

A SANCTUARY OF HERMES AND APHRODITE IN CRETE

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Translated by
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In September 1972 a bulldozer opening up a minor road on the southern slopes of Mt. Dikte above the village of Kato Syme, in the area of Viannos, uncovered remains of ancient walls, pottery and numerous objects, particularly of bronze. The immediate investigation of the find by the staff of the Heraklion Museum headed by the author was followed by systematic excavation (1972-74) under the auspices of the Greek Archaeological Society and the Greek Archaeological Service. The excavation, which is still in progress, has uncovered substantial parts of an extensive sanctuary, located at a height of 1200 m. above sea level, on an inclining plateau backed by precipitous mountains covered with pine and oak trees. The site is known locally as Krya Vryse, the name given to a copious, ice cold spring which flows right by the excavated area.

The sanctuary had a long, continuous life from the latter part of the MM period through the 3d century A.D. Its development through this long time span cannot yet be completely documented. Each new season of exploration has made it increasingly evident that the sanctuary covered a far more extensive area than had initially been suspected, and that only a small part has been excavated. Even that has not yet been dug to bedrock. Moreover, in addition to the problems inherent in excavating an area used over such a long time, where each period is represented by a shallow fill repeatedly disturbed by subsequent building and levelling activities, difficulties are compounded at the Syme sanctuary by other factors: the cultivation of the ground in modern times, the destruction caused by the bulldozer which dug down into deep levels and disturbed a large area, and the natural steepness of the plateau which facilitated the flow of rain and spring water through the sanctuary. The water not only washed down objects and deposited them in different contexts, but may also have caused changes in the configuration of the ground.

Because of all these factors, the stratigraphy of the site is extremely disturbed and difficult to disentangle and so far no complete sequence has been found. In fact, not all the periods within the long life of the sanctuary are represented in the architectural remains that have come to light so far. However, the pottery and other objects found



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fill in the gaps of the architectural evidence. In spite of the relatively restricted area investigated, the quantity and quality of these finds, as well as the impressive character of the architectural remains, testify to the importance of this new sanctuary throughout its long period of existence.

Entirely by accident the first season of exploration uncovered what must have been the center of the sanctuary in the early 1st millennium B.C. The bulldozer ploughing its way up the mountain brought to light and at the same time partially destroyed a structure which proved to be an altar. The altar was of a peculiar plan consisting of two parts. The eastern part was a solidly built rough rectangle (2.70 x 2.20 m.) with a rectangular depression (0.55 x 0.73 m.) sunk in the middle to a depth of 0.50 m., which must have been a *bothros* used for liquid sacrifices. The altar was approached from the east by a low step built of rough, undressed stones just like the altar itself.

The whole structure had been built in a deep, burnt layer which yielded mixed

pottery ranging from the LM IIIB through the Late Geometric periods, at which time the altar must have been erected. The foot of a Minoan stone table was used as building material in the northern side of the structure. The altar was built against a strong wall (1.40 m. thick) of similar construction which extends beyond the southern limit of the rectangle. The exact date of this wall has not yet been determined. It is obviously earlier than the rectangular addition and must represent an earlier form of the altar, of a type known from Gortys (Rizza & Scrinari, 1968, 99ff., fig. 175).

To the east and south of the altar extended a deep, burnt layer of a peculiarly greasy consistency resulting from the burning of countless animals, whose bones were found all over the area. Numerous objects, particularly of bronze, had been deposited in the pyre.

These votive offerings, just as the pottery in the burnt layer under the altar, must have been mixed together during the long period when this area was in use. In addition, the



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Preliminary reports of the Kato Syme excavations have been published in the Proceedings of the Greek Archaeological Society (*Praktika*), 1972, 1973. The 1974 report will appear shortly.

1
Kato Syme: view of the site from the west.

2
Kato Syme: the excavated area from the north.

3
The altar from the northeast.

Credits
All photographs are by the author.

Early Minoan	I	3000-2600
	II	2600-2300
	III	2300-2200
Middle Minoan	IA	2200-2000
	IB	2000-1900
	IIA	1900-1800
	IIB	1800-1700
	IIIA	1700-1620
	IIIB	1620-1570
Late Minoan	IA	1570-1500
	IB	1500-1450
	II	1450-1400
	IIIA	1400-1300
	IIIB	1300-1200
	IIIC	1200-1100
Sub-Minoan		1100-970
Protogeometric		970-820
Geometric		820-735
Early Orientalizing		735-680
Late Orientalizing		680-635
	Early Dedalic	680-650
	Middle Dedalic	650-635
Archaic (Late Dedalic)		635-620

This table is based upon that given by R. W. Hutchinson, *Prehistoric Crete*, 1962. The chronology of ancient Crete is under revision at the present time and the dates are subject to change.





