

## EX THERA

### MONOLITHOS A MYCENAEAN INSTALLATION ON THERA

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One of the crucial questions regarding the historical development of Thera is how many years or centuries after the catastrophic eruption of the volcano was the island inhabited again. In other words, when was Thera safe enough for groups of people to reside permanently and have sufficient possibilities to cultivate the soil and to rear livestock. This issue has hardly been researched and, given the lack of excavations on the island, remains a desideratum for Cycladic prehistory.

The conclusions of the archaeobotanical study at Akrotiri and the fossils from the caldera suggest that many olive trees, palm trees, cypresses and other trees existed on the island. Consequently, the pre-eruption landscape of Thera was very different from the one shaped by the momentous eruption in the Late Cycladic I/Late Minoan IA period, which differs little from the present landscape of Santorini. One understands that the inhabitants (those who survived the destruction and possibly returned, but also those seafarers who sailed by Thera at various times) came into contact with a very different island, for years after the eruption, arid, essentially harbourless and with minimal local tall vegetation, yet very fertile.

The only installation that certifies to date the inhabitation of the island after the eruption in 1630 BC is located at Monolithos, on the east coast of Thera. It dates to the last Mycenaean century (12th century BC), which is conventionally named Late Helladic IIIC period. Earlier Mycenaean finds of the twelfth century BC have not been reported elsewhere on the island of Santorini, although the archaeological picture of a place is often the result of ad hoc excavations and the absence of systematic surface surveys.



*Fig. 1. Monolithos, adjacent to the island's airport, as seen from the air (2002). Photo: Ministry of the Aegean and Island Policy.*

Monolithos is a rocky hill, 29 m. high, conspicuous in the plain on the east coast of Thera (fig. 1). Its modern name is due to the solid aspect of its limestone hillock. It is located near the airport, a few metres to the east of the landing strip, and a short distance from the sea. According to geologists who have studied the area, in pre-eruption Santorini, Monolithos was an islet a few metres off the east coast. Following the eruption

in 1630 BC the landscape of the area changed dramatically and the small islet was found in the middle of a flat area of fertile volcanic fill. Consequently, during the Late Mycenaean period (1400-1100 BC), when the civilization of Greek-speaking Mycenaeans from the mainland was expanding dynamically across the Aegean, Monolithos was a region with potential for settlement and cultivation, with the sandy east coast ensuring good mooring for the settlement.

About one hundred years ago, the form of the rocky hill changed considerably, when, in the early twentieth century, materials were required for the ambitious project of the new harbour at Monolithos. These were obtained by quarrying the larger, east part of the limestone hill. The project was never completed and the enormous blocks still lie abandoned on the beach of Monolithos bay. However, the marks from the extensive intervention at Monolithos are clearly visible since then.

The earliest photograph we have of Monolithos was taken by Spyridon Marinatos in 1968 (fig. 2), on the occasion of a religious feast in the church of St Paraskevi, which stands at the southwest foot of the rock. Strangely, Marinatos does not mention surface antiquities at Monolithos, perhaps because of the pressure of work that kept him fixed on Akrotiri and on topographic surveys only in the surrounding area.



*Fig. 2. Monolithos hill in 1968, with the church of St. Paraskevi full of people, probably during celebration of the patronal feast on 26 July. Colour slide by Spyridon Marinatos, courtesy of his daughter, Prof. Nanno Marinatos, to the Archive of the Akrotiri Excavation.*

Antiquities in the area were first mentioned by Ch. Doumas, then a young Curator of Antiquities of the island, who in the late 1960s, having found sherds, prevented the planned levelling of the rock for the construction of the airport, promoted by the Junta's development programme.

Professor J.W. Sperling, a scholar specialized in the study of ancient Greek cities, mentioned the surface finds from Monolithos in his work on Thera and Therasia. In 1971 Sperling had collected Mycenaean, Archaic and Classical sherds from 'the south slope, 5-14 metres from the lowest level of the rock', as we learn from the label accompanying the sherds identified in 2007, in the old Phira Museum<sup>1</sup> (fig. 3).

In 1979 Ch. Doumas and P. Warren published in the *Athens Annals of Archaeology* a selection of the Mycenaean sherds they had collected in the area, and made reference

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1. I would like to thank Dr M. Marthari, head of the XXI Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities, and Ms Maya Efstathiou, Curator of Antiquities, for facilitating my study. The Old Phira Museum also houses sherds from the more recent collections.



*Fig. 3. Sherds of Late Mycenaean vases (mainly 12th century BC), collected by Prof. J. W. Sperling in 1971. Handles and rims of jugs and drinking vessels, decorative motifs of net pattern, triglyphs and circles. Top left sherd of a pithos with impressed decoration of circles. Thera Archaeological Museum. (Photo A. Vlachopoulos)*



*Fig. 4. Selection of Late Mycenaean sherds from the 12th century BC (Late Helladic IIIC period), decorated with birds, rosette in circle, arcs and bands. Bottom right, base of a kylix. Collected by Ch. Doumas and P. Warren. Museum of Prehistoric Thera. (Photo A. Vlachopoulos)*

to wall remains, visible on the north and west sides of the rock, estimating that the settlement extended as much as '100 m. from the rock'. They dated the sherds of painted pottery depicted in their article to the twelfth century BC (Late Helladic IIIC period). Some of these sherds (fig. 4) have been commented upon by the undersigned, who located them in 2003 in the Museum of Prehistoric Thera, with the assistance of the Theran archaeologist Charalambos Sigalas.

