

# TRENCH NOTES FROM PETRAS

July 11, 2014 Frank Lynam Archaeological Prospection, Bronze Age, Day of Archaeology 2014,Excavation



*The Cretan town of Siteia from the Petras cemetery hill*

I have just arrived back from site after a very long, hot and tough day in the (relative) wilds of Crete. For the last 4 weeks I have been working with the Petras project, digging in the EM-MM cemetery site on the hill that is known as Kephala just to the east and overlooking the palace hill of Petras. Petras, the modern village, lies in the space between and on the fringes of these two hills and it is within walking distance of Siteia, a lovely seaside town in the east of the island.

The cemetery of Petras is notable for being one of the few undisturbed cemetery sites that was in operation during the Bronze Age (c.3,500-1,000 BCE) on the island. Minoan burial practice is still something of a mystery for scholars working in the field. Primary burials are very rare for the period and even at Petras, which has not been affected by the looting that has blighted many other burial sites, all of the human remains are found in secondary contexts. The working theory is that the dead would have been laid out either on site or in an open air environment and left to partially or fully deflesh. The bones would have been then collected and placed within the burial contexts that we find them.

In the case of Petras, these secondary burial contexts are the rooms of what are known as house tombs. These structures are constructed of stone, sun-baked clay materials and organics such as wood and reeds and appear at first glance to be very similar to the houses that can be seen at roughly contemporary settlement sites such as Gournia and Palaikastro; hence the name. They vary in plan but typically they have a core of rooms (anywhere up to 9) that are often circled partially or completely by a corridor. In many of the house tomb rooms, there does not appear to be a space for a door and so we can assume that these were accessed via a flat roof. It is within these rooms that we find the remains of long dead humans including their grave goods, which by their quality suggest that we are dealing with the remains of elite individuals and these in the later tombs would no doubt have come from the nearby palace.

Petras has been excavated for many years now. The director, Metaxia Tsipopoulou, discovered the site when conducting a survey of the general area having excavated the nearby Cycladic Early Bronze Age site of Aghia Fotia in the 1980s. Excavation began on the palace hill and after the site was opened to the public, excavation on the cemetery hill started in 2004 and this is my second year working on the project. There is a mix of Greeks and non-nationals working at Petras, including this year a large contingent in the form of a field-school from Brandeis University in Boston.

Today played out differently to the standard routine that we have observed over the last 4 weeks as tomorrow the site will have aerial photographs taken of it and after it will be opened for a tour to be led by Dr Tsipopoulou. As such, the trenches that we have been working in and those opened during previous years needed to be cleaned thoroughly in readiness for the visiting public tomorrow. So, having completed a very quick section drawing of a baulk that was created in the 2011 season, and which abuts the area that I am currently working in, I joined in with the cleaning team and spent the rest of the day with a broom and dustpan in hand. And this goes to show that archaeology is not all about finding seals and beautiful ceramics.

Next week will be our last of the season and I expect it will be busy. Hopefully, during the coming weekend, I will find some time to make sure that my notebook and all of the paraphernalia (photographs, plans, catalogue lists, et cetera) that is produced by a season of digging are put in good working order and ready for submission to the director in a week's time.

But now for a swim in the sea and perhaps a raki or two this evening!