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The historiography of landscape research on Crete

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Introduction

The island of Crete has been the focus of extensive landscape explorations aiming to uncover its archaeological past since the time of the Travellers in the 19th century, even though the roots of such an interest can be discerned much earlier. Explorations increased in time, particularly encouraged by the extraordinary archaeological discoveries of the Minoan civilisation. Undeniably, archaeological landscape research is immensely important for an understanding of the history of human societies, as much because it discovers the spatial context of human activity over time, as because it allows the study of such activity and its relationship with the physical environment from a variety of perspectives. Indeed, archaeological landscape research on the island has contributed a great deal to the building of a puzzle of human history, whose extents however, are unknown. Moreover, the information gathered does not necessarily constitute neighbouring pieces in the puzzle; it may be the result of different research orientations, questions and desires, subject to historical and epistemological contingencies. The partial picture of the puzzle is also hazy, as the interpretations of such information constitute suggestions that not only can be debated, but are most often unclear. So what have we ultimately gained from hard archaeological work of over a century? To what extent and in which ways can we profit from archaeological landscape explorations that have produced and continue producing information and knowledge at multiple levels? The understanding of archaeological knowledge from landscape research and the assessment of its potential seems to me a necessary step in the effort to put the puzzle pieces together in a meaningful way. I strongly believe that archaeologists have a duty to propose explanations and offer suggestions about life in the past; however, it is very important that relationships between data and interpretations are exemplified and the reasons why specific explanations are preferred to others are clear. Research and knowledge are, no doubt, dependent on a high level of communication and understanding among researchers.

The aim of this thesis is to explore archaeological landscape research on the island of Crete from the time of the early Travellers in the 19th century till the present day. The ultimate purpose is to describe and understand knowledge production, and assess its potential and usability. Moreover, a methodology is proposed towards the study and integration of various strands of landscape research. The ‘data’ analysed are in fact the interpretations proposed and the research process itself. The approach followed sought to identify ‘traditions’ of landscape work, through the description of theory, methods and results, so as to understand interrelationships between different projects and be able to construct the historiography of archaeological landscape research on the island. Problem orientation, methods, definitions and interpretative framework have been studied and described, and relevant patterns have been grouped into ‘traditions’. The term ‘tradition’ should, thus, be understood as a discourse exhibiting certain characteristics in the way the past is approached through landscape explorations and related writings. Traditions, however, do not follow each other in lineal temporal and quality relationships. They interrelate in multiple and complex ways, exhibiting rather fuzzy borderlines, and variable degrees of internal consistency. On the other hand, projects of archaeological landscape research do reveal common traits in theoretical and methodological frameworks, which illuminate a wider context within which they were realised.

Chapter one aims at providing a historiographical context of archaeological theory and method in landscape research worldwide, which illuminates perspectives of relevant work in Crete and allows us to study it in relation to wider developments. It discusses landscape concepts and the practice of landscape archaeology from the time of the early Travellers until the present day in a historical framework.

Chapter two describes the methodology followed to analyse landscape projects in Crete over time, which is based on two relational databases; these describe relevant work and allow us to identify common characteristics among projects that are used to describe the various traditions. Furthermore, they allow us to compare projects and traditions.

Appendix one consists of database reports for the thirty-five projects described in the ‘surveys’ database (both on cd). A wide variety of information is collected and presented, from aims and interpretative frameworks to methodologies and results. Detailed descriptions allow a better understanding of each project and constitute a useful guide to all relevant work. The fields used in the database tables are documented and described in appendix two, which should be consulted any time explanation of the terms used is needed. It should be noted that of the 35 projects analysed, most belong to the Landscape Tradition of intensive surveys, as these constitute the current paradigm of archaeological landscape research and promote a desire for integration and inter-regional studies. Even though the great majority of intensive survey projects have been studied, there are a few of minimal or of no publication that have not been included. The remainder of the projects discussed constitutes a representative sample of the various traditions. There are, of course, numerous reports of Travellers and Culture History archaeologists that could not be included in the present study due to time restrictions. Nonetheless, it is believed that these follow the same principles identified in the projects analysed.

Appendix three provides reports of the ‘interpretations’ database (on cd), describing possible relationships between data observed and site interpretations proposed, for a representative sample of site interpretations. All the fields and terms used in the database are exemplified in appendix four.

Chapter three consists of a text analysis for each of the thirty-five projects studied. It discusses problem orientation, methods, presentation and relocatability, site densities and site definition, interpretative framework and finally it provides a summary assessment. The discussion is based on the information collected in the ‘surveys’ database. The final section discusses the interpretative process of site definitions based on the ‘interpretations’ database and presented in appendix three.

Chapter four uses analytical tools to describe the five traditions identified, on the basis of qualitative and quantitative relationships that emerge from the ‘surveys’ database. Comparison is pursued at an inter- and intra-tradition level, resulting in a detailed presentation and explanation of the operational framework and the results we have for every tradition. It identifies similarities and differences among them and it provides an assessment of variability within traditions.

Chapter five discusses extensively the various traditions and provides a historical framework within which archaeological landscape research in Crete has been undertaken. It follows a set structure of the most important themes regarding landscape research, namely theoretical background, methodology, site definition and relocatability, results and interpretative framework. The chapter seeks to exemplify what is considered as proper discourse and how traditions interrelate and explores the disciplinary paradigms that have guided archaeological landscape projects on the island. An assessment of what we ultimately have as information and interpretations is also provided through the description of strengths and weaknesses for every tradition.

Chapter six is a case study that explores the potential of integrating research of different traditions within the same area. The acquired knowledge from landscape research undertaken in the eparchy of Siteia is combined to propose a history of human evolution, subject of course to the potential and limitations of the relevant projects. It demonstrates the variability of landscape research undertaken on the island and allows insights into the usability of results and ideas from different archaeological landscape projects.

Finally, chapter nine presents the conclusions, which focus on a proposal that defines all the necessary information we need in order to integrate results from different landscape projects. Emphasis is given on the importance of publication standards that can ensure a better communication of survey data and interpretations, so that research assessment and data integration may be immensely enhanced.

Overall, the present study is hoped to elucidate the history of archaeological landscape research in Crete and offer insights into world-wide developments. It stresses the importance of studying knowledge production and promotes ideas of evaluating this knowledge and using it to the best of its potential. A most important aim has been to encourage a meaningful communication of ideas and results and it is hoped that it will promote interesting discussions among archaeologists interested in landscape research.