

# “In the Midst of Mountains”

## Messara: a Passage through Space, Myth, and Time

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**Abstract** The necessity to communicate the rich cultural heritage of the Messara valley and its impact on the formation of the Cretan civilization through a holistic approach led to the creation of two interrelated projects: the establishment of the Archaeological Museum of Messara (AMMe) by the Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports, and the project of the Region of Crete, in coordination with the Ephorate of Antiquities of Iraklion. The purpose of these projects is to establish a network of cultural routes that will unite the places of archaeological interest and various remote monuments of the region with the new Museum as a starting point. The concept of both these interlaced implementations is presented below.

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### A. The concept of the new Archaeological Museum of Messara (AMMe)

“In the midst of mountains,” between Psiloritis and the imposing wall of the Asterousia Mountains, protected from the freezing northern winter wind and the hot southern summer wind, irrigated by the waters of the holy river Lethaios and freshened by the breeze of the Libyan sea, the valley of Messara always represented for the Cretans a sort of a promised land.

The fertility of the land favored human habitation very early. During the Neolithic period the first organized settlements appeared on the low hills in proximity to the river banks, which controlled the access to the plain from the sea and the northern coast. From these early settlements emerged the Minoan administrative centers of Phaistos and Hagia Triada as well as the Doric acropolis of Gortyn, which was destined to become the most powerful Roman city of the Southeastern Mediterranean. The trade of Messara with Egypt,

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Africa, Cyprus, and the coasts of Anatolia contributed to the affluence of its population and favored the development of the harbor cities of Kommos, Lebena, Lasaia, and Matalon (today Matala).

Lying in the midst of the two sacred mountain peaks, Ida, where Zeus was nourished, and Kofinas, Messara was the birthplace of myths. On its fertile grounds prevailed the worship of the Minoan bull, a symbol of power and wealth. Here, the bull became Zeus who met with Europa under the evergreen plane tree. Here, Europa gave birth to Minos, founder of Knossos, and Rhadamanthys, founder of Phaistos; and it is here, where she later married Asterion, who gave his name to the range of Asterousia. Finally here, the son of Rhadamanthys, Gortys, founded the city that was named after him.

This is the land where Apostle Paul ministered, the land where the relic of his companion, Apostle Titus, founder of the Cretan Church, was praised for centuries, the land linked with the sacrifice of the Ten Martyrs. This is also the land that sheltered the eremites, the land of the holy mountains and gorges, the land where the worship of new Martyrs first appeared during the Middle Ages. This was the cradle of the Christian cult in Crete.

The necessity to communicate the rich cultural heritage of this unique region and its impact on the formation of the Cretan civilization through a holistic approach is met by two interrelated projects: the establishment of the Archaeological Museum of Messara (AMMe) by the Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports, and the project of the Region of Crete, in coordination with the Ephorate of Antiquities of Iraklion. The purpose of these projects is to establish a network of cultural routes that will unite the places of archaeological interest and various remote monuments of the region with the new Museum as a starting point.

The construction of the new Museum, financed by the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) Program 2003–2013, covers an area of 2,900 m<sup>2</sup> on the western edge of the archaeological site of Gortyn, a huge future archaeological park, where during the last century impressive relics of the ancient city were unearthed (Fig. 1). It was designed as an



**Fig. 1** General view of the new Archeological Museum of Messara (© EphAHer)

independent and fully organized Museum, which, aside of the exhibition halls, is equipped with a conference hall, a temporary exhibition hall, an inner courtyard fit for cultural activities, a café and a souvenir shop, as well as with spacious access points. The Ephorate of Antiquities of Herakleion was responsible for providing equipment and furnishing the conservation laboratory and the Museum storage rooms according to modern standards, as well as for the design of the Museum’s permanent exhibition (Figs 2 and 3), which is financed by the undergoing NSRF Program 2014–2020.

The foundation of a new museum exclusively for the antiquities of Messara was a constant demand of the locals and the excavators of the area for decades. The necessity of the Museum was perhaps not evident, given that the most famous artifacts were already exhibited in the Archeological Museum of Herakleion (AMH), which, in fact, has been recently renovated. However, a series of reasons called for its creation:

**i) The necessity of a synthesis.** The “metropolitan” Museum of Herakleion, due to its huge amount of exhibits from all around the island and its thematic organization up to the Roman period, can offer only scattered aspects of the specific area’s cultural life through time. From this point of view, the AMMe fulfills a different purpose: the necessity of a synthesis, which permits the visitor to ascertain the unique cultural character of the area in its entirety and through time, from the Prehistory up to the early Middle Ages. Synthesis and interpretation have been much championed by the archeological research of the last few decades, which provided new evidence for the topography and history of the area, thus enriching and often altering older interpretations, as well as new findings which are kept in storage rooms, unknown to the public.

**ii) The Museum as a junction for the interconnection of the archaeological sites.** Messara is a region of tourist attraction. Due to its mild climate and the numerous coastal settlements, the tourist season in Messara extends until the end of autumn. Nevertheless, the tourism is not of industrial character as it is the case in Knossos and the AMH. Most of the travelers have a particular interest in the region: they evaluate the history, the monumental heritage, the folk tradition, and the beauty of its mountains and coasts. Many of them are highly educated and seek alternative forms of tourism focused on religion, agriculture, trekking, or even local cuisine. The area is also a destination specifically for Greek tourists because of its famous monuments and monasteries. Finally, local organizations and schools express an intense interest in the area’s history and cultural heritage. All these types of visitors constitute target groups for the new Museum.