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1
Subminoan plastic vase.

2
Protoegeometric female figurine.

3
Early Geometric bronze female figurine.

4
Late Geometric bronze ithyphallic group.

5
Late Geometric clay female figurine.

6
Fragment of bronze tripod of Cypriote type showing griffins flanking Sacred Tree.

7
Late Dedalic bronze centaur.



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upper levels were further disturbed by the path of the bulldozer (marked by a dotted line on the plan). Thus, only three rough subdivisions could be distinguished in this layer, confirmed also by the pottery and the typological analysis of the objects found. These subdivisions correspond to three periods: LM IIIB to the end of the Geometric, end of Geometric to end of Classical, and Hellenistic-Roman.

Offerings characteristic of the Minoan period were clay and bronze animal figurines, fragments of wheel-made bull figurines and stone offering tables. To the Sub-minoan period belongs half of a double plastic vase in the shape of a male head, which should be assigned to the same stage of development as the janiform head from Piskokephalo in Oxford (Boardman, 1961, 101-102, no. 472, pl. 35). Many female figurines of the Proto-geometric period were also found. To the Early Geometric belongs a bronze female figurine which incorporates Oriental and Minoan elements. An important find of the Late Geometric period is a group of two ithyphallic figures which can be associated typologically to a certain extent with some Iron Age groups from Asia Minor, and which is directly connected with similar ones of the 7th century from Sicily. A headless female clay figurine belongs to the end of this period. Many fragments of a bronze tripod of Cypriote type, decorated with the repeated motif of two griffins flanking the Sacred Tree, were found scattered in the area. In spite of its connection with Cypriote tripods, certain differences suggest that it was a Cretan work modelled on Cypriote prototypes. This is also indicated by many common elements and technical similarities existing between these



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fragments and those of another tripod of the Ideean Cave type. The latter was decorated with figures of horses, goats and a chimaera and was undoubtedly made in a Cretan workshop.

The 7th century is represented by numerous examples of bronze figurines of excellent quality, images of gods or worshippers. To the Early Dedalic period belongs the figurine of a man wearing a kilt and holding a four-stringed lyre, perhaps an early representation of Hermes, the inventor of the instrument. The Middle Dedalic period is represented by an intact kouros, also wearing a kilt and bending his arms in a worshipping gesture. The torso of a male statuette of the same period is a work of superlative quality. The form of the head and the arrangement of the hair suggest the presence of Egyptian influences on the art of Crete in the 7th century. To the end of the Middle and to the Late Dedalic periods belong respectively an archer and a small kouros, both superb products of a vigorous artistic tradition. They also prove that the well-known Berlin *kriophoros* (Ram Bearer) (Neugebauer, 1931, 61-62, no. 158, pl. 19) was created by the same workshop. The figure of a centaur is impressive for its lively movement and the vivid expression of the face. The solid structure of the body and the sturdy form of the legs, which date it to the Late Dedalic period, reveal a certain Corinthian influence on the art of Crete in the late 7th century.



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Of paramount importance for the history of Cretan art and for the history of the sanctuary itself, is the long series of bronze cut-out plaques found in both this area and elsewhere in the sanctuary. The evidence suggests that they were separate offerings and not decorative attachments mounted on a larger object. Several of them represent male worshippers carrying an animal or part of it for sacrifice. Others may portray the god Hermes. Some represent male figures armed with bow and quiver, as that illustrated here. Iconographic elements common to this figure and the centaur mentioned above indicate the existence of a workshop which produced both figurines and plaques. This workshop is definitely distinct from that which produced the bronzes from Aphrati, a find of pieces of armor, which were divided among private collectors and the museums of Heraklion and



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Hamburg (Hoffmann, 1972, 1-14, pls. 1-13, 19-24, 27-38, 40). Up to now only five examples of these cut-out bronze plaques were known from 7th century Crete and they were all attributed to the Aphrati workshop (Hoffmann, 1972, 32-33). The Syme find shows that this attribution is correct for only one plaque from Aphrati in the Heraklion Museum (Hoffmann, 1972, 36, fig. 6). The other four, in Oxford, Copenhagen and the Louvre, clearly belong in the Syme series (Hoffmann, 1972, pls. 48-49).