The surface pottery from Monolithos was enriched by sherds collected by German tourists in 1991 (fig. 5). The quality and the quantity of those handed in to the Museum are indicative of the dense concentration of ceramic material around the hill. There are sherds dating to many periods, even Venetian, testifying to the long duration of human activity at the site.

Sherds were still visible at Monolithos in July 1999, mainly in the only field



*Fig. 5. Mycenaean sherds of the late 13th and 12th centuries BC (Late Helladic IIIB2-C period) collected by visitors to Monolithos (1991). From cups, skyphoi and kylikes, decorated with checkerboard, whorl-shell, semicircles and other linear motifs. In the middle of the lower row, two discs of a stirrup jar, a characteristic Mycenaean vase for liquids. The sherd with the flower, lower, probably comes from a Cretan vase. (Photo A. Vlachopoulos)*

which was still ploughed to the west of the hill. Most of the earlier pottery collected by archaeologist A. Papadopoulos and myself at the time was once again Late Mycenaean. However, sherds of black-glaze vases from the Classical period also existed, as well as loom-weights and fragments of unpainted vases from the Roman and Early Christian periods, with the characteristic ribbed decoration (fig. 6). During my last visit to the area, in autumn 2007, with a young researcher of Thera prehistory, L. Zorzos, we observed a significant number of Mycenaean sherds to the northeast of the rock.

The extent, the form and – primarily – the dating of the Mycenaean installation at Monolithos will only be clarified if the slopes of the hill are excavated. The absence of intermediary inhabitation between the Late Cycladic I and the Late Helladic IIIB2-C period, in any case, shows that Thera remained uninhabited for more than four centuries, if we accept that the eruption took place *ca* 1630 BC and estimate 1200 BC as the beginning of the Late Helladic IIIC period, to which the surface pottery from Monolithos date. The imposing, naturally fortified rock of

Mesa Vouno, to the south of Monolithos, where the settlement of Ancient Thera was founded in the Geometric period, has not yielded traces of Mycenaean presence, despite the hints in the old German publications<sup>2</sup>.

In the environs of Akrotiri, traces of human presence after the eruption are only attested in the Archaic period (7th-6th century BC), as shown by a possible agricultural installation revealed in the area where the pilot shelter for the archaeological site was built.

The first re-settlement of Thera after the eruption is of major historical importance, since it is linked to the second spread of Mycenaean civilization in the Aegean, which took place after the collapse of the centralized palatial system of the Greek Mainland, circa 1200 BC. During this period, the so-called “Small Mycenaean Koine”, which lasts until the early eleventh century BC, significant centres flourished in the Cyclades (Grotta on Naxos, Koukounaries on Paros, Phylakopi on Melos, Aghios Andreas on Siphnos) with a similar archaeological picture in the Dodecanese (Rhodes, Kos, Kalymnos), as well as in Euboea and Crete. The Late Mycenaean installation at Monolithos seems to have been one of the nodal points for this coordinated expansion in the Cyclades between the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BC, which is connected with the formation of a dense commercial network for the exchange of goods and new ideas with regions in the Aegean and beyond.

Nothing is known about the origin of the new settlement’s inhabitants. The clay of the Mycenaean vases at Monolithos, is characteristically orange-coloured and does not appear to be local. The pottery belongs to the known shapes of the period: stirrup jars, hydrias, kylikes, bowls and skyphoi in the majority. There are only a few pithoi and even fewer cooking pots. The vases are of good quality, mostly with painted decoration in the characteristic styles of the twelfth century BC, such as pictorial (fig. 4a-b), close (fig. 5a) and linear (fig. 3 right column, fig. 4c, fig. 5b, d, h). The characteristic motif of the oblique whorl-shell on the body of a kylix (fig. 5c) probably dates to the Late Helladic IIIB2 period (late 13th century BC), as does the rayed Minoan flower on a most probably Cretan vase (fig. 5e). The remaining

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2. For this confirmation I am indebted to Ch. Sigalas, for decades excavator, and researcher of Ancient Thera, of which he had profound knowledge.

Mycenaean pottery dates to the early and middle Late Helladic IIIC period (ca 1200-1100 BC), with good parallels for the pictorial subjects from Melos, the East Aegean and other centres of the post-palatial Mycenaean world.

The ongoing study of the surface pottery from Monolithos will add more evidence on this important Late Bronze Age installation in the Aegean and a coordinated surface survey of the area will potentially yield more data on the character of the first known post-eruption settlement on Thera.

Like many archaeological sites in Greece, Monolithos is not threatened by time or by the fact that it has remained unexcavated. It is mainly threatened by the unpredictable and irrational human intervention, which has long disturbed the Theran landscape.

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