

Prehistory

Natalie Abell, *Keos XII. Ayia Irini: Area B*. pp. xviii+360, 52 plates (5 col.), 52 B/W figures, 35 tables. Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2021 ISBN 9781948488570 (hardback), 9781948488679 (pdf). \$80.

Area B is a narrow strip of land adjacent to House A, the largest in Ayia Irini Period VII, but it is on a lower slope that ends abruptly at the current shoreline. Erosion by the sea has taken away almost all evidence of its eastern side, but enough is preserved to show a single house (B), consisting of a row of rooms, which stretches in the same NE-SW orientation as House A, along an alley (AB) that runs from its façade on Temple Lane down to the South Alley, which runs behind it and House A. The person in charge of the excavation of this area, as part of a wider region that included the Temple, was Alicia Bikaki, ‘an excellent archaeologist’ (p. xv), talented, careful, and conscientious, with the result that this is one of the best documented parts of the whole Ayia Irini excavation. She worked on publishing Area B until 2008, when she passed on her material to Abell, and this book is very fittingly dedicated to her memory.

Despite its position close to House A there is nothing very remarkable about House B except the fact that its central rooms had fresco decoration on walls and floors, apparently, in Period VII (pp. 33, 64; most pieces belong to coated areas or banded patterns, but human figures are reported), a feature found in House A and hardly any other buildings apart from the Northeast Bastion, published in *KEOS XI*.¹ The value of the Area B excavation as a whole lies in the stratigraphical sequence that was retrieved, the material from which, largely pottery, is fully published and discussed in this volume.

After a useful initial chapter covering the history of the excavation and explaining its goals and methodology, the treatment of the material and the standard methods of presenting the finds, Chapter II covers the stratigraphic sequence in detail, focusing on each room or separately identified area in turn. It contains full accounts of the strata, deposits, and building remains, and general summaries of the material in the deposits, including entries and drawn illustrations and profiles for most catalogued pieces (some only appear in plates), both pottery

and the relatively rare ‘small finds’. The accounts make it clear that, inevitably, a good deal of the pottery was discarded in the initial sorting and/or during study, often with little if any record (a common practice then, as I admit to my guilt); the quantities of material were such that even sherds identified as of imported wares might be discarded if they were from mixed deposits (e.g. p. 35). There follows an important chapter which describes the different fabrics identified, both local and imported, and discusses the evidence for the manufacture of the pottery. Then there are four chapters of ceramic analysis, for the EBA (Period III), MBA (Periods IV and V), and early LBA (Periods VI and VII, dealt with separately), and a final chapter summarising general conclusions on production and consumption at Ayia Irini and its place in the Aegean. This incorporates an important discussion of the theme to which the MB and early LB evidence is highly relevant, the nature and significance of ‘Minoanisation’. There are copious plans, sections, tables, and plates to illustrate and explain the observed stratigraphy and, in the case of the ceramic analyses, to support the accounts with statistics and other information. The discussions of pottery are further supported by 4 colour plates of photomicrographs of the different fabrics identified, both local and imported, and a fifth colour plate is a stylised plan of Area B which shows the remains of the successive architectural phases in distinctive colours and includes walls of the neighbouring Period VII structures to demonstrate its setting in the town. All discussion is very full and clear, with constant references to the relevant material that has already been published from other parts of Ayia Irini. A single significant error has been noted: Dickinson 2007, cited p. 239, is not in the Bibliography (it is in fact Appendix E in Barber 2007: 238-248).

Evidently there were always structures in Area B, but the pre-LBA periods are represented only by scattered fragments of walls and surfaces. House B was founded as a single room (B1) in Period VI, in the centre of the area, but the building was expanded in Period VII to take in the full extent of the area, going northwards to a façade opening onto Temple Alley and southwards to an outer wall on South Alley, to make a total of 4 rooms, but in the final phase two (B2 and B3) were combined. Only slight remains of an extension of the building (or possibly a separate but attached building) to the east, along the Temple Alley façade, were preserved because of the severe erosion. There was little indication of what the separate rooms’ functions might have been (B4 may have contained a cooking area, p. 106); all contained considerable quantities of pottery and a variety of other finds. House B was destroyed in the general

¹ Reviewed in *JGA* 6 (2021): 486-488.

destruction of the town that ended Period VII, and there are few traces of later activity in the area, although the Temple nearby continued in use in the later LBA and beyond, into historical times (pp. 144–145).