The area of Messara has a series of organized archaeological sites located along the highway that connects Herakleion to Moires and Tympaki: Gortyn, Hagia Triada, Phaistos and Matala. In the near future, the Minoan port of Kommos and the site of Koumasa will probably be added to this list.







As mentioned above, the new Museum is located at the western edge of the area once occupied by the ancient city of Gortyn. Within these boundaries lies also the organized archeological site which includes the ruins of the Roman Odeion, the famous Great Code, and the church of St. Titus, as well as areas still under excavation by the Italian School of Archeology (SAIA) and the Ephorate of Antiquities of Herakleion, such as the acropolis, the Grand Theater, the so called Praetorium, the complex of the shrine of Apollo Pythios, the thermal complex, and the five-aisled episcopal basilica of Mitropolis. The rest of the ancient site is a vast area of ruins, which attracts all-season visitors, mostly independent travelers exploring Crete and its glorious past. The architect George Petrakis, on behalf of the Region of Crete, and the Ephorate of Antiquities of Herakleion worked together on the project of marking the walking paths around the unearthed monuments of Gortyn with signs, information points, and digital guidance, as part of the broader network of cultural routes designed for the Messara valley. Our long-term intention is to turn Gortyn into a large archeological park through a series of actions and interventions.

According to the plan, the new Museum will serve as the junction of the interconnected archaeological sites throughout the Messara valley. This will be obtained in three different ways:

- a. **Through direct information:** The visitor will be able to better understand each archaeological site within its topographical and historical context, to admire its most important artifacts and receive written or digital information for their origin, meaning, and importance.
- b. **Through direct interconnection:** In the near future, the visitor of the Museum will be able to take a guided walk to the archaeological park of Gortyn on a specially marked pathway.
- c. **Through digital guidance.** The museum will be the starting point of the network of cultural routes. A large interactive digital map at the end of the Museum tour will help the visitors to plan their cultural journey.

**iii) The imperative necessity of awareness and education.** Messara continues to be primarily an agricultural and livestock husbandry area. Its particular geomorphology, which contributed to its cultural development in the past, became nowadays a cause of insularity and malpractice. In this context, illicit search and trade of antiquities in an area so rich in ancient treasures, has become a true menace. Moreover, the increasing arbitrary building activity in modern settlements established on the ruins of ancient cities, such as Lebena (Lentas), Lasaia and Matala, precipitated by the touristic demand, had a catastrophic impact on the antiquities.

The AMMe aims therefore to play a fundamental role in the effort of the Archaeological Service to protect the cultural heritage. The new museum will thus venture to:

- educate the locals about the necessity of protecting the cultural heritage of their homeland by demonstrating its positive impact on the cultural and financial development of the area;
- get the local people in touch with the cultural heritage of their homeland and promote a better understanding of it not only through the exhibition of artifacts but also through activities, lectures, cultural events, and temporary exhibitions; and finally,
- create a wide variety of constantly updated educational programs specifically tailored to children and youth.

According to the aforementioned targets, the concept of the exhibition is entitled “In the Midst of the Mountains. Human Presence in the Valley of Messara from Prehistory to Christianity”, aiming to underline the catalytic impact of the landscape, namely its unique geomorphology reflected in the name *Messara* itself (meaning “in the midst of the mountains”), on the development of the human material and non-material culture through time. The landscape is also presented as an essential parameter in the process of compilation of the myths and the rise of the writing systems, which will be the subjects of two parallel narrations accompanying the exhibition.

For the realization of the general concept, the architectural design was based on two main axes:

- the topographic organization of the exhibition, which focuses on the settlements and their relations and interactions from the very early households to the mighty cities of historical times, and
- the integration of the landscape into the exhibition halls, aiming to overcome the visual barrier of the external walls and help the visitor to become part of the correlation between the exhibits and their place of origin.

This will be achieved as follows:

- with the projection of alternating images of the landscape under different day-light and season conditions on appropriate surfaces above or behind the showcase windows, in order to establish a visual correlation between the exhibits and their place of origin (Fig. 4);
- with graphic design of architectural elements or the natural environment of the findings (Fig. 4);
- by taking advantage of the natural light illuminating the building to create a false impression of the original outdoor environment or a three-dimensional effect (Fig. 5);
- through the outdoor exhibition on the subject of water resources management, taking place in the inner courtyard of the museum, under the title “The Water Routes” (Fig. 3).

