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MIDDLE AND LATE HELLADIC LACONIA





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MIDDLE AND LATE HELLADIC LACONIA

COMPETING PRINCIPALITIES?

edited by Corien Wiersma & Maria P. Tsouli



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The curious case of an island

A preliminary account on the northern Kythera Bronze Age landscapes

Konstantinos P. Trimmis

Abstract

The current perception of Middle and Late Bronze Age Kythera is an island that in its totality oscillates between influences of two worlds: "Minoan" Crete and the "Helladic" Peloponnese. This chapter brings together recent archaeological data from the Australian Paliochora Kythera Archaeological Survey (APKAS), and earlier surveys on Northern Kythera by I. Petrocheilos, A. Tsaravopoulos and the author. This article aims to present the available evidence for the Middle and Late Bronze Age landscape patterns of northern Kythera, and to contextualize the dynamics between local groups and the possible influences from the north (Laconia) and the south (Crete). The goal is to showcase how the settlement patterns on northern Kythera are similar to or different from those in Laconia and southern Kythera during the 2nd millennium BC. In addition, it investigates if and how the intra- and inter- island dynamics actually swing between the two worlds – the Helladic and the Minoan.

Keywords: Kythera – Landscape Archaeology – Colonisation – Insular Dynamics

The story of Bronze Age Kythera to date

The narrative on Bronze Age Kythera was, until recently, quite straightforward. Kythera, an isolated island between the Greek mainland and Crete, was influenced by Early Bronze Age (EBA) mainland traditions. In the second millennium, due to the growth of Cretan maritime influence, it progressively became the first "Cretan colony" in the Aegean before the Mycenaeans eventually took the island under their control.¹ This narrative was built in the late 1960s, mainly after the excavations of N.J. Coldstream and G.L. Huxley in the Kythera port of Skandeia and the consequent discovery of the Bronze Age settlement of Kastri.² Kastri, and Kythera in general, gradually became a case study for the study of Cretan influence on the southern Aegean communities during the Bronze Age, the Minoan Thalassocracy and the colonisation of the Greek islands by migrating Cretan – Minoan – groups.³ The linear idea of a "Helladic" Early Bronze Age Kythera, that has been overtaken by a "Cretan" Middle Bronze Age (MBA), with a consequent "Helladic" influenced Late Bronze Age (LBA) was supported by the Petrocheilos survey in the 1980s and the excavations of Sakellarakis at the peak sanctuary of Ag Georgios in the 1990s.⁴

¹ Coldstream & Huxley 1972, 309.

² See Coldstream & Huxley 1972; Broodbank & Kiriatzi 2007.

³ Coldstream 1974; Blackman et al. 1974.

⁴ Sakellarakis 2013.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s a survey organised by the British School at Athens - the Kythera Island Project (KIP) was established to examine these theories and to better understand the structure of Minoan influence onto the island's Bronze Age societies. Broodbank's and Kiriatzi's preliminary publications suggest that Kythera first established contact with Crete during the Final Neolithic (FN)-EBA transition period.5 The authors claimed that even during the EBA Kastri was a site with "international spirit", which played a major role for the later Minoan dominance over the Kastri area. Based on the pottery shapes and ware types KIP suggested that, in at least the project's research area, Cretan pottery styles were dominant for the first half of the second millennium, displacing the local production. However, in the early days of Minoan presence at Kastri (EBI-II), although the pottery production was mainly based on Cretan shapes and styles, the clay was sourced locally from the northern part of the island, particularly from the area of Vythoulas, which is close to the modern day Potamos village.6

Further north of Kastri and its satellite areas, the archaeological information was very limited until recently. All known sites, mainly from the Petrocheilos survey and Tsaravopoulos field visits (such as Krotiria, Pyreatides and Vythoulas), showed EH I-II pottery made with coarse orange micaceous clays.⁷

Tsaravopoulos continued also to discuss the idea that Kastri was a Minoan trade post, which was used 'as an intermediate port of call for the Minoans *en route* to Laconia'. The perception of Kythera as a stepping stone for Cretan traditions to reach Laconia and consequently the Greek mainland is also evident in a review carried out by Efstathiou, in which contacts between Crete, the Peloponnese and Kythera during the MBA and LBA are mentioned as distinct events. The perception of "Minoans" taking control of Kythera during the MBA is also discussed in a review by Georgiadis, who compares the case of Bronze Age Kythera with other islands in the Aegean.