To the 7th century belong also a series of beautiful Dedalic protomes and another of relief plaques, while many of the bronze cut-out plaques can be dated in the 6th century. The 5th century is represented by a bronze repoussé plaque showing Hermes, while from the upper levels destroyed by the bulldozer come the lower part of a clay statuette of Aphrodite, another of Hermes, and a beautiful bronze figurine of the god wearing a short belted tunic, mantle, petassos and winged sandals, all works of the Late Hellenistic period. Numerous bronze and clay animal



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1
Bronze cut-out plaque of
the 7th century B.C.

2
Bronze plaque with
representation of Hermes;
5th century B.C.

3
Late Hellenistic statuette
of Aphrodite.

4
Dedalic clay protome.

5
Late Hellenistic statuette
of Hermes.

6, 7
Seventh century bronze
cut-out plaques.



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1
Bronze animal figurine.

2
Minoan bronze animal figurines.

3
"Tube" vase from MM III shrine.

4
Stone offering table from MM III shrine.

5
Stone bowl and goblet from MM III shrine.

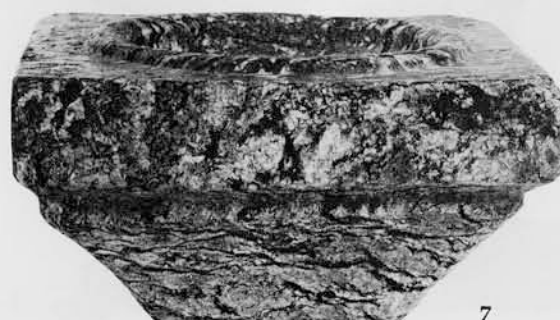
6
Stone offering table from MM III shrine.

7
Stone offering table with Linear A inscription from MM III shrine.

8, 9, 10
Vases of religious character from MM III shrine, and interior of No. 9.



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figurines, miniature bronze votive shields, jewelry and other objects were also found.

The disturbance created by the bulldozer in this section of the excavation completely obliterated any traces of the lay-out of the sanctuary, which, however, became clear when the investigation progressed into the areas beyond its path. It then became apparent that the area to the east and south of the altar was laid out in terraces oriented southwest to northeast at an oblique line to the altar. These terraces were built of rough stone fill supported by retaining walls, which increased in height towards the south as the steepness of the plateau demanded. So far, three of these terraces have been uncovered (I-III on the plan). Their limits to the east and west have not yet been determined.

The destruction of retaining wall III near the southern limit of the excavation (particularly in trenches N, Π, Σ, Υ) allowed the investigation to proceed in depth. It was then determined that the terrace fill and retaining walls, which south of the altar were covered by the burnt remains of sacrifices, had their foundations in another burnt layer resulting from sacrifices performed in an earlier period. This layer yielded pottery of the LM IIIB-C period. It seems, then, that the terraced lay-out of the sanctuary must be contemporary with the earlier phase of the altar.

Furthermore, the investigation of this area of the sanctuary proved that this terraced lay-out existed already in the prehistoric period, although, at that time, it followed a different orientation. In trench Σ part of a retaining wall (IIIA on the plan) was discovered built inside the LM III burnt layer in a roughly north-south direction. Therefore, the continuity in the use of the sanctuary exists not only in the cult practices employed, but also in its architectural plan.



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So far, the main cult center of the LM III period has not been located. Pottery of MM IIIB and LM IA date has been found in deep levels of a partially investigated room west of the altar which may date from the LM IIIC period. A small bronze votive axe and a rectangular stepped stone table were the only objects of religious character found in this area. Since the excavation of the room has not yet been completed, it is impossible to say whether it was the center of the sanctuary in the IIIC period. Sherds of earlier phases of the Late Minoan period, LM IA and LM IIIB, have been found in the prehistoric burnt layer south of the altar along with numerous fragments of large wheel-made bull figurines similar to the LM IIIB-C examples from Aghia Triadha. One was almost a meter long and about half a meter high, to judge by the proportions of its fragments. Numerous bronze animal figurines were also found.

