

## Prehistory

**Elizabeth C. Banks.** *Lerna, a preclassical site in the Argolid, Volume VII, the Neolithic settlement.* pp. ix+331, 66 b/w illustrations, 53 plates. 2015. Princeton (NJ): The American School of Classical Studies at Athens. ISBN 978-0-87661-307-8 hardback \$150.

Among field archaeologists and excavators there has always been a firm opinion that publication of old excavations presents a real challenge requiring considerable reserves of skill and dedication. Such is the nature of research that, despite the care with which the original project has been carried out, the methodology adopted and the goals set are always intimately related to the concepts and ideas current at the time of the project. Rarely methods, which once looked cutting edge, and goals considered at their time groundbreaking will remain up to the standards of the present or preserve some of the original sophistication. Advances in the discipline and shifts of debate to other directions favour the application of a more intensive retrieval and documentation regime on a scale inconceivable even a few decades ago. Needless to say, the difficulties increase considerably when the original mastermind is not around anymore.

Lerna is one such case. Excavations from 1952 to 1958 by John Caskey had revealed deep Neolithic deposits underneath the impressive Early Helladic 'House of the Tiles'. Barely anything was known at that time regarding the Neolithic of the Peloponnese, and Caskey rightly considered Lerna as an excellent opportunity to explore and subsequently present the little-known period systematically. The original plan, however, was delayed and eventually never completed in Caskey's lifetime. The present volume is the seventh in a series that appeared under the general title 'Lerna. A Preclassical Site in the Argolid'. Almost 60 years after the excavation at Lerna much new evidence on the Neolithic of Peloponnese had accumulated. Most notable are the volumes of the Franchthi Cave and, in particular, the detailed publication of Franchthi pottery by Vitelli.<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt that the series overall is an impressive achievement, representing many years of hard work and remarkable scholarship that spans more than forty years.

Volume VII of the Lerna series presents the final publication of the stratigraphy, architecture and 'minor' finds of the Neolithic deposits of Lerna. The

volume abandons the phasing of the site developed by Caskey and adopts a revised phasing, based on analogies with the ceramic sequences from Franchthi. Appendices include a chapter on fauna, by David S. Reece, informative lists of walls and buildings with relevant stratigraphic information, and a comprehensive list of pottery lots, assigned to the revised pottery phasing. The reader is advised to read the book in conjunction with Vitelli's 'The Neolithic Pottery from Lerna,' number V in the series mentioned above, where the revised phasing is explained in detail. A systematic cross-reference to Vitelli's volume helps the reader to find her/his way quickly to pottery contexts (called 'lots') and illustrations. The author, however, cautiously remarks that the chronological scheme adopted should be considered tentative. There is only a single <sup>14</sup>C specimen available from Lerna, and it gives a range of 6700–6050 cal BCE, too broad to be of any use. The author, judging the stratigraphic and ceramic evidence, wisely dates the start of the excavated deposits to the end of the Early Neolithic at around 6100–6000 cal BCE. This date seems now perfectly acceptable, as abundant recent <sup>14</sup>C dates from sites in Macedonia, Northern Greece, point towards the end of the 7th millennium as the transition between the Early and the Middle Neolithic.<sup>2</sup> Still, it is somewhat surprising that new dates were not sought for the final publication of Lerna, not even as a check to the total reliance on the <sup>14</sup>C-based Franchthi chronology, which is not entirely free of problems and possible discontinuities.

The core part of the volume offers a detailed report of architecture and finds. The well-organized presentation follows the new, revised phasing of Lerna, starting from the earliest features, the so-called 'clay pits', and ending with the Final Neolithic deposits. For every architectural feature, the associated lots and finds (pottery, lithics, bones and shells, figurines) are systematically mentioned. The consecutive numbering of features, walls and objects adds further to the clarity of presentation, so that the excavation procedure becomes a swift task to follow. Various concordances sort out any conceivable uncertainty. The plans and photographs published are clear and informative. It is a neat, tidy and, above all, an honest report.