Kythera is currently understood as an island that shifted back and forth, during the Bronze Age, between the influence of mainland and Cretan traditions. Even though theories such as the "Minoan Thalassocracy" and the "Minoan Colonisation of the Aegean islands" are under severe scrutiny in our post-colonial era current research still partly suggests that during MBA, for several reasons, Kythera was culturally a "Minoan" island.¹¹ This brings up

a number of questions: is Kythera the key to understanding the Late MBA of Laconia and the southern Peloponnese? Is Kythera a cultural bridge that balances the powers of the Bronze Age civilizations in the southern Aegean? And what is the role of the locals, the "Kytherians", in the mainland-Cretan cultural interaction?

The main limitation on investigating these questions is that the discussion to date is based on limited archaeological evidence: the finds of the British School at Athens (BSA) excavations in Kastri and the BSA survey in the centraleastern part of the island and Sakellarakis' excavations at Vouno. Some intermittent archaeological excavations in areas such as the Leska peak and Kataphygadi cave on Mermygaris Mountain, Chousti cave in Diakofti, and the early excavation by S. Stais of the Lionis tombs in the area of Manitochori village complete the picture. The main aim of this paper is therefore to incorporate new evidence into the discussion of social dynamics in Bronze Age Kythera, and to analyse how these dynamics may have influenced Middle and Late Helladic Laconia. This new evidence includes the preliminary outcomes of the Australian Paliochora Kythera Archaeological Survey (APKAS) in the northern part of the island,12 surveys in northern and western Kytheran caves,13 excavations in the Kataphygadi cave on Mermygaris Mountain,14 along with older research such as the Tsaravopoulos and Petrocheilos pedestrian surveys.¹⁵ This provides an updated picture of the island's landscape and settlement patterns enabling to discuss both intra- and inter island dynamics and cultural influences.

Big questions and the island's research limitations

Kythera, due to its geographical location and to the intensity of the Minoan presence in Skandeia bay during the MBA, has long been used as the major case study for understanding notions of "expansion", "colonization", "archaeology of interaction", and "thalassocracy" in the Minoan world and beyond. The island lies just ten miles from the Laconian coast, sixty miles from western Crete and seventy miles from the Cyclades. It is isolated without an archipelagic network that can create complexities over cultural and social networks, such as is the case in the Cyclades for example. The island offers a fertile ground for landscape studies, both geographically and geologically, with varied environments that offer different possibilities, such as the fertile Paleopoli valley and the Mitata plateau

⁵ Broodbank & Kiriatzi 2007, 265.

⁶ Kiriatzi 2003.

⁷ See Petrocheilos 1984; Tsaravopoulos 2006.

⁸ Tsaravopoulos 2006, 199.

⁹ Efstathiou 2012.

¹⁰ Georgiadis 2015.

¹¹ For an overview see Gorogianni et al. 2016.

¹² See Gregory & Tzortzopoulou-Gregory 2015.

¹³ See Trimmis 2015; Trimmis 2018; Trantalidou et al. 2019.

¹⁴ Trantalidou et al. 2019.

¹⁵ Petrocheilos 1984.

¹⁶ E.g. Broodbank 2013; Broodbank & Kiriatzi 2007; Coldstream & Huxley 1984; Knappett 2011.

¹⁷ For studies regarding interactions in the Bronze Age Aegean with cases from the Cyclades see chapters in Gorogianni et al. 2016.

in the KIP study area and the arid Amoutses plateau in the APKAS southern extension.