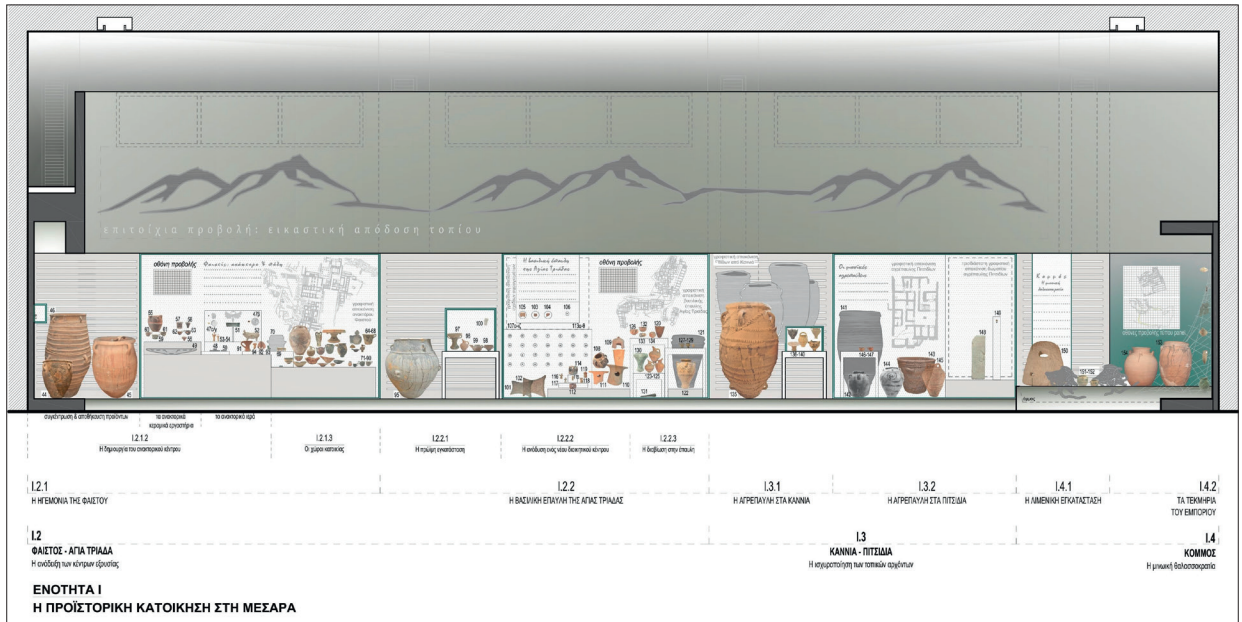


Fig. 4 Western wall of the Exhibition Hall I (© EphAHer)

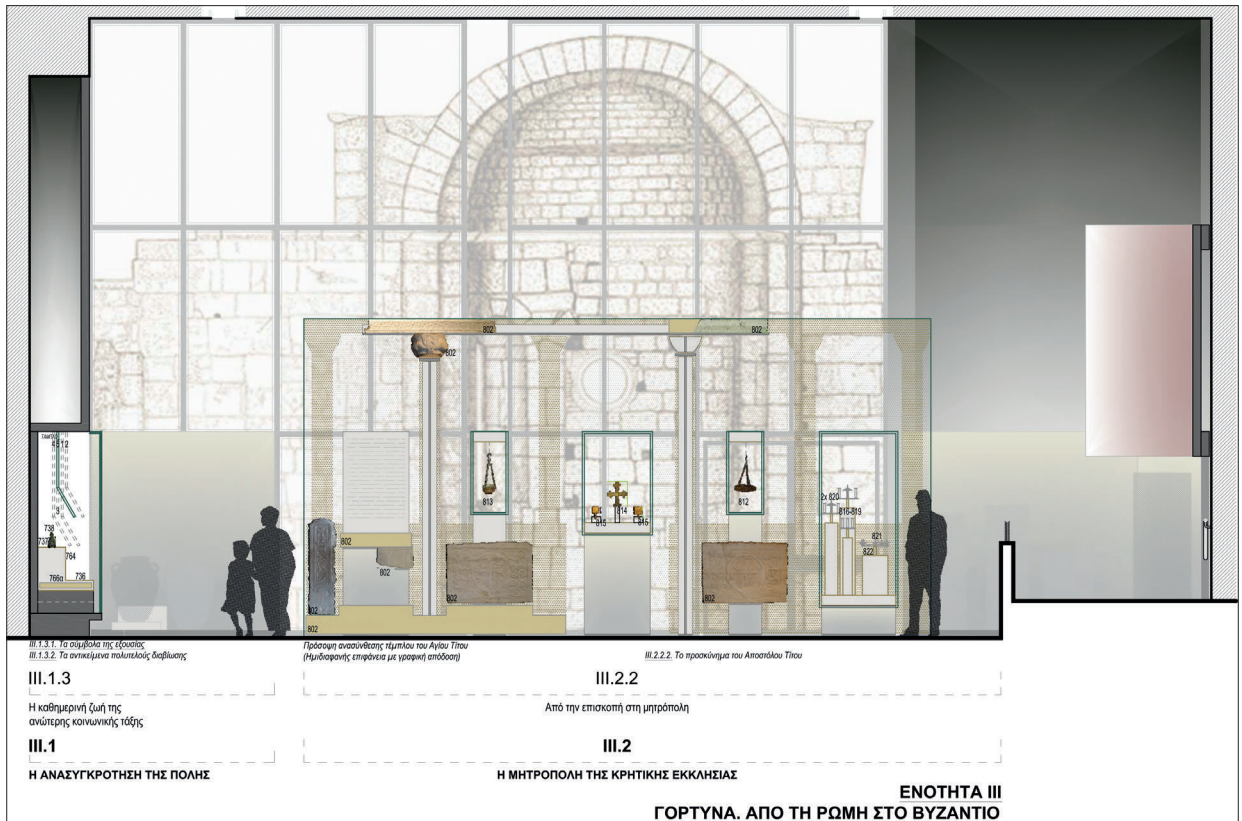


Fig. 5 Eastern window of the Exhibition Hall III (© EphAHer)



The tripartite division of the exhibition halls (Fig. 2), which was preexisting since the original construction of the building, led to the distribution of the exhibits in three sections as follows:

**Hall I: The prehistoric settlements of Messara** (Fig. 6)

Through the presentation of the sites (early settlements, administrative centers, countryside villas, harbors, places of cult, and cemeteries) various manifestations and aspects of the Minoan civilization throughout the Messara valley are presented.