It is certain that the site was already an important religious center in the MM IIIB period. Under the LM III burnt layer and partially under the contemporary retaining wall IIIA, a shrine was found. Parts of two rooms have been investigated. The walls survive to a height of 0.30 m. A door, blocked at some later time, connected the two rooms. Stone tables were found on a low bench which ran along the three excavated sides of the large west room. In the northeast corner of the second room was found a bin (0.60 x 0.70 m.; height, 0.24 m.) covered and paved with schist slabs. Both rooms had plaster floors. Many stone tables, two with Linear A inscriptions, and stone vases were found in the shrine. Most of the pottery belonged to cult vases which date the shrine firmly in the MM IIIB period.

The extent of the Minoan sanctuary is made obvious by other, isolated finds, such as two bronze figurines of adorants found near the northern limits of the excavation in a much later context, doubtless washed down from the area to the north. The unexpected find of three splendid Minoan swords right on the edge of the excavated area in the east, only 0.40 m. below the present surface, may also indicate that the limits of the prehistoric sanctuary in this direction have not yet been reached. Two of the swords are over a meter long and can be dated to the LM IIB phase. The third, decorated with incised designs along the blade and with a handle of ivory, may be slightly later in date. The swords were found carefully laid down with their handles towards the south, but it is not entirely certain that they were *in situ*.

In any case, there is no doubt that the Minoan sanctuary extended to the north of the altar. In the relatively small area dug here, which is supported by a retaining wall of the 5th century, cluster buildings representing most of the periods of the use of the sanctuary. The distinction of the two burnt layers of

prehistoric and historic times, which extend northwards beyond the excavated area, is clear.

Under the prehistoric burnt layer was a wall belonging to a structure built of huge stones which seems to continue to the west and north. The fill covering the wall face produced pottery of the MM IIIB and LM IA periods, whereas the burnt layer contained, along with great quantities of animal bones, pottery of the LM III phase, wheel-made bull figurines and stone tables.

On top of the eastern end of the Minoan wall lies the wall of a Late Geometric or 7th century building, which must be associated at least chronologically if not also structurally, with a 'hearth' found in this area. This 'hearth', formed of two rough parallel stones and with a floor of pebbles, was found full of clear ash that extended over a large area around it. A pair of goat's horns were found near it.

Parts of two walls of another building dating to the first half of the 6th century have also been cleared. This building had a roof of tiles laid on a layer of *lepidha* (a special type of waterproof bluish-black schist clay still used in roofing houses in Crete) supported by wooden beams. Sometime after it went out of use the foundations of the wall of another building were laid inside it.

The eastern limits of the two earlier structures were destroyed by a small double temple of the *oikos*-type. Its western half, measuring 2.65 x 2.85 m., is relatively well preserved, standing to a height of 2 m. at the northwest corner. The entrance was on the south side. Along its northern wall ran a bench. The strong foundations of a later building lie on top of the south wall of this part of the temple and also on its western half, which has not yet been dug.

An inscription of the 2d century B.C. used as building material in the eastern wall of the temple and a 2d-1st century coin of Lyttos found under floor level, give a *terminus post quem* for the dating of this structure. The latest finds in this area, mainly lamps, belong to the 3d century A.D. Inside the temple were found a large number of clay figurines of Hermes, clay votive herms, figurines of Eros and Psyche, many clay female figurines wearing chiton and mantle, and part of a stone statuette of Aphrodite. Among these objects, most of which were found together in front of the bench, a stone offering table was also included, while two broken ones had been used as building stones in the walls of the temple.

The most important find in the area of the temple, found near the surface, was an inscription of the 3d century A.D. with a dedication to Hermes Dendrites (i.e. Hermes of the Trees).

ΕΡΜΑ ΔΕΔΡΙΤΑ (sic) ΝΙΚΑΝΩΡ
ΘΕΟΜΝΑΣΤΟΥ ΤΟΝ ΝΑΟΝ

The cult of Hermes in Classical and later



1

1
Minoan bronze figurine of adorant.

2
Hellenistic temple from the south.

3, 4, 5
Clay figurine of Hermes, votive herm, and Eros and Psyche, all from the Hellenistic temple.



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Suggested Reading

Boardman, J.
1961
The Cretan Collection in Oxford. Oxford.

Hoffmann, H.
1972
Early Cretan Armorers. Mainz on Rhine.