To date, research on Kythera's Bronze Age has been subject to limitations that have restricted our understanding of the island's role in the social dynamics and networks during this period. The first limitation relates to the nature of survey studies carried out on the island. The BSA survey was conducted in a systematic way, revealing true insights into the island's past landscape beyond Kastri. However, the survey covered only part of the island, leaving out rich historical and archaeological areas known for strong Bronze Age evidence, such as Vythoulas. Without a complete picture of the settlement patterns and the landscape, intra-island dynamics and insular models that might work for Kythera are difficult to identify and reconstruct. Additionally, the area of the island that is closest to Laconia was not covered by KIP; therefore it may be difficult to identify a possible MBA connection between northern Kythera and the mainland. The APKAS methodological framework is also different from that adopted by KIP, which makes comparative studies between the two initiatives difficult. The western and particularly the southern fringes of the island have also been excluded from the systematic approaches of the two surveys. Despite that, preliminary work in certain areas like Toufexina, Vani, and Vigla have shown evidence of a Bronze Age presence.18

The second main limitation is the absence of large-scale excavation projects. To date, excavation work on Kythera has been limited to the work of Coldstream and Huxley at Kastri, Trantalidou and the author's work at Kataphygadi,¹⁹ Tsaravopoulos's work in Chousti and Petrocheilos's work at Paliokastro.²⁰ Analyses have been limited to petrographic analysis on the pottery assemblages from Kastri,²¹ undertaken as part of KIP, and osteoarchaeological analysis of assemblages from the Kataphygadi cave.²²

The final limitation is the absence of strong evidence for Neolithic communities on the island that might have been "receivers" of the Helladic or Cretan Bronze Age cultural characteristics, what has been described as the 'Neolithic Background' by Tomkins.²³ The only evidence for a presence on Kythera prior to Bronze Age is limited to unstratified pottery from the Agia Sofia cave in Kalamos,²⁴ some scattered and limited pottery sherds and lithics that may belong to the Neolithic period from the KIP research

area,²⁵ two pottery sherds from the APKAS survey in Theodorakia that can be dated to Final Neolithic, and the recently published lithic tools from the Koupharika-Krotiria site which were also unstratified.²⁶

The Bronze Age of Northern Kythera revealed

In the following, the two main surveys in Kythera, KIP and APKAS, will be briefly presented, before a more detailed presentation of the main Bronze Age sites located in Northern Kythera (Figure 1). In contrast to regions such as Boeotia, in Kythera we can be optimistic about the survival of whole prehistoric micro-landscapes, as is the case of the Mitata Plateau in the KIP research area.²⁷ The KIP has identified 80+ MBA (Neopalatial) archaeological sites, some of which could be dated exclusively to the LM I period.²⁸ In the KIP research methodology, a place was characterised as a "site" when surface pottery densities from 5 m² grid units from which all finds were collected (vacuum collection) was between 0,5-1 sherds per m².²⁹ In the APKAS research area also prehistoric micro-landscapes can be observed in the localities of Thodorakia, Vythoulas, and Amoutses.30 APKAS, as opposed to KIP, is not following an intensive grid-based landscape survey, but a non-site-specific interpretational approach. Archaeologically interesting areas are defined by extensive pedestrian surveys over large parts of the landscape, the so-called Geomorphic Units (GUs). When surface artefacts or features are observed, the area is then divided into Discovery Units (DUs) that follow landscape patterns. For the purpose of this chapter I will keep Bevan's definition of the "archaeological site" as a defined space with a median pottery density between 0.5-1 sherds per m². The pedestrian survey in Kythera caves also employed a different methodology for the recording of archaeological artefacts;31 however, for the purpose of this chapter each locality with an artefact density between 0.5 -1 per square metre has also been characterised as a "site" and incorporated into the discussion.

KIP covered a total area of 4,256 ha – around 15.3% of the island,³² and APKAS covered, by field survey, a total area of 5,360 ha – around 19.3% of the island. The 80+ MBA sites in the KIP area had a median density of 0.019 sites per ha. The additional 32 sites in the APKAS area had a density of 0.005 sites per ha. The considerable difference in the site density between the KIP and APKAS areas may be the consequence of several factors. These factors include

¹⁸ Gregory & Tzortzopoulou-Gregory 2015.

¹⁹ Trantalidou et al. 2019.