**Corridor between Halls I and II** (Fig. 7, left)

The narration of the conceptual transition from Prehistory to History, takes place in the corridor that connects **Hall I**, dedicated to the Minoan Civilization, and **Hall II**, where the emergence of the Greek city-state is presented. The objects from the refugee settlement Gria-Vigla near Pombia and the Bronze-Age phase of Hagia Triada mark the end of the Minoan/Creto-Mycenaean period and the beginning of a new era, helping the visitor to better anticipate the historical, administrative, and cultural gap that coincides with the invasion of the Doric tribes, the transition from the centralized administrative system of the Minoans to the independent Greek polis as well as the transformation which led from the idea of local civilizations (Cycladic, Minoan, and Mycenaean) to the broad perception of the ancient Greek culture.

**Hall II: The Graeco-Roman cities** (Fig. 7)

The northern half of **Hall II** is occupied by the Section of “The Cretan Politeia”, in which the formation of the Greek city and the emergence of the powerful city-states of Messara (Phaistos and Gortyn) are presented.

The section “Gortys, Capital of Crete and Cyrenaica”, which occupies the southern half of **Hall II**, aims to present through juxtaposition the evolution from the independent Greek city-states to the new Roman model of concentrated administration, which formed the perception of universality that also predominated in the following period of the Byzantine Empire.

**Gallery between Halls II and III** (Fig. 8, left)

The continuity from the Roman to the Byzantine era is underlined by the continuous flow of the exhibition dedicated to Gortyn from **Hall II**, in which the Roman period is presented, to **Hall III**, covering the Byzantine period. The **internal gallery**, which overlooks the lower **Hall III** and the descending staircase reinforces visual continuity. The material from the recent excavation of the small sanctuary of Apollo Pythios serves as evidence for the impact of the demolition of the Roman city by the earthquake of 365 AD and its subsequent reconstruction according to an altered urban concept. In fact, the existence of the gallery gave