The chapters of ceramic analysis form the heart of the book, and they are very impressive for their extremely careful and thorough account of the pottery in each period, with much attention to the practical use and potential social function of each form, both of locally produced pottery and imports, and comparison of the impression given by the Area B deposits with that from other published material from Ayia Irini. The analysis of the Period III pottery shows that already in the later EBA Ayia Irini had a wide range of external contacts, including various Cycladic islands, some quite distant like Melos, Thera, and Amorgos, and also Aigina, Attica and Euboea, while there are no certain links with Crete or the Peloponnese. Various indications suggest that this wide range of connections was linked to the exploitation of the mineral sources of Mt. Laurion. But the period ended in a destruction, following which Ayia Irini seems to have been entirely deserted until a developed stage of the MBA, when the site was refounded as a town. The detailed analysis of the pottery from Area B makes it extremely likely that this was a local venture, for the links of the pottery, both locally made and imported, are very much with the Cyclades and the neighbouring mainland regions, Attica and central Greece, from which much of the fine pottery comes in the form of Grey Minyan goblets and kantharoi. In contrast, Cretan imports are mainly closed vessels especially containers (p. 177); these are common, and the potter's wheel seems to have been introduced from Crete, but to make only some of the range of cup and bowl types identifiable at Ayia Irini, where the range of locally produced wares, including painted wares, is much wider than is suggested in some general comments. However interested the developing Minoan civilisation of Crete may have been in Laurion metals, then, archaeological evidence does not give much support to any suggestion that Ayia Irini was refounded with Cretan patronage, *let alone* as a 'Minoan colony'.

In Periods VI and VII the evidence for contacts with Crete and the adoption of Minoan styles and influences not only in local pottery manufacture but in cooking styles and weaving, increases markedly, exemplifying the 'Minoanising phenomenon' identified widely in the southern Aegean, as far as Miletus and Iasos in western Anatolia, and reflected in a rather different form in the development of the Mycenaean culture on the mainland. But the evidence from Ayia Irini resolutely refuses to fit

theories that it may have come under the control of a central power in Crete and even have received a Cretan element in its population. Minoan features were introduced progressively in the pottery, including in the range involved in food preparation and consumption, and also quite conspicuously in weaving, in the form of loomweights of types associated with the upright loom. Sometimes these reflect influence from the Minoanising crafts of other Cycladic islands rather than directly from Crete (at least some of the loomweights are apparently Naxian), and they were found side by side with material of local non-Minoanising traditions. It is emphasised by Abell (p. 229) that the techniques of using the potter's wheel and the upright loom require long training to be learned, and also that these skills seem to have been practised mainly at household level, which would mean that the practitioners who introduced the skills should have been integrated into households. Since weaving and cooking, and frequently potting, are generally assumed to have been particularly women's skills in Bronze Age societies, the interesting possibility arises that these Minoanising innovations were introduced to Ayia Irini through the arrival of 'foreign' women, whether voluntarily (as wives?) or forced (as slaves or dependents).

The lack of evidence for any spatial variation in the distribution of Minoanising types or of Minoan imports, such as might indicate an enclave of Cretan settlers within the settlement, is most noticeable in the pottery. Typically, while many forms of cooking ware well represented in Crete were adopted, plausibly reflecting changes in cooking methods, one distinctive form, the shallow dish with a thin rounded base, did not appear. More generally, the use of the potter's wheel became more common, especially for Minoanising types; but it was also used for non-Minoan types and not entirely consistently, even for the notorious mass-produced 'conical cups' (called handleless cups throughout the volume, with good reason, for not all of the types produced at Ayia Irini were close in form to those standard in Crete). Even in the early LBA there continued to be a considerable percentage of imported pottery from different island and mainland sources, among which material from Crete itself was never dominant; indeed, early Mycenaean decorated pottery is better represented than Minoan. In this respect the evidence from Ayia Irini contrasted noticeably with that from Phylakopi on Melos and Akrotiri on Thera, in which imported material from the mainland and Aigina was relatively uncommon. This rarity may well reflect relative distance from the mainland, but it is notable that small quantities of East Aegean material reached Ayia Irini in Period VII.