²⁰ For an overview, see Georgiadis 2015.

²¹ Kiriatzi 2003.

²² Ongoing work by K. Trantalidou and the author.

²³ Tomkins 2004.

²⁴ Tsaravopoulos 2006.

²⁵ Kiriatzi 2016 pers. comm.

²⁶ Gregory et al. 2019.

²⁷ Bevan 2002.

²⁸ Bevan 2002.

²⁹ Bevan 2002.

³⁰ Gregory & Tzortzopoulou-Gregory 2015.

³¹ See Trimmis 2018.

³² Bevan 2002.

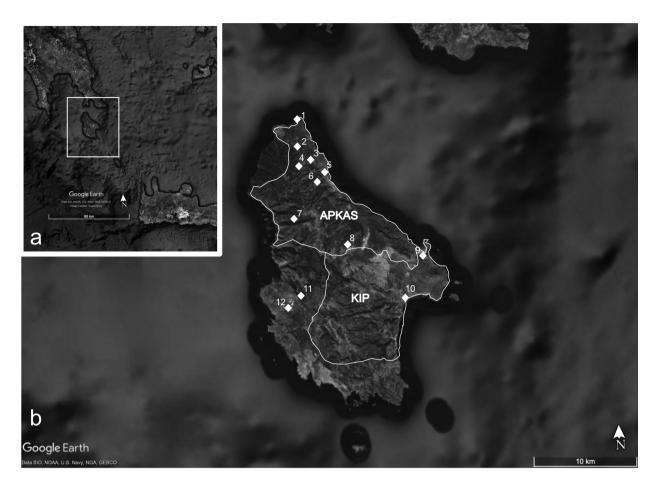


Figure 1: a. The location of Kythera island – in the white frame – south of Laconia and north of Western Crete; b. A Google Earth view of the island of Kythera and the southern tip of Laconia with the major localities referred in the text, and the boundaries of the major survey projects annotated: 1. Moudari cave 2. Pyrreatides 3. Theodorakia (or Thodorakia) 4. Kambi 5. Ag. Georgios Kolokythias 6. Vythoulas 7. Toufexina 8. Tholaria 9. Chousti cave 10. Kastri 11. Kataphygadi cave 12. Lachnos cave.

geological differences between the limestone of the south and the more arid marls of the north, the absence of good natural harbours in the north compared to the Paleopoli bay and the southern coast, which has good natural harbours, and the presence of more natural springs and streams in the KIP survey area compared to APKAS.

The most important aspect of the Petrocheilos, Tsaravopoulos and APKAS surveys is the presence of large archaeological sites in northern Kythera with significant pottery densities throughout Bronze Age. The most significant Bronze Age sites are the localities of Vythoulas (4.3 ha), Ag. Georgios Kolokythias (1.9 ha), Tholaria in Amoutses (1.8 ha) and Thodorakia (2.5 ha). Bronze Age pottery was also identified in Ag. Georgios Kolokythias, Tholaria, and Thodorakia by APKAS and formed the centre of the second APKAS campaign for further investigation between 2015 and 2019 (Figure 1).³³

From the current research, it appears that Vythoulas was a long-lived site with prehistoric occupation starting in the EH, undergoing decline during the MBA, which was followed by a major rise in the LBA during which Vythoulas seems to be a major "Mycenaean" centre for the island. In addition to the pottery presence in the area that confirms the size of the site, the density, and the timespan of the occupation, the importance of this locality during the Bronze Age is supported by significant architectural remains, including evidence of megalithic fortifications. The strongest evidence for Vythoulas' importance is the presence of clay sources in the area. Most of the very characteristic micaceous orange clay of Kythera has been sourced from the deep valleys that surround the site. This clay was used throughout the EBA and MBA in Kythera for pottery production and exports of this characteristic pottery can also be found both in Laconia and western