Kunze, E.
1931
Kretische Bronzereliefs. Stuttgart.

Neugebauer, K.A.
1931
Katalog der statuarischen Bronzen im Antiquarium. Bd. I: *Die minoischen und archaisch griechischen Bronzen*. Berlin.

Rizza, G., and V.S.M. Scrinari
1968
Il santuario sull'Acropoli di Gortina, vol. I. Rome.

1
Dedalic clay plaque showing Aphrodite revealing herself.

2
Naked Aphrodite from Hellenistic temple.

3
Hermes Dendrites: bronze repoussé plaque of the 7th century.

4
Hermes Dendrites: bronze cut-out plaque of the 5th century.



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times at the Kato Syme sanctuary is proven beyond doubt by the evidence of an inscribed sherd and the bronze plaque and figurines mentioned above (see pages 7, 11), whereas the parallel cult of Aphrodite is attested by a graffito on a Late Hellenistic hydria which reads:]I ΑΦΡΟΔΙΤΑ, perhaps [ΕΡΜΑ ΚΑ]Ι ΑΦΡΟΔΙΤΑ, and many representations of the goddess ranging from Dedalic examples to others of later periods.

However, the inscription which mentions specifically the worship of Hermes Dendrites is important evidence for the identification of a much earlier representation of the god which would otherwise be problematic. It occurs on a rectangular plaque which dates to the 7th century and was found near the 'hearth' in the northern area of the excavation. It represents

in a combination of repoussé and incised techniques a beardless man, dressed in a short belted tunic, sitting on the branch of a tree. His left arm is wrapped around the trunk and his right hand grasps one of the branches. The close and dynamic interconnection of man and tree and the stance of the figure staring full-face at the spectator suggest by themselves the representation of a demonic being, but the epigraphical evidence for the worship of Hermes in his character as Nature God confirms this identification. Further support can be found in a 6th century bronze plaque found also near the 'hearth', where the god is represented bearded and wearing his characteristic winged sandals, but also crowned with small branches that seem to spring out of his hair.

The iconographical elements connected with the representation of Hermes, which became standard in the 6th century, had not yet been canonized in the 7th, but the combination of epigraphical and archaeological evidence indicates that the worship of the god was established at the Syme sanctuary in this period and probably even earlier, as suggested by the find of a bronze herald's staff of unique type found in levels of the later Geometric and early Orientalizing period. At the same time, the joint worship of Hermes and Aphrodite, deities whose basic character is closely connected with nature and fertility, suggests that their succession of the Minoan Goddess and her consort did not modify in any significant way the essential elements of the cult at Syme.

The importance of this religious center throughout Crete is attested by graffiti on tiles and sherds, mainly of the Hellenistic period, which mention the names of pious citizens from various towns, such as Lyttos, Knossos, Tyliossos, Hierapytna (modern Hierapetra) and Arkades (modern Apherati), who visited and worshipped at the site. There is good reason, then, to connect the sanctuary with the *Hieron Oros* (Sacred Mountain) mentioned by Ptolemy (*Geography*, III 17, 3) who locates it between Inatos (modern Tsoutsouros) and Hierapetra on the southern shore of the island.

It is not possible to determine whether the sanctuary belonged to any of the known cities in the area, such as Viannos. Surface sherds of Minoan and later periods indicate the existence of a settlement on a hill situated 6 km. south of the sanctuary, near the village of Kato Syme, in a ravine which begins just east of the excavation and runs all the way to the sea.