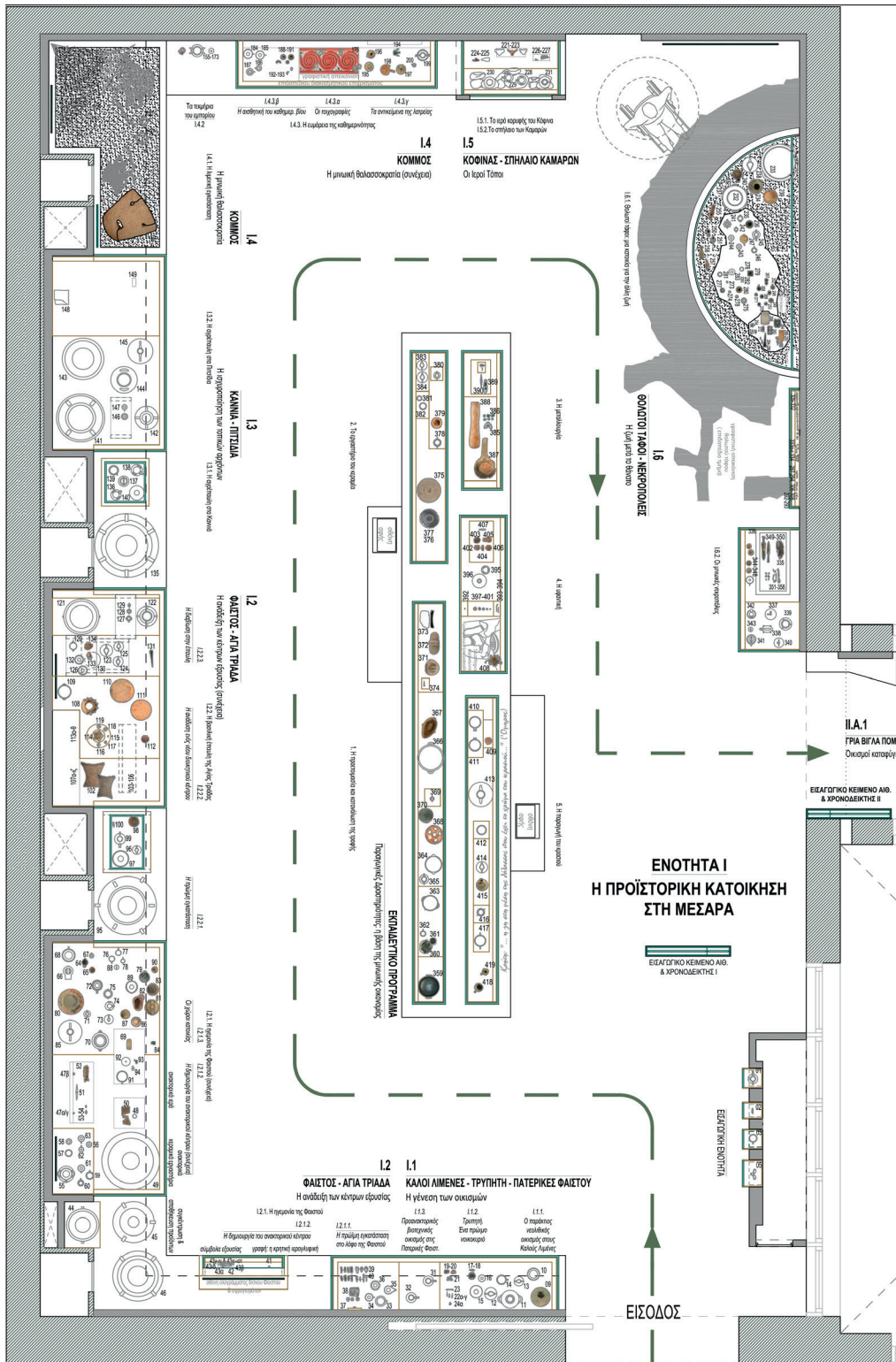


Fig. 6 Plan of the Exhibition Hall I (© EphAHer)

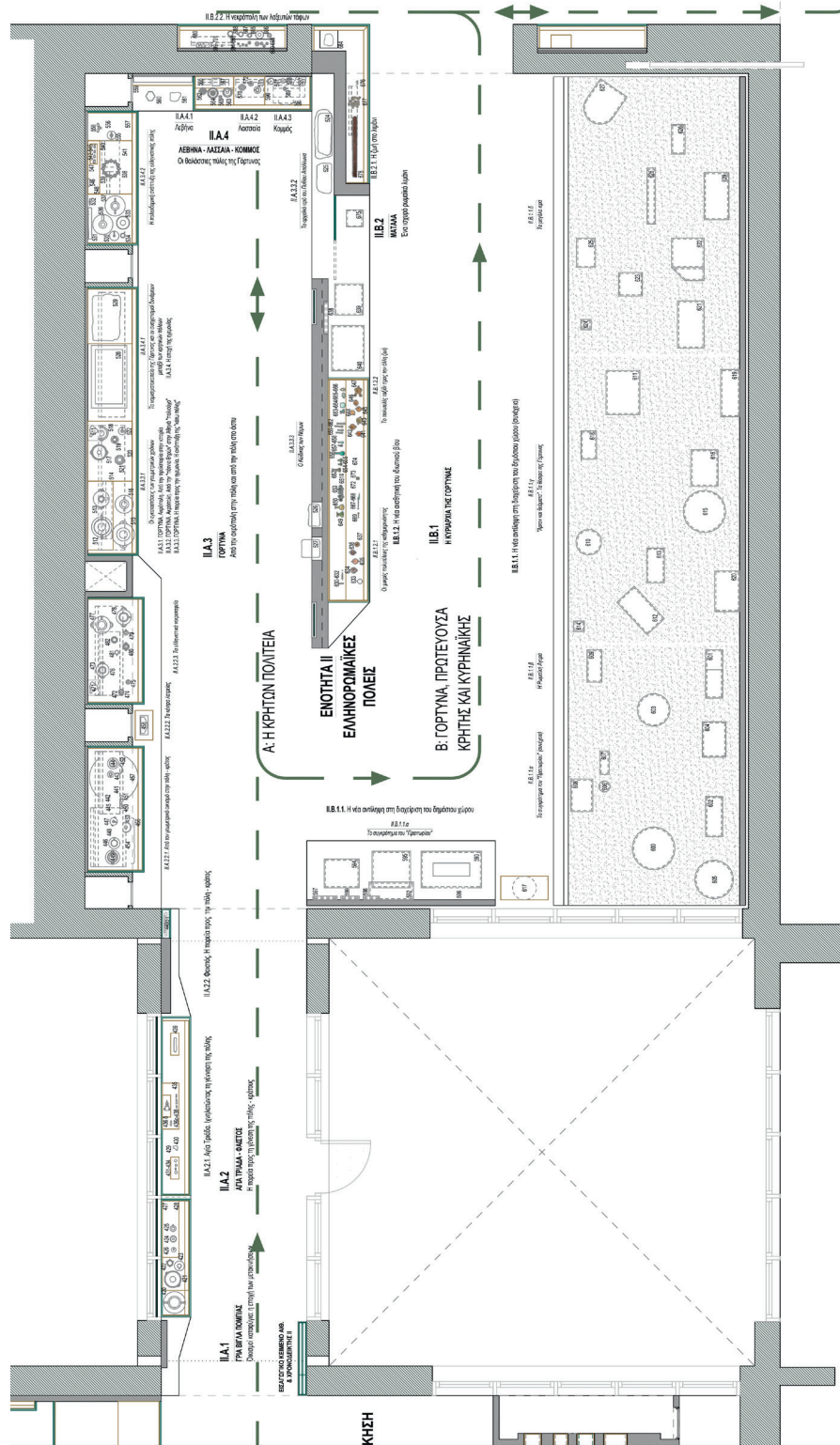


Fig. 7 Plan of the Exhibition Hall II (© EphAHer)