The very extensive and thorough examination of the Ayia Irini pottery deposits in Area B represents a valuable contribution to the continuing debate on the nature and significance of the 'Minoanising phenomenon'. The topic is usefully discussed in detail on pp. 232-235 in the final chapter, with particular emphasis on the pottery evidence, and the following discussion of 'Exchange and interaction beyond Minoanization in Periods V-VII' (pp. 235-237) is also highly relevant. Viewed generally, the evidence helps to underline the point that at each major Aegean island centre outside Crete that has been extensively investigated Minoan influence takes different forms, and even at its height never seems to have been complete in the way that it was on Kythera, to judge from the evidence from the settlement and graves of Kastri, finds in survey work from other areas of the island, and the presence of at least one, probably two or more peak sanctuaries on the island. Ayia Irini is in fact a far less 'Minoan'-looking site in its material culture than Akrotiri on Thera. The dominant plan in town buildings seems to be a row of single rooms, one behind the other, which does not seem very Minoan. House A is the only one to include distinctive Minoan features, in its final phase, but it does not resemble a Minoan 'villa' very closely,² and other notable structures such as the Temple and the fortification, with its unique fresco-decorated bastion, do not seem very Minoan as buildings either. What is known of local burial customs in Periods V-VII is equally un-Minoan, and overall, detailed analysis shows that the extent of Minoan influence was hardly overwhelming even in Period VII.

What is more likely to lie behind the 'Minoanisation phenomenon', as argued cogently by Abell, is that the local elites of the various centres, or leading elements among them, considered it profitable to cooperate with the greater powers of Crete and were impressed enough by the likely elaborateness of Cretan social and ritual behaviour to develop their own versions of ceremonies such as those of communal drinking, postulated to have been a major arena for the use of the ubiquitous handleless cups. They may have adopted, or adapted, some Minoan religious concepts and behaviour, and seem sometimes to have established ritual centres that displayed at least some of the features of Cretan peak sanctuaries, as was plausibly done on Mt. Troullos near Ayia Irini, and, as has recently been discovered, at Stelida on Naxos.³ It is possible that, if Knossos established itself as the dominant power on Crete

(but this remains an area of controversy),⁴ it might have attempted to extend its domination or at least overbearing influence further, to the Cyclades and other parts of the Aegean, but whether in doing so it could have made use of 'sea power' in the way that Athens did in the fifth century BC is very much open to question. The rise of new centres of power on the mainland during the period of Ayia Irini's greatest flourishing in Periods VI and VII may well have had a disruptive effect on previously established trading and political relationships in the Aegean (as the eruption of the Santorini volcano in the middle of the early LBA must surely have done), and in general it seems quite likely that the early LBA was a period of at least intermittent turbulence and uncertainty rather than a calm *pax minoica* presided over by an overwhelmingly powerful Knossos.⁵

In sum, this book must be welcomed for its very thorough presentation and searchingly analytical discussion of evidence that represents a major contribution to our knowledge of developments and relationships in the period when Minoan civilisation reached its height and Mycenaean civilisation began to develop.

OLIVER DICKINSON
DURHAM UNIVERSITY, UK
otpkdickinson@googlemail.com

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² See Wilson and Cummer 1984: 40-41 on House A and Ayia Irini architecture in general.

³ *JGA* 6 (2021): 60-100.

⁴ The picture of Minoan Crete offered in Watrous 2021 envisages the island as divided between large and small states, very much like the historical pattern, and does not suggest that Knossos was dominant, cf. especially p. 87.

⁵ See also *JGA* 6 (2021): 488.