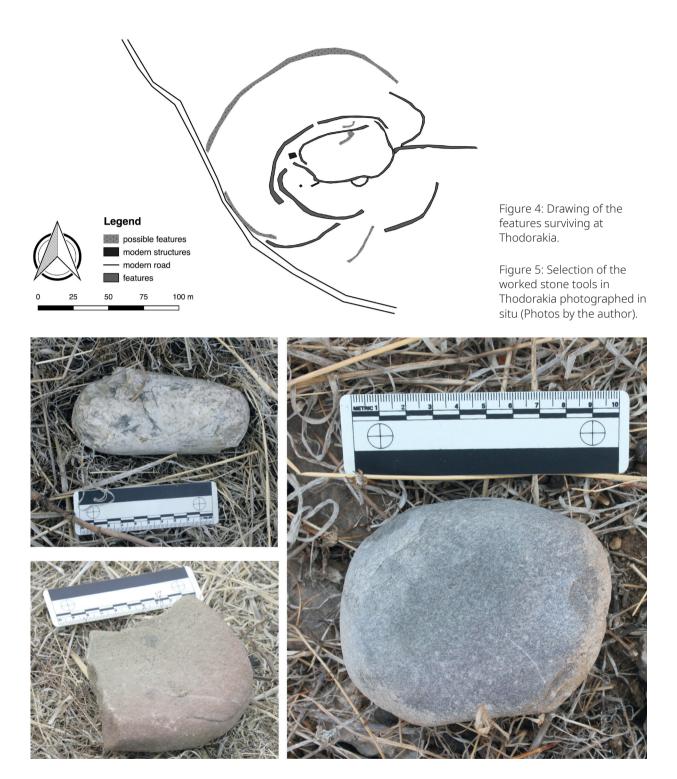
³³ Gregory & Tzortzopoulou-Gregory 2015.



Figure 2: The hilltop of Ayios Georgios Kolokythias, viewed from the Ayia Patrikia bay/ harbour. The Ayios Georgios church is just visible at the top (Photo by the author APKAS 2016, courtesy of S. Paspalas, L. Tzortzopoulou-Gregory and T. Gregory).



Figure 3: Aerial view of Thodorakia locality facing east. The land over the horizon is the south-eastern tip of Laconia, Cape Maleas (or Kavo Malias in the local dialect). The architectural features are visible in the dense shrub (Photo by P. Gianniotis – APKAS 2019. Courtesy of S. Paspalas, L. Tzortzopoulou-Gregory and T. Gregory).



Crete.³⁴ During the MBA, Cretan pottery styles are present in Vythoulas but comprise a significantly smaller proportion compared to Helladic ones. Around Vythoulas, as is the case for Kastri, there is a scatter of smaller scale sites with BA pottery mainly made from local clays, such

as the localities of Elliniko, Ag. Nikitas, Koufoschoino, and Krotiria. All these satellite sites comprise an area of between 0.48-0.6 ha, with pottery densities of between 0.2 and 0.5 sherds per $\rm m^2$.

Ag. Georgios Kolokythias is an interesting case. It is located on the coast, overlooking one of the few natural harbours of the northern part of the island, the little bay of Ag. Patrikia (Figure 2). The site is also very close to

³⁴ See Kiriatzi 2003; Broodbank & Kiriatzi 2007; Efstathiou 2012; Fouriki-Fraser pers. comm.

Vythoulas and the two localities are clearly intervisible. The MBA pottery types found were almost exclusively Cretan, while LBA material was absent.³⁵

Thodorakia (or Theodorakia) (Figure 3), an area on the north-east outskirts of the modern-day village of Karavas, is also very interesting. It has relatively low pottery densities but surviving architectural features (Figure 4), and a large amount of worked stone objects, such as saddle quern stones and hand grinders (Figure 5), was visible on the surface. Thodorakia had a large concentration of EH pottery, mainly of EH II types.³⁶ Pottery was made mainly in the local orange micaceous clay, similar to one sourced from the ravines around Vythoulas. During the MBA, the pottery quantities declined and consisted of mixed Helladic and Cretan style pots. Pottery in Helladic styles seems still be made in local clays, while Cretan style pottery shows a wider variety of clay and tempering. All these, though, are macroscopic observations and views may well change when further analysis on the pottery takes place. As at Ag. Georgios Kolokythias, there is an absence of LBA pottery styles in Thodorakia. Worked stone tools at the site also show a large variety of materials, from yellow sandstone local to the Karavas area to a variegated marble whose origin is difficult to locate.

