

The Lasithi Mountains in Crete represent not only one of the most picturesque landscape of the island and one of its most favorite touristic targets, but encapsulate also the most interesting episodes of the Cretan history, from the beginning of human permanent settlement, around 5000 BC, to the end of the Turkish occupation at the end of the nineteenth century. In the centre of the mountains lies an oval plateau (c. 800 m asl), which is the main arable land of the region and the focus point of regional settlement. In the past, the mountainous barrier, which encircles the plateau and rises to the altitude between 1600 and 2150 m, isolated its inhabitants from the coast and plains below, and made the region the largest and most populous natural refuge place, whenever Crete was invaded or internal conflicts shook the island. Thus, each substantial and sudden change in a settlement pattern, and especially a relocation of large groups of people from the more agriculture-friendly plateau or lower outer slopes of the mountains to the high, more defensible, mountainous zone, reflected dramatic historical events or processes, which not always are easy to reconstruct in other parts of the island. Although the region was earlier more or less randomly investigated by archaeologists, the main elements of its settlement organization during the Bronze and Early Iron Ages (c. 3100-900 BC) still hide unknown episodes of the island's history (as for example is the case of the best known and partly excavated site in the region - that of Karfi) or have been completely ignored in the description of the Minoan civilization (as for example Mesa Lasithi Agioi Apostoloi, the highest [c. 1000 m asl] located large town in Bronze Age Crete). The earlier reconnaissance and topographical works (carried by the PI) have shown a huge research potential regarding settlement history that can be directly linked with the history of entire Crete, but the work is far from being complete.

The primary goal of the proposed project is to reconstruct the life of the selected major settlement centres in the mountainous zone of Lasithi, during the third and second millennia BC, and to explain all the numerous anomalies which differentiated these centres from the patterns of settlement in lowlands. On the basis of a combined analysis of newly recorded and collected topographic data and surface material, as well as newly excavated evidence (at the site of Karfi), the historical explanation will be proposed of the origins, development and decline of these high-zone centres which contrary to settlement in the plateau zone were usually a short-lasting phenomenon. The answers will be looked for to the questions when and why people founded these high-zone centres, where did they come from and where did they move to, after they had left them?

To achieve the goal mentioned above, more intensive fieldwork around the selected sites is proposed. The latter will consist of three categories: 1) archaeological reconnaissance – searching for unknown elements of the studied centres, 2) their detailed topographic studies, including analysis of air-photos and preparing a documentation of selected sites for future intensive survey projects or/and excavations on behalf of the newly-founded Polish Institute of Archaeology at Athens, and 3) excavation at Karfi (project of the British School at Athens). Regarding 1) and 2), the areas in the vicinity of the known main settlements (up to half an hour radius) will be examined to identify the most essential peripheral and auxiliary sites, which may have played a key role in the economic and social aspects of the researched settlement centres. Regarding 3), the PI will direct excavation in Area B, with a unique Middle Bronze Age deposit, particularly relevant to the project. This fully documented archaeological record will be studied together with landscape characteristics, which are important indicators of the causes of every expansion or retreat to/from difficult mountainous areas. The reconstruction of the above mentioned settlement centres and especially the substantial changes in individual sites' location, as well as the inner spatial organization of site clusters which formed these centers, will help to understand the darkest, but also the most crucial moments in the early Cretan history, such as the hypothetical population movement to the Cretan mountains towards the end of the Neolithic (c. 3500-3100 BC), the collapse of the Old Palaces political system (c. 1700 BC), the dramatic end of the Minoan state caused by the Mycenaean expansion (c. 1450 BC) and the general collapse of the security system in the East Mediterranean around 1200 BC.

The results of the project will be summarized in academic papers and chapters of books, in popular papers and talks presented to the local communities in Crete, and will be also handed over to the local authorities which are responsible for protection and preservation of ancient monuments and landscape.