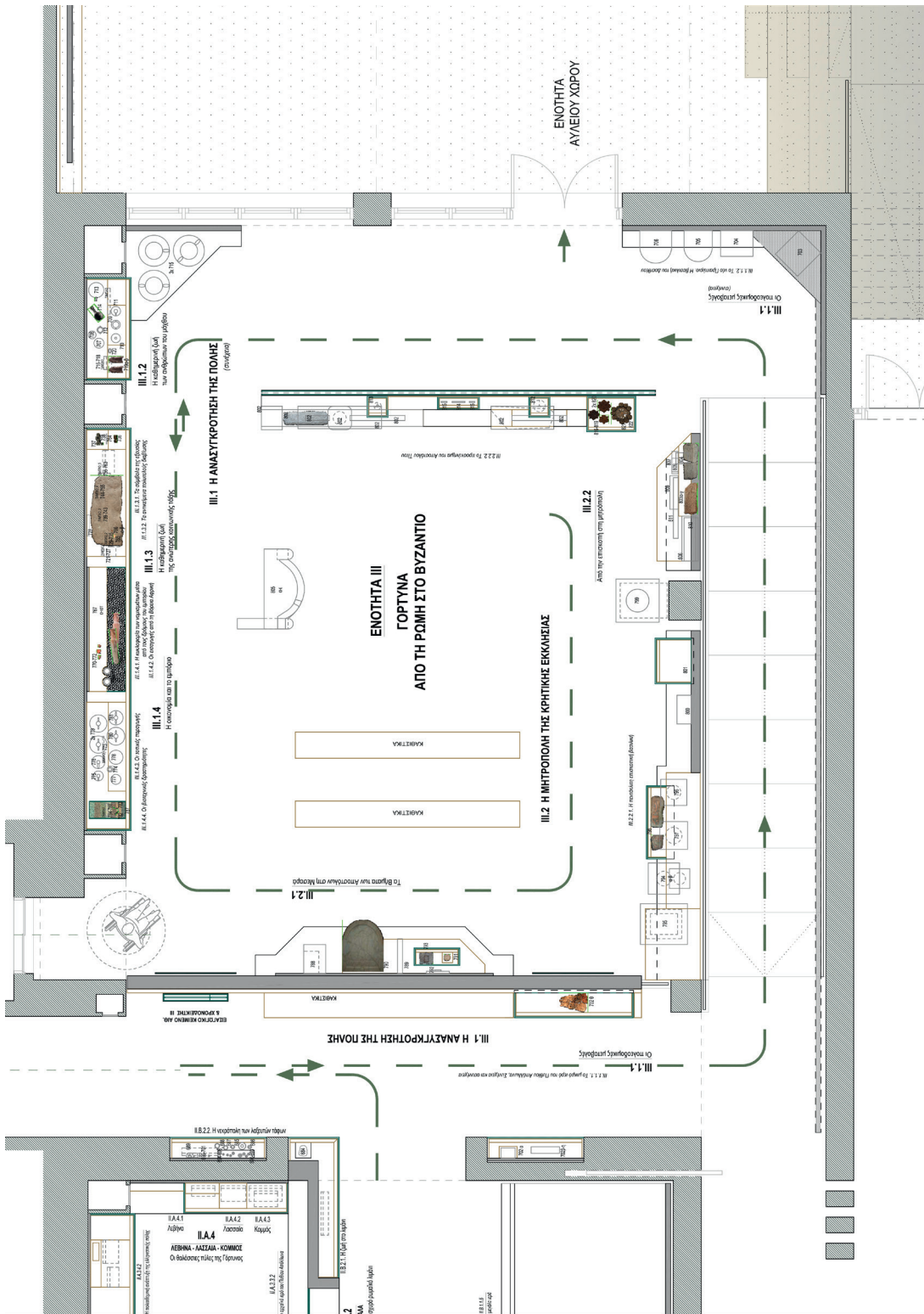


Fig. 8 Plan of the Exhibition Hall III (© EphAHer)



us the opportunity to focus on the continuity, presenting the early Christian period as an extension of the Roman period, and at the same time discontinuity (urban reorganization, change of administration, and decisive change in worship). Thus, the disadvantage of splitting the exhibition of Gortyn into two sequential halls has been turned into an advantage.

### **Hall III: Gortyn. From Rome to Byzantium** (Fig. 8)

The urban transformation of Gortyn after the earthquake of 365 AD, such as the reuse of large public buildings and the spatial changes imposed by the erection of new large buildings meant for the Christian cult and by the administrative reorganization of the Byzantine Empire, is presented in **Hall III**, next to the exhibits that testify the inextricable connection of Messara and its capital Gortyn with the acts of the Apostles Paul and Titus. These led to the establishment of Gortyn as a metropolitan center of Christian worship on the island and a pilgrimage site honoring the memory of the Apostle Titus. For the first time, material from the five-aisled metropolitan basilica that served as the archbishopric seat is exhibited along with the scattered architectural sculptures and objects of worship from the basilica of Saint Titus, which are brought together after many centuries to form a unified narrative.

Thus, the tripartite spatial division of the Museum’s exhibition space, rather than having an effect of fragmentation, is utilized for the benefit of the narration, so that the visitor can capture the major socio-economic and political changes that determined the emergence, existence, change, or disappearance of the residential centers of Messara, during Prehistoric, Historic, Roman, and Christian times, through a single route. The visitor can thus perceive the evolution from the three pillars of Minoan power in the region (Phaistos, Hagia Triada, and Kommos) to the dual power structure of Phaistos-Gortyn of historical times, and ultimately to the domination of Gortyn in the Roman and Christian period.