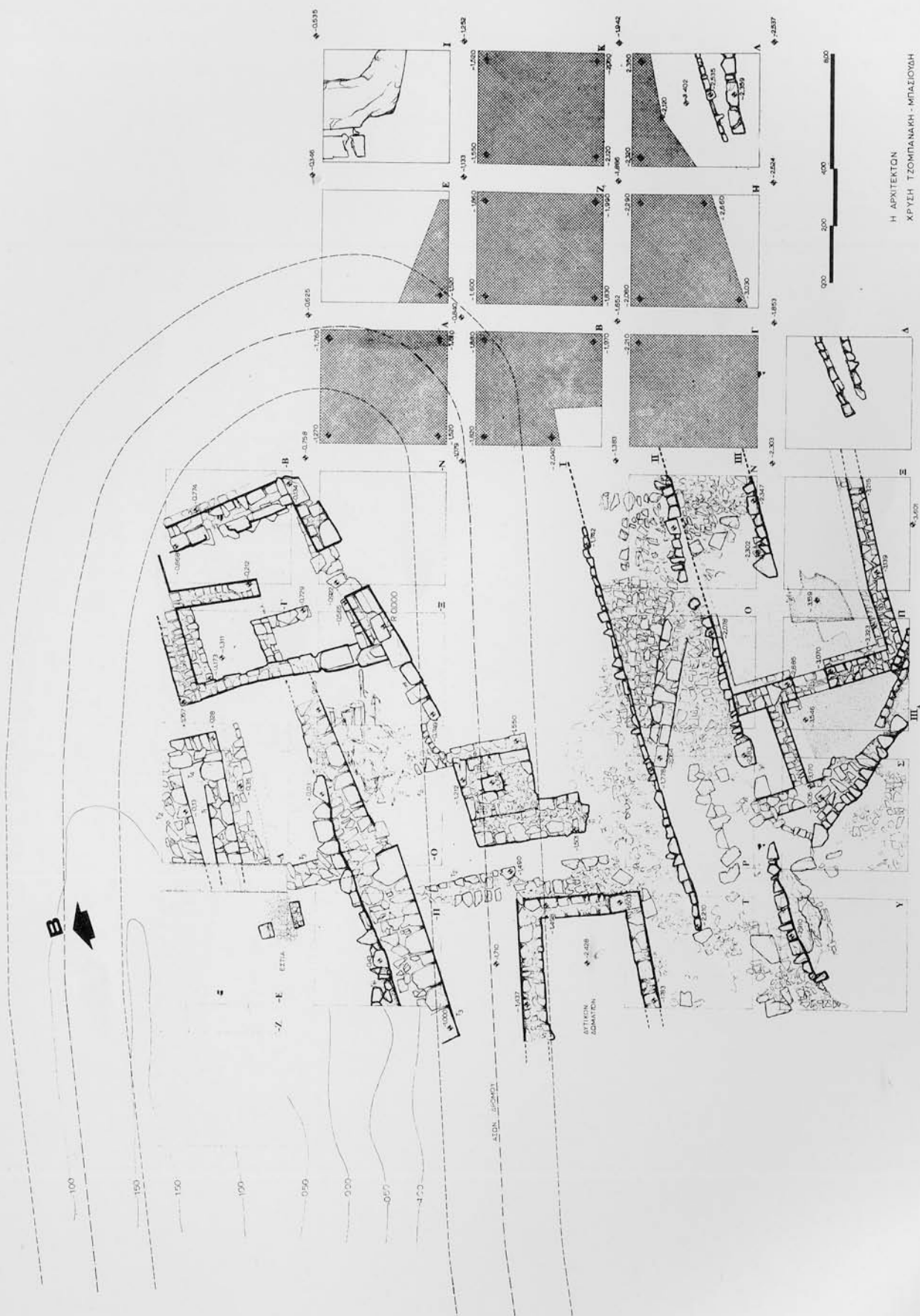
In spite of the limited extent of the investigation, it is clear that the Kato Syme sanctuary is so far unique not only in Crete, but throughout Greece as well. As a whole it does not conform to any of the known Greek religious centers. At present the uninterrupted continuity of worship at the site from the MM IIIB period through the 3d century A.D. is

certain. Hermes and Aphrodite in their character as nature and fertility deities were worshipped from very early historic times through the Roman period. These same basic qualities can be recognized in the goddess and her consort worshipped in the Minoan period. The cult practices employed, i.e. the burning of sacrificial animals and depositing of votive offerings in the pyre and the similarity of certain types of offerings, such as the bronze and clay animal figurines, are attested from the LM IIIB period through the 6th century B.C., while the use of intact stone tables as ritual objects and broken ones as building material continued into a very late period. The same continuity exists in the architectural layout of the sanctuary. It is hoped that further excavations at this important site will supply the stratigraphical continuity which is lacking so far.

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Η ΑΡΧΙΤΕΚΤΟΝ
ΧΡΥΣΗ ΤΖΟΜΠΑΝΑΚΗ - ΜΠΑΛΕΟΥΣΗ

Opposite
Plan of the excavations at
Kato Syme.

Cover
Bronze cut-out plaque of
the 7th century B.C. from
Kato Syme.

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