In the vicinity of the modern day Karavas village lies also the important site of Kambi, the only MBA site of northern Kythera known before the APKAS campaign. A MBA chamber tomb cut in the soft marls was known to the locals of Kambi and has been recorded and studied by the Greek Archaeological Service.³⁷ Later survey of APKAS, where the author was part of the research team, recorded large quantities of MBA "Minoan" pottery in the area around the tomb and towards the spring of Keramari. The presence of large quantities of pottery on the agricultural terraces around the tomb area and along the stream may also indicate MBA activity in the area.

The last of the large sites in the north with significant pottery scatters is Tholaria in the area of Amoutses, just north of the northern edge of the KIP survey area. In this area, Riemann noted chamber tombs carved out of the soft marls.³⁸ Further APKAS research in the area located the large site of Tholaria in the vicinity of the chamber tombs. A small scattered presence of EH pottery at the site is followed by a larger presence of MBA Cretan styles mainly concentrated on the low plateau that rises above two deep ravines. LBA pottery is present in very small numbers and it is difficult to identify styles and origins.³⁹ As is the case around Vythoulas and Theodorakia, in the periphery of

Tholaria there are smaller sites, such as Ag. Ioannis, with high densities of EH pottery but very small amounts of pottery from the later phases of the Bronze Age.

Many of the 87 recorded natural caves of the island also present evidence of use from prehistory to the present. Cave research in Kythera was started early in the 1930s by the speleologist Ioannis Petrocheilos. 40 Petrocheilos until his death in 1960 recorded twenty caves on the island. In addition to geological and paleontological observations, Petrocheilos recorded evidence of use in the Kythera caves, such as the presence of medieval and post-medieval chapels, animal pens, and prehistoric surface pottery.41 With respect to prehistoric pottery, Petrocheilos records the importance of the cave at Moudari cape and the cave of Kataphygadi, close to the summit of Mermygaris Mountain, at the western part of the island.42 Recent research in Kythera caves by the Ephorate of Antiquities, the Ephorate of Speleology and Paleoanthropology, the Hellenic Speleological Society, and independent researchers such as A. Bartzokas and K. Paragamian, has resulted in the recording of more caves with Bronze Age material, such as the caves of Chousti, Grias Kakomarienas, Nioros, and Kalogeros in the KIP area of study, the cave of Lachnos on the eastern slope of Mermygaris mountain, and the cave of Fournospilia in the north close to the Ag. Nikolaos bay.43 Excluding Kataphygadi and Chousti, though, there is no further research published to date about prehistoric occupation in the island's caves that is more extensive than some data resulting from a pedestrian survey.44 KIP did not survey the caves located in the project area and APKAS only recently included caves in its survey objectives, including the Fournospilia cave. 45

What can be noted so far is that the cave of Lachnos over the bay of Limnaria and the cave of Moudari over the bay of Ag. Nicholaos present few MBA pottery sherds that reflect Cretan styles, while pottery evidence for the EBA and LBA is lacking. Both caves have been used as animal pens during the 20th century, making any assumptions about the exact date of the occupation and use of the caves very difficult. However, it may be important to realize that both caves showing evidence of BA occupation overlook natural harbours.

³⁵ Gregory & Tzortzopoulou-Gregory 2015, 273.

³⁶ Gregory & Tzortzopoulou-Gregory 2015, 270.

³⁷ Tsaravopoulos 2009.

³⁸ Riemann 1880.

³⁹ Gregory & Tzortzopoulou-Gregory 2015, 249.

⁴⁰ Note that he is a different person from the archaeologist Ioannis Petrocheilos who did the survey in the late 1970s, see also Trimmis 2019.

⁴¹ Trimmis 2019, 151.

⁴² Trimmis 2019, 152.

⁴³ For a review, see the introduction in Trantalidou et al. 2019.

⁴⁴ Trimmis 2015.