### **IV. Inner Courtyard: “The Water Routes”** (Fig. 3)

The visitor’s tour ends in the inner semi-roofed courtyard which will be used both for exhibition and education activities. In the roofed section a small group of objects related to the water management in antiquity will be exhibited (aqueducts, fountains, wells, bathing facilities, drainage, and related cult facilities), which, due to their size and use, require an open space. With the help of information materials, we intent to underline that the exploitation of water resources was a crucial factor in the choice of the location of the settlements, in the process of human development as well as the ensuing prosperity and cultural evolution of the Messara region.

Following the thought of creating a Museum focused on children and the local community, the inner courtyard of the Museum was also designed to accommodate a variety of educational activities and outdoor cultural events with the construction of a stepped platform, which allows the visitors to view the special events with comfort or simply to get some rest.

**The multi-purpose Conference Room** (Fig. 2)

The visitor's tour of the museum will continue through the corridor leading back to the museum's foyer. Along the corridor, the visitor will be able to reach the multi-purpose Conference Room, meant to host lectures, small conferences, and video-projections. There, the visitor can seat comfortably and watch a slide-show, such as the current slide presentation entitled "Byzantium and the West", focused on the most important Byzantine and Venetian monuments in the Messara region.

**The Temporary-Exhibition Room** (Fig. 2)

The room designed to host the museum's temporary exhibitions is situated at the end of the corridor that links it with the foyer. According to the plan, a permanent photographic exhibition under the title "Archaeological Evidence from the Messara" was realized, based on the abundant testimonies and drawings of the travelers who visited the area since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and the rich photographic archive of the excavators. In addition to the existing photographic exhibition, the room can host other temporary exhibitions in the future.

**Interactive video-wall—Access point of the Network of Cultural Routes**

The end of the long corridor coinciding with the end of the visitor's tour through the exhibition was chosen to host a large interactive multi-touch video-wall with a digital map of the network of archaeological sites, which will allow visitors to recall the afore given information and act as the starting point for the designed network of cultural routes.

**Educational programs**

The educational mission acts as a core of the entire exhibition, aiming to establish a close contact between the visitor and the exhibits, enabling the first to get a comprehensive understanding of both the tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

The first example of this principle are the two parallel exhibitions dedicated to myth and to the history of writing systems. Color differentiation of the labels, special markings on the floor, and narration supported by additional information will provide the means for implementing two educational programs focusing on a form of interactive gaming applications for mobile phones and tablets designed in a treasure hunt format.

The long board in the middle of the first hall will host an educational program under the title "Productive Activities—The Base of the Minoan Economy", combining groups of objects from different prehistoric settlements with interactive applications. The visitor will have the opportunity to explore various methods related to the main production activities of the region (food production, pottery, metallurgy, weaving, and wine production) which constituted the basis for the development of the Minoan economy, and in their nearly unaltered forms, still play the same fundamental role today.



Educational activities focused on water management and its use in human labor processes (oil production and pottery) will be hosted in the inner courtyard along with “The Water Routes” exhibition. In the same area, young visitors will have the opportunity to get acquainted with the excavation procedures in a replica of an excavation pit, an activity which is combined with the permanent photographic exhibition on the history of the excavations in Messara, housed in the temporary exhibition room, and the educational activities and projections hosted in the multi-purpose hall.

V. S., K. G., K. V., A. G., A. B.

## **B. The Network of Cultural Routes of Messara (NCRM)**

The Network of Cultural Routes of Messara (NCRM) has been the result of a cooperation between the Region of Crete and the Ephorate of Antiquities of Herakleion. It encompasses the needs to promote and protect the archaeological sites of the wider Messara region by implementing the basic principles of sustainable development which represent a strategic choice for the Region of Crete.

The NCRM planning meets variable goals:

- it helps to highlight the long history of the area by promoting the vestiges of the past;
- it plays an educational role for visitors and residents;
- it contributes to a balanced development process for the region.

### **What is the NCRM**

The NCRM is a set of thematic routes organized around the environmental and cultural heritage of the Messara region (Fig. 9, left). It is a rural tourism infrastructure that highlights the special features of the region along which tourism industry can be developed. In this sense, it serves as an important element of outdoor recreation, physical exercise activities, and environmental awareness as well as education.

### **Character of the NCRM**

The design of the NCRM within the framework of the Study of the Interconnection of the Archaeological Sites of Messara utilizes an organic set of comprehensive and consistent principles and actions. For example:

- it sets clear objectives and serves an official regional strategy;
- it designs organizational and administrative structures and mechanisms;
- it specifies financial tools as well as means and ways of their implementation;

