

SO MANY SHERDS, SO LITTLE TIME

July 29, 2011 Andrew Shapland Archaeological Prospection, Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2011, Iron Age, Prehistory, Roman, Survey Andrew Shapland, Archaeology, Arthur Evans, Athens, British Museum, British School, Bronze Age, Bronze Age curator, Crete, food, Greece, Katy Soar, Knossos, Minoan civilization, Minoan pottery, pottery, Stratigraphic Museum, Todd Whitelaw, United Kingdom

The Cretan sun is shining, the olive trees are rustling in the breeze and the cicadas are chirruping incessantly. We, however, are sitting in the Stratigraphic Museum at Knossos looking at sherds. The Museum houses archaeological material excavated in the area by archaeologists working for the British School at Athens over the course of a century: from Sir Arthur Evans's famous excavations at the Palace to material collected over the last few years. With its extensive comparative collection it makes it the perfect place to study pottery.



The Stratigraphic Museum at Knossos

The sherds we are looking at today were collected by the Knossos Urban Landscape Project in 2005-2008. The valley in which the Palace sits was divided into 20m grid squares and a collection taken from each one. This is how survey projects rather than excavations usually work: material is collected from the surface across a wide area. Rather than digging ourselves we rely on agricultural activities such as ploughing to bring material to the surface. Our job now is to make sense of what we have collected. After separating out the pottery and washing it we lay the sherds out on tables for a first look and divide them into periods spanning the settlement history of the valley (Prehistoric, Hellenic, Roman, Post-Roman).



Sherds laid out for sorting by Angeliki Karagianni (background)

The interesting sherds (relatively speaking – those with decoration or which are diagnostic of a particular type of vessel) are then scanned and given a unique number in a database.



Katy Soar scanning sherds

The specialists examine these sherds and enter more information about them. We are trying to establish what sort of vessels the sherds came from and whether they can be closely dated. We can then plot this information on the map of the survey area to add to the existing picture of how people occupied this valley for the last 5000 years and more: where were the central places, where did they bury their dead, did the settlement grow or shrink over time? I am looking at the Middle Minoan pottery; Antonis Kotsonas is in charge of the Iron Age sherds.



Andrew Shapland (foreground) and Antonis Kotsonas studying the survey material

Overseeing the project, and trying to keep track of over 400,000 sherds is one of the project directors, Prof. Todd Whitelaw.



Todd Whitelaw and his crystal ball

Today has been a normal day: sorting, scanning and studying sherds. The Stratigraphic Museum is part of the British School at Athens's permanent base at Knossos, which also includes accommodation and a library. I'll be off there shortly to work on my book and check my work emails. I'm on leave from the British Museum, where I'm Greek Bronze Age curator, and so this complements my day job perfectly. I've just finalised the programme for a Knossos Study Day at the Museum and will send that off for distribution today: ten archaeologists who have worked at Knossos will be describing their work; some of them are working on other projects here at the moment. No doubt the Cretan sunshine and food will seem far away on an inevitably rainy day in November but at least I won't be surrounded by cicadas and scrappy survey sherds.