAVE (PL. 1)

The cave, which is located on the south slope of the Pothia valley near to the Byzantine fortress of Chrysocheria, consisted of two chambers connected by a narrow, winding corridor⁸. The roof of the outer chamber had in part collapsed as suggested by the impressive rock debris fallen in front of the entrance. At the time of the excavation the cave looked like a rock shelter rather than a cave. In the south-eastern sector of the outer chamber at - 1/1.50 m. below the surface was found a layer of whitish earth, mixed with ashes and food remains (sheep/goat bones and many seashells). Stone tools (**AV 44-AV 66**) (**Pl. 22a-b**) (**AV 67-72. AV 83-95**), obsidian blades and a nucleus (**AV 73-AV 82**), and bone tools (including finely crafted double-ended chisels) (**AV 101-AV 106**) (**Pls. 22c-23a**) were apparently found on the floor. At -1.50/2 m below the surface was discovered a cobbled floor laid on a 30/50 cm thick layer of beaten earth, which reached down to the bedrock. The excavation in the small (30 m²) and dark inner cave proved extremely difficult. The excavated deposits reached a depth of 4 to 5 m. The first prehistoric layer was found at -1.50/2 m below the surface. It consisted of black earth mixed with charcoal and food remains and yielded two clay figurines (**AV 39-AV 40**) (**Pls. 20o-p; 51c-d**) and plenty of pottery, including a group of sherds with incised/punctuated decoration (**AV 22-AV 31**) (**Pls. 19a-j; 45i**)⁹. From - 2 to -3 m below the surface, several hearths were discovered; further down to a depth of -4 m was discovered a thick layer consisting of decomposed animal bones. In this case too it is not clearly stated how many layers were discovered or which materials came from each level.

1.3 THE CHOIROMANDRES CAVE (PL. 1)

The cave opens into the western slope of a rocky hill located in a little valley close to the modern town of Pothia¹⁰. At the time of the excavation the cave looked like a rock shelter, but evidence was found that it was considerably larger before much of the roof collapsed. The excavation proved difficult and only a small area was actually investigated. The prehistoric deposit was found at about -1 m below the surface. It contained the richest group of obsidian tools found in Kalymnos (**CH 24-CH 32, CH 34**) (**Pl. 23b**), a number of stone axes (**CH 35-CH 44**) (**Pl. 24a**), other stone tools (**CH 45-CH 57**), and abundant ceramic finds. From -80 to 2 m below the surface were discovered several hearths. Set apart from the others was an outstandingly large hearth (2.10 m in diameter) partially surrounded with stones. From a pit in the bedrock were recovered bone tools and food remains (**CH 58-CH 62**) (**Pl. 24b**). Below the level with hearths there was a further layer consisting of earth mixed with animal bones. In the NW corner of the cave a deposit of bones and burnt debris reached 4/5 m. below the surface. As usual it is not clearly stated how many layers were discovered or which materials come from each level.

⁸ MAIURI 1928, 106-108, fig. 87.

⁹ *Ibid.* fig. 88.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

1.4 THE VALLEY OF VATHY

No other prehistoric excavations took place on Kalymnos until 1947, when T. Burton Brown, Antiquities Officer of the British Military Administration of the Dodecanese, examined the spoil earth from a well dug a few years before in the valley of Vathy¹¹. According to Burton Brown report, «the well had reached, at about nine metres down, the remains of a village of late Neolithic and early Bronze Age date». The finds were deposited in the Rhodes Museum while a number of duplicates was sent to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, but all the material has apparently disappeared. Burton Brown gives short descriptions of the finds and suggests a number of parallels with the then known prehistoric pottery from various sites in Anatolia and the Aegean, but unfortunately does not provide any illustration of the materials. The only safely identifiable shape is the «part of the rim of a large vessel with internal ledge handles and a row of holes pierced just below the rim» no doubt a cheese-pot (see *infra*, 26-27).