There are, however, limits to what one could do with the amount of information provided. There are no detailed descriptions of the deposits, except generic colour, or occasionally a qualitative assessment such as 'hard', or 'soft' and it is not possible to reconstruct lots as three-dimensional chunks of archaeological sediment. The only spatial information available is the

<sup>1</sup> Vitelli 1993; Vitelli 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Μανιάτης, Κωτσάκης, and Halstead 2012.

depth of each lot but not its extent or shape, or actual location. Even more critical, as the author points out, was the practice of combining lots, when considered as belonging to the same sub-phase, a standard post-excavation routine at Lerna. Combining lots without any identification of provenance of the individual sherds makes any attempt to examine patterns of distribution simply not possible. For example, all lots from the basal 'clay pits' are combined into one (p. 10). This mixing excludes any possibility to pick up underlying patterns or differences in function among the pits, as shown by recent examples, again from Macedonia.<sup>3</sup> Equally detrimental for subsequent research was the practice, common at that time, of discarding sherds, often without any information on rates. According to Vitelli, up to 90% of the sherds were discarded at Lerna.<sup>4</sup> We all now understand the massive data loss of this practice, which treats ceramics strictly as typological fossils of chronological significance, probably one of the most serious side-effects of culture history. None of these shortcomings, however, are the responsibility of the author, who did succeed in extracting maximum information from the documentation available. Nevertheless, it stands as a prime example of the revolution that took place in excavation methodologies and archaeological concepts over the last few decades.

Given the inconclusiveness of the data available, I would be sceptical of the rather hasty dismissal of a dwelling function for at least some of the basal pits. The fact is that many Early Neolithic sites in Greece repeatedly exhibit dense clusters of pits in their basal levels, and there is evidence that at least some of them must have been dwellings of some sort. This applies in particular to sites of Northern Greece, like Paliambela Kolindros, Revenia, Mavropigi and many others contemporary or later.<sup>5</sup> The same phenomenon is documented in Thessaly, e.g. from Argissa and Sesklo C and more remotely in time and space, from Mureybit.<sup>6</sup> Even the pits from Nea Nikomedeia might now require a reconsideration, on account of the new evidence. Furthermore, the archaeological evidence does not correlate these early pits with clay constructions, especially since, as at Lerna, their presence usually precedes mudbrick architecture. On the contrary, similar pits are not so common when settlements switch to proper rectangular houses made of clay, and the need for clay would have been higher, as the examples from the Bandkeramik longhouses in Central Europe indicate. Of course, these two functions are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Why rectangular houses are not present from the start of the Neolithic is debatable, but based on the evidence we have so far from a number of sites I would bet that their absence in Early Neolithic Lerna is not just the result of the limited area excavated. Further interesting similarities are notable, with practices documented in other Neolithic sites as well, particularly those in the North of Greece. A deep ditch, for example, was dug in Paliambela Kolindros in the same period as the first rectangular houses appeared, and it seems that the same applies in Lerna with the cutting of the Gully. In both settlements, these two events were dated to a very early Middle Neolithic. Of particular interest also are open areas with hearths and stone platforms, possibly areas of public consumption at the edge of the settlement and away from houses. The extremely meaningful practice of building new houses on the socles of the old ones is clearly documented at Lerna too, although with an interesting twist, as all houses did not follow this practice.

It is true that the discussion in the Lerna volume is restricted mainly to the Peloponnese and Thessaly. One way or another, however, most of the Neolithic excavation and research has moved in the last two decades to Macedonia, revealing much new and exciting evidence on a large scale, and approaching many hitherto untapped aspects of Neolithic life. Equally, the Anatolian Neolithic now offers a wealth of new data, to be integrated with those of the Greek side. The archaeological world is very different from that of the 1950s when the Lerna excavation took place. However, it would not be fair to expect this task from a systematic publication of an excavation project, especially of a project which was completed almost sixty years ago. The duty of any publication is to present all available evidence and data in the most efficient and clear way, and in this duty, this publication excels. It is certain that it will be a secure base in the future for the specialized analyses that will follow, to bring out the full potential of Neolithic Lerna.

This volume, with the detailed description of architecture and finds, is a contribution to the Neolithic in the Peloponnese and the whole of Greece and a worthy addition to the high-end Lerna series. As anyone who has been involved in publishing old excavations understands immediately, this lengthy task involves enormous effort, dedication, and tenacity, which command much respect. Despite the problems resulting from decisions taken by the excavators in the 1950s, the amount of data extracted and the clarity of presentation are remarkable. We should be grateful to the author for offering to all of us this set of data which remained little known until now.

<sup>3</sup> e.g. Tzevelekidi 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Vitelli 2007: 3–5.

<sup>5</sup> e.g. in Stefani, Merousis, and Dimoula 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Moore, Hillman, and Legge 2000: figs 5.14–19.

