

An archaeological site of Karphi represents one of the most important ancient monuments of Crete that for many decades has been in the centre of academic discussions concerning the collapse of the Minoan-Mycenaean civilization around 1200 BC and the historical explanation of the period known as the Dark Age. Because of its spectacular mountainous location, on the altitude of 1150 m (see the photo below), the site is often referred in tourist guidebooks as Cretan Machu Picchu and is frequently visited by tourists for an amazing view it offers. For the same reason Karphi attracts also the attention of producers of documentaries dealing with the above mentioned 1200 BC collapse.



The first excavation at the site was conducted by British archaeologist John Pendlebury, in 1937-39, but only less than one fifth of this very extensive (numbering at least 125-150 houses) settlement was unearthed. In 2008 the British School at Athens conducted a one-year pilot excavation project (directed by S. Wallace) and in 2023 a new five-year excavation permit was issued to the Polish Archaeological Institute in Athens by the Greek Ministry of Culture and Sport. During the first excavation seasons (2023-24) work was carried out in three sectors which represent three different aspects of the ancient settlement's history and social organization. The preliminary results of this most recent excavation indicate that the site can provide much needed evidence to explain some of the key problems concerning not only the period during which it served as a defensible settlement (c. 1200-1000 BC), but also the earlier phenomenon of ritual places on mountain tops (c. 1800-1700 BC).

Among the most important goals of the project initiated in 2023 and scheduled for 2025-28 are: 1) the reconstruction of the complexity of the population structure of this large settlement, 2) the organization of an individual household/families and the interrelation between different households/families, 3) tracing the complex history of this one of the most interesting mountainous settlements in Crete, in particular its origins and final moments of its life; the fact that the settlement was destroyed by fire around 1000 BC means that the evidence from the last phase of its existence is relatively well preserved, 4) identification of other, less known episodes, dating earlier or later than the main period of the settlement's use, such as the Middle Bronze Age activity which may have been related to the phenomenon of the so-called 'peak sanctuaries'. All these issues will be taken into account in a more general analysis of similar historical episodes elsewhere in Crete and, more broadly, in the Aegean. To achieve the above mentioned goals, a research team of approximately 20 scholars and students will carry out excavations in relatively large areas in three sectors, in different parts of the settlement. In total an area between 800 and 1000 m² will be excavated.

The results of the project will be summarized in academic papers and books, lectures and talks, as well as in magazines and newspapers addressed to a wider, non-academic audience, including the very local communities. The latter activity is crucial to understanding the importance of archaeological research at the local level and to maintaining good relations with the local people who rightly treat the researched area as their rightful heritage.