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Review

Minoan Architecture and Urbanism. New perspectives on an ancient built environment, eds. Quentin Letesson & Carl Knappett, 2017. Oxford: Oxford University Press; ISBN 978-0-19-879362-5 hardback £90; xxiii + 393 pp., 119 b/w figs, 7 tables

Ilse Schoep

For more than a century, the Minoan built environment has been approached from a typological and descriptive perspective and as a static by-product of social and economic processes. The aim of this volume is to 'bring together international scholars whose research focuses on the Cretan Bronze Age built environment as well as on theory and methods in spatial analyses' (p. 7) and to study the built environment as a dynamic process that is the result of the complex interplay between society and space. The volume contains 14 chapters, five of which are—unusually—written by the editors. The other chapters were delivered at a workshop held in Toronto in January 2015 ('From Static Data to Dynamic Processes'). The volume has a wide chronological (Middle Bronze Age, Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age) and spatial (Crete, Cyprus, the Levant and Kea) scope.

The general introduction by Letesson and Knappett (chapter 1) sketches the history of past approaches to Minoan architecture, as well as outlining some future challenges. Barring a few exceptions (Hitchcock 2000; Preziosi 1983; Sanders 1990), past approaches focused on the characterization and distinction between palatial and non-palatial buildings/settlements and approached architecture as a source of information for measuring the complexity of a site and of Minoan society in general. Spatial modelling and techniques (GIS, space syntax, networks) made their introduction in Minoan archaeology relatively recently and the volume intends to explore how methods in spatial analysis can be integrated more effectively into Minoan architectural studies. The need for an explicit integration of bottom-up empirical studies with top-down analytical/interpretative approaches is reflected in the organization of the volume into three parts—each preceded by an editorial introduction (chapters 2, 6, 11)—reflecting a three-tiered conception of the built environment (micro-, meso- and macro-scale).

Three papers deal with the built environment at the micro-scale, which is equated with individual buildings and bottom-up processes, everyday practices and local variations. Cunningham (chapter 3) focuses on aspects of architecture that are not usually given much consideration, such as contradictions between design and execution, poor choice of materials and obsolescence or repurposing of rooms. He argues that the decorative elements of the Minoan Hall with its pier-and-door partition in the South-east Building of Block M may have been more important than its spatial and functional implications. This is an intriguing suggestion one would like to have seen explored further. Devolder (chapter 4) follows with a contribution on the application of architectural energetics to 23 Neopalatial buildings. She outlines the problems inherent in this approach and summarizes views first developed elsewhere (Devolder 2013). On the basis of labour-time involved, she concludes that, in comparison with the huge impact of the construction of the tholos tombs at Mycenae, Minoan building projects had only a limited impact on communities. This may well be the case, but the buildings she selects are not amongst the most labour-intensive ones from Crete (an explanation of the selection criteria involved would have been welcome). Another tentative factor in her argument concerns the quantification of the size of communities, which is notoriously tricky. Minor points of critique are that figures 4.1. and 4.2 are not very user-friendly (they do not always include the site) and that Gournia Palace is omitted from figure 4.2. The third paper, by Driessen (chapter 5), also summarizes views published previously. He argues for a spatial concentration of gender-specialized activities in two LM IIIB Buildings (Building CD at Sissi and Quartier Nu Malia) on the basis of the co-existence of different architectural units within these complexes and the complementary nature of their finds (weaving and food production on the one hand and commensal activities on the other). Despite the binary and rather rigid division he notes between the architectural units and the gender-power asymmetry in the Knossos tablets, Driessen argues that this does not reflect an unbalanced relationship between the sexes, but a 'complementarity' (p. 93). He even goes so far as to suggest that Minoan women had relatively high status, which on the evidence present seems speculative rather than carefully argued.

The second part groups papers dealing with the meso-scale or the organization of settlements and urbanism (p. 108). After a brief editorial introduction there

follows an excellent paper by Whitelaw (chapter 7), who provides a much-needed comparative discussion of Minoan urbanism in the wider Eastern Mediterranean world. Minoan cities are comparable to Eastern Bronze Age city-states in terms of scale, internal differentiation and community size distribution, which is characterized by highly centralized cities, surrounded by much smaller villages and hamlets. Whitelaw's comparative approach also highlights some interesting differences, however: the Minoan palace of Knossos is large not only in comparison to most Eastern palaces, but also in the context of the small polity that must have mobilized the resources to support it. Second, unlike Near Eastern palaces, Minoan palaces are all comparable in size and layout, suggesting an exceptional degree of ideological unity. Further differences are the anomalous absence of monumental temples on Crete, the exceptional resources and space dedicated to the open spaces around the Minoan palaces and their high level of accessibility. Some of the observed differences could, in my view, perhaps be explained by the fact that the Minoan palaces were ceremonial centres rather than palaces. Whitelaw is right to suggest that further comparative investigations at all scales, from regional settlements to cities to the details of individual institutions, are needed.