⁴⁵ The author, as member of the APKAS team responsible for the prehistoric research, set these objectives in the post-2016 surveys.

Discussion and concluding remarks: Laconian, Cretan, or Kytherian?

As the title of this article indicates, this is a preliminary account of a review of the research on the northern landscapes of Kythera. Views presented in this article are heavily based on the author's observations and early data published by the aforementioned projects. The next decade will see the final publication of KIP and APKAS, the publications of the analysis of the skeletal material from Kataphygadi and further publications on the archaeology of Kythera caves.

Northern Kythera settlement patterns seem to follow more closely the evolution of the settlement pattern in Laconia rather than that of western Crete. As Cavanagh presents it, during the EBA, the settlement patterns in Laconia develop in a 'complex manner'. 46 A 'strange' hierarchy is presented, with some proto-urban sites that are surrounded by smaller satellite localities. In Kythera the EBA sites of Thodorakia, Vythoulas (probably a proto-urban site, but this is subject to further research), and Tholaria seem to work well in this model, particularly if we add Kastri as well. Simultaneously EH sites decline or disappear, as is the case with Thodorakia and Pyreatides respectively. In Western Crete, according to an early review by Moody et al,47 settlement patterns follow a different pattern, with Kastelli, the main centre, appearing later, in the New Palace period, a development 'at odds' with the central and eastern Cretan hierarchies. In Laconia, during the MBA and especially the LBA an 'imbalance' is observed by Cavanagh between the high order settlement and the smaller ones.48 In Kythera the "high order" settlement for the MBA is undoubtedly Kastri, particularly considering the decline of MBA pottery quantities in the north indicated above. During the LBA this power balance seems to move to Vythoulas, but this needs to be further confirmed with the publication of the APKAS survey results. It is obvious, though, from the ceramics that Cretan traditions have strong influence in north as well as in central-west Kythera during the MBA. Ag. Georgios Kolokythias and Kambi in Karavas and Tholaria in Amoutses are sites where Cretan-style pottery is dominant, some even decorated, while at Vythoulas pottery attributable to this period is small in quantity and consists of mixed styles, both Cretan and Laconian.

Kythera showcases "Minoanization" as an amalgamation of Cretan and local traditions. This is not seen only in Kythera but also in other islands – most notably the site of Akrotiri on Santorini and Aghia Irini on Keos. 49 Following Patton's approach to insular dynamics in prehistory, islands in a core/periphery model work by default both as core and as periphery. 50 Patton suggests that islands work as enclosed

46 Cavanagh 2009, 63.

contexts that larger regional models of social interaction can be adapted to in small isolated spaces, in order to make better use of the island's resources.⁵¹ For Patton, Crete works as the core during the Aegean Bronze Age and creates alliances with local communities in the Cycladic islands, Dodecanese and Kythera. These alliances were based on bonds that were created between "colonizing" groups and the locals. The "Minoanized" settlements in the islands then worked both as peripheral sites to Minoan centres in Crete, and as core centres for the island's communities. 52 Bronze Age Kythera is a case study in which insularity has by default shaped the relationship between different social groups. Cretans, "Minoanized" locals and local populations seemed to live together and, as the outcomes from the surveys in the north show, continue with their cultural differences and traditions for almost a millennium. We can argue that these diverse insular communities did not form by chance, but their amalgamation was a combination of insular factors, like limited natural resources or isolation during the winter months, and a strong sense of social identity.

It seems that northern Kythera presented a mixed picture through the MBA, with evident Cretan influences but also some characteristic local features, such as the survival of larger settlements from the EBA. This can only be stated as a working hypothesis at the moment, since the research in the north is currently ongoing. What can be taken away from this article is that Kythera may actually have played an important role in shaping the characteristic features of LBA Laconia, as there are indications that the island kept a distinctive Helladic character in its northern region even during the rise of Minoan influences during the MBA.

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⁴⁷ Moody et al. 1996.

⁴⁸ Cavanagh 2009, 65.

⁴⁹ See the debate in Broodbank 2013.

⁵⁰ Patton 1996, 188.

⁵¹ Patton 1996.

⁵² Patton 1996, 188.

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