1.5 OTHER FINDS

Finally, a group of EBA II pottery from Chorio is reported by T. Marketou without any further comment on the circumstances of their discovery¹².

1.6 THE PRESENT STATE OF THE ITALIAN MATERIALS AND THE PROBLEMS OF THEIR IDENTIFICATION

As evidenced above, Maiuri's excavations are virtually un-documented. The excavation notebooks, if ever existed, have long disappeared. Maiuri published only two preliminary reports. The first is no more than a short and poorly illustrated notice (**Pl. 20m**)¹³. A slightly more detailed report appeared later in the first issue of the Clara Rhodos series¹⁴, but provides very poor information on such basic issues as stratigraphy and associations of finds. The preceding description of the three caves is a summary of the Clara Rhodos report, which is the only available source. After the excavation, the materials were transferred to Rhodes and were displayed in a large showcase in the Archaeological Museum located in the former Hospital of the Knights of Saint John. At the beginning of World War II, they were removed for security reasons and stored in boxes deposited in underground deposits in the Old Town of Rhodes. Unfortunately in the wet conditions of the underground stores most of the paper labels on which were written the inventory numbers of each piece have disappeared or are no more readable. Sometime after the end of the war a substantial part of the material was sent back to Kalymnos and housed in the so-called Vouvalion, the fine mansion of Nikolaos Vouvalis (1859-1918), a local rich sponge merchant. Another small group of finds was re-traced many years later in a storeroom of the Rhodes Museum. Finally, in 2009 the finds from the three caves were in part displayed in the newly built Archaeological Museum of Kalymnos located in Pothia, the modern capital of the island, and new inventory numbers were assigned to the materials.

Identifying and re-assigning the finds to their original contexts proved a long and painful task. Such work was made at least partially possible by two main sources, namely the Italian Inventory and twenty five or so photographs depicting a number of whole vessels from Vathy as well as pottery sherds, stone, and bone tools from A. Varvara and Choiromandres¹⁵. The Italian Inventory provides sketchy descriptions of the materials, but proved useful in the identification of vessels of unusual shape or characterized by unusual features. Particularly useful was a photograph of the showcase in which a selection of the materials was displayed in the Rhodes Museum before the World War 2 (**Pls. 3-4**). Sherds and small finds were strung on cardboards. Sometimes the original inventory numbers are still visible by means of a magnifying glass. In the catalogue, each object is identified either by the Italian and Greek inventory numbers or, where the Italian number was not ascertained, by its position in the showcases. For example, [I:6:2] means that the piece was displayed in showcase I and was the second on cardboard six. Both cardboards and objects are numbered in clockwise order. The author apologizes for the bad quality of the photographs, which date

¹¹ BURTON BROWN 1947.

¹² MARKETOU 2010a, 767.

¹³ MAIURI 1923/24, 236, figs. 4 (storage jars **VA 223-VA 221**); 5 (duck-vase **VA 123**); 6 (stone objects **VA 337-339**), (spindle-whorls

VA 281-VA 304); (loom-weights **VA 305-VA 310**).

¹⁴ *Id.* 1928.

¹⁵ The photographs are kept in the library and photographic archive of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Dodecanese in Rhodes.

back to the late twenties of the past century. In the catalogue each piece is designated by a serial number in Arabic, preceded by the abbreviations **VA** (Vathy), **AV** (Ayia Varvara), **CH** (Choiromandres), and **UP** (undetermined/unknown provenance). The inventory numbers in square brackets refer to the Italian Inventory while those in round brackets refer to the Greek Inventory. Bracketed asterisks refer to unidentified or missing inventory numbers [*] (*). Late Bronze Age vessels marked [*] have been assigned to Vathy by default as the Italian Inventory lists only three undiagnostic LBA sherds from A. Varvara (**AV 41-AV 43**) (see *infra*, 120) and one from Choiromandres (**CH 23**) (see *infra*, 123, 125 **Pls. 20h; 46l**). All measures are in centimetres.