## REVIEWS

- Μανιάτης, Γ., Κ. Κωτσάκης, and P. Halstead 2012. Παλιάμπελα Κολινδρού. Νέες χρονολογήσεις της Αρχαιότερης Νεολιθικής. Αρχαιολογικό Έργο στη Μακεδονία και Θράκη (υπό εκτύπωση).
- Moore, A.M.T., G.C. Hillman, and A.J. Legge 2000. *Village on the Euphrates. From foraging to farming at Abu Hureyra*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stefani, E., N. Merousis, and A. Dimoula (eds) 2014. *A Century of Research in Prehistoric Macedonia*. Thessaloniki: Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki.
- Tzevelekidi, V. 2012. *Dressing for Dinner: Butchery and Bone Deposition at Late Neolithic Toumba Kremastis Koiladas, Northern Greece* (British Archaeological Reports International Series 2451). Oxford: Archaeopress.
- Vitelli, K.D. 1993. *Franchthi Neolithic Pottery I. Classification and Ceramic Phases 1 and 2, Excavations at Franchthi Cave, Greece, fasc. 8*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- 1999. *Franchthi Neolithic Pottery II: The Later Ceramic Phases 3 to 5, Excavations at Franchthi Cave, fasc. 10*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- 2007. *The Neolithic Pottery from Lerna. Lerna. A Preclassical Site in the Argolid, Vol V*. Princeton (NJ): The American School of Classical Studies at Athens.

KOSTAS KOTSAKIS  
ARISTOTLE UNIVERSITY OF THESSALONIKI  
kotsakis@hist.auth.gr

**Philip P. Betancourt (ed.). *Temple University Aegean Symposium: a compendium*. pp. x+623. 2015. Philadelphia (PA): INSTAP Academic Press. ISBN 978-1-931534-82-6 £20.**

This work forms a compilation of the typewritten texts prepared by the speakers and copied, to be bound into volumes for distribution to attendees at the Aegean Symposium held annually at Temple University, Philadelphia, from 1976 to 1985. Thus they vary somewhat in font and spacing on the page, and since the texts could not be edited minor errors like typos are noticeable, but they are not common. Some are the equivalent of articles, but others are so short that one imagines they can only have been intended as guides to what the speaker was going to say. Usually there are bibliographies, and often footnotes, and some are illustrated with line drawings, which may be reproductions of previously published illustrations and plans, or prepared for the seminar paper.

The themes of the seminars vary considerably. Some are quite precisely targeted, focusing on e.g. the site of Gournia, Minoan foreign relations at the beginning of the LBA, or the Mycenaean ‘empire’ (reviewer’s quotation marks). Others have more general, catch-all titles, e.g. *Studies of little-known material from the Aegean Bronze Age*, or *The Aegean Bronze Age: an interdisciplinary approach*. The number of contributions also varies from year to year, generally 7–8, once 9, but in the last three years only 6. The majority focus on or have a strong link to Minoan Crete, but some are concerned with specifically Mycenaean or Cycladic topics, or general themes like chronology or metal sources and metallurgy.

But, granted the popularity of the Symposium at the time, what is the point of publishing these seminar texts now? The symposia took place thirty to forty years ago; the continuing fast pace of discovery and discussion, and the changes in scholarly approach, have made the majority of them effectively obsolete (e.g. who needs the first reports of carbon-14 dates from Akrotiri?). Some are still worth reading as important contributions to a debate, e.g. Jerry Rutter’s plea for the abandonment of the term ‘Submycenaean’, Jim Wright’s *Umpiring the Mycenaean empire*, and Mark Cameron’s discussion of theoretical principles in fresco restoration. The whole Gournia section is of continuing value, particularly Harriet Blitzer Watrous’s study of the ground stone implements (a class of material that rarely gets much attention), Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier’s identification of fine quality Gournia *rhyta* and jugs at Akrotiri, and Pamela Russell’s careful analysis of the evidence for dating the Gournia shrine. But others cannot help but seem thoroughly outdated in their approach, at best having some historical interest as examples of modes of thought and argument that were once prevalent, such as the tendency to think of ‘Minoan’ and ‘Mycenaean’ as homogeneous cultural blocs, with unified artistic and technological traditions, so that e.g. precious vessels can only belong to one or the other. In one or two cases, as with Iakovidis’s *Royal shaft graves outside Mycenae*, the reviewer feels that to publish is a positive disservice to the scholar’s memory.

Perhaps the best use for the volume (which, it has to be said, is very reasonably priced) would be as a training ground for beginners in postgraduate research in Aegean prehistory, to see if they can identify arguments based on once prevalent but questionable assumptions, or conclusions about material that have been called into question, if not made obsolete, by new finds, or challenge them to come up with counter-arguments that have simply not been considered to hypotheses advanced. The