The next paper, by Palyvou (chapter 8), suggests that the palace at Knossos is a sophisticated case of space articulation of bounded areas within a supergrid, adding weight to Whitelaw's argument that the palace of Knossos is exceptionally monumental. The palace is characterized as a group design of differentiated bounded areas that come together through the town-and-palace supergrid; it is appended to the town's supergrid as shown by the urban causeways that continue into the building like interiorized streets. The central court is the best defined bounded area as well as a major circulatory node in the supergrid system '... the absolute destination and origin of the arrest and movement sequence that runs through the town and the palace' (p. 199). From the central court 'one can grasp the totality that is the palace and at the same time identify its constituent parts ... made possible by the differentiation of the surrounding facades' (p. 199). This paper contributes to understanding architectural planning at Knossos and confirms the hypothesis already outlined by Warren that the Royal Road, the Royal Road West and the east-west road on the south side of the West Court were laid out on the same cardinal points as the palace (Warren 1994, 201). Buell and McEnroe (chapter 9) discuss new findings from the Gournia Excavations Project. The most important discovery is perhaps that of the Protopalatial retaining wall X-X in the northern part of the settlement with its crystalline stones in what is called 'monumental rubble masonry' (p. 210). On the basis of this diagnostic stretch of wall, a Protopalatial palace in similar masonry, the façade walls of which were incorporated in the later (and expanded) palace, can be identified. Just like Petras to the East, Gournia can now be considered to be a Protopalatial palatial settlement, inviting comparisons between both coastal towns and throwing new light upon regional dynamics.

A minor point of criticism concerns the small size of the plans and the absence of room numbers. By reinterpreting the shallow gaps built into the slab pavement of the 'raised walkways' as sockets for the greased sleepers upon which ships could slide, Shaw (chapter 10) provides more evidence for the interpretation of Kommos as a harbour town and the buildings with long narrow compartments as shipsheds. This paper also gives an update on other evidence for harbour installations on Crete.

The third part of the volume groups papers dealing with the macro-scale, referring to supra-regional scale, within Crete (chapter 11), the Aegean (chapter 12) and the eastern Mediterranean (chapter 13). The paper by Paliou and Bevan is the only paper in the volume dealing with spatial modelling as such and summarizes previous research (Bevan & Wilson 2013; Paliou & Bevan 2016). They revisit the case study of the distribution of Minoan seals in south-central Crete in EM III-MM IB and demonstrate the possibilities offered by computational models for examining the link between cultural transmission and geographic distance. Hitchcock and Maeir look at architectural patterns and differences across IIC Cyprus, Greece and Philistia and argue for a multi-scalar study of architectural features (urbanism, curation, design and technique), rather than rash ethnic attributions. They make a well-argued case for Philistian buildings, which in the past have been linked to Mycenaean temples, to be compared with contemporary elite complexes on Crete. The next paper, by Fitzsimons and Gorogianni (chapter 14) looks at Minoanization at Ayia Irini (Kea) from a bottom-up perspective by examining structures other than House A. On the basis of a detailed architectural analysis of the North-east Bastion and its finds, which include frescoes, they argue for the existence of a Minoan-style banqueting hall. They paint an interesting picture of a dynamic community in which the adoption and adaptation of Minoanizing features functioned as a mechanism for the negotiation of status between members of the community. The concluding paper by Letesson, Knappett and Smith is extensive and summarizes the other papers, but also outlines multiple new avenues of research, which rely heavily upon Rapoport's (1990) conceptual model of three levels of meaning in architecture.

To summarize, the contents of the volume are rather diverse and the strength of this volume lies in the quality of some of its individual chapters, rather than its coherency. It leaves me with the feeling, though, that rather than moving on from previous 'atheoretical' approaches (p. 4), one of the aims stated in the introductory chapter, most of the papers are factual rather than 'theoretical', dealing as they do in the first place with formal descriptions and functional evaluations. The collection of papers does not reflect the extent to which spatial modelling has been embraced in Aegean studies and falls somewhat short on the promise of exploring how methods in spatial analysis can be integrated more effectively into Minoan architectural studies. The volume will appeal in the first place to Minoan specialists, rather than specialists from other disciplines or archaeology students.

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