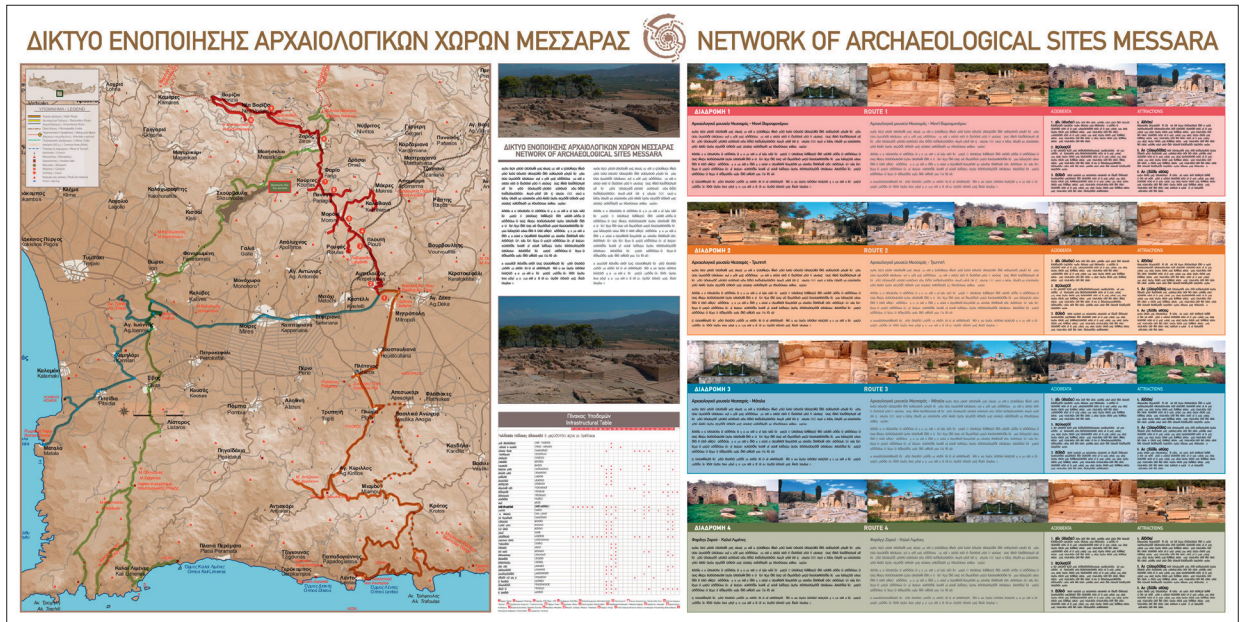


Fig. 9 Example of the general information board for the main booth (© G. Petrakis/Region of Crete)



Fig. 10 Main information booth (3D graphic representation) (© G. Petrakis/Region of Crete)

- it highlights mechanisms for raising citizen awareness, which is a necessary condition for a successful operation of the network.
- From the onset, the NCRM was approached by the Study Group as a system that is aimed at achieving the following objectives:
- to provide experience, enjoyment, and knowledge of the region and its landscape to the visitor;
- to promote and preserve the ecosystem by means of informing and educating the visitors;
- to communicate the timeless local cultural values and contemporary cultural events; and
- to form a single cultural-ecological space which will achieve a proper balance between the built spaces and the natural environment.

### **Phases of realization of the study**

**Phase A** of the study focuses on the analysis and evaluation of the current state of affairs. In this phase, the present state was evaluated and the possibilities of intervention were identified. In practical terms, in this phase, the financial resources were procured and evaluated in relation to the needs and objectives of the project and the prospects of the region. In **Phase B**, the route network was chosen based on the preceding evaluation. The final **Phase C** consisted of a number of interventions and actions. This was the final stage during which specific projects and interventions were proposed which were deemed necessary for the development of the Thematic Route Network. In addition, an operational plan was presented which included construction work as well as various actions, initiatives and financial tools.

### **Planning Stages**

The previous phases were analyzed in a six-stage process, which ensured a methodology for objective selection and sustainability of the network of routes.

**Stage 1:** Determination of qualitative route selection criteria.

**Stage 2:** Determination of the nature of the tourist product based on the qualitative criteria of all areas of the region for the final selection of the routes, along with the unquantifiable value of each site.

**Stage 3:** Rating of the selected areas on a consistent scoring scale.

**Stage 4:** Determination and description of final proposed routes.

**Stage 5:** Consideration of capabilities of route hosting in the selected regions and the potential impact of the route creation on these areas.

**Stage 6:** Discernment of prerequisites for operation of individual Infrastructures.

### Specific aims of the operational design of the network

The operational design of the network includes the following basic aims:

- developing a network of routes which are easily recognizable and at the same time adapted to the particular environment of the area in a way that meets the requirements of the modern visitor;
- creating security conditions through the provision of services and facilitating help in case of an emergency;
- creating an educational network that will meet the needs of environmental education of the visitors;
- activating local community along the routes through the development of business initiatives;
- exploiting advantages of each locale and existing touristic and cultural infrastructure and resources;
- establishing the Messara in the tourist market as a destination for alternative thematic forms of tourist activities;
- extending the tourist season of the wider region.

### Actions & Interfering

It is clear that the above objectives are also modules for the implementation of the proposed interventions and their achievement is directly dependent on:

- the degree of implementation of the necessary projects and the careful planning and strict implementation of the institutional arrangements;
- close monitoring of the developments and changes;
- the degree of acceptance by visitors and residents of the area.

The final proposed interconnection plan for the Archaeological sites of the Messara includes four general actions and corresponding sub-projects that can be implemented gradually:

**1<sup>st</sup> Action:** Creation of a “Network of Cultural Routes for the Interconnection of the Archaeological Sites of the Messara”.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Action:** Protection and promotion of archaeological sites and monuments.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Action:** Creation of the thematic environmental paths or routes.

**4<sup>th</sup> Action:** Creation and/or facilitation of access to points of interest, observation points with scenic views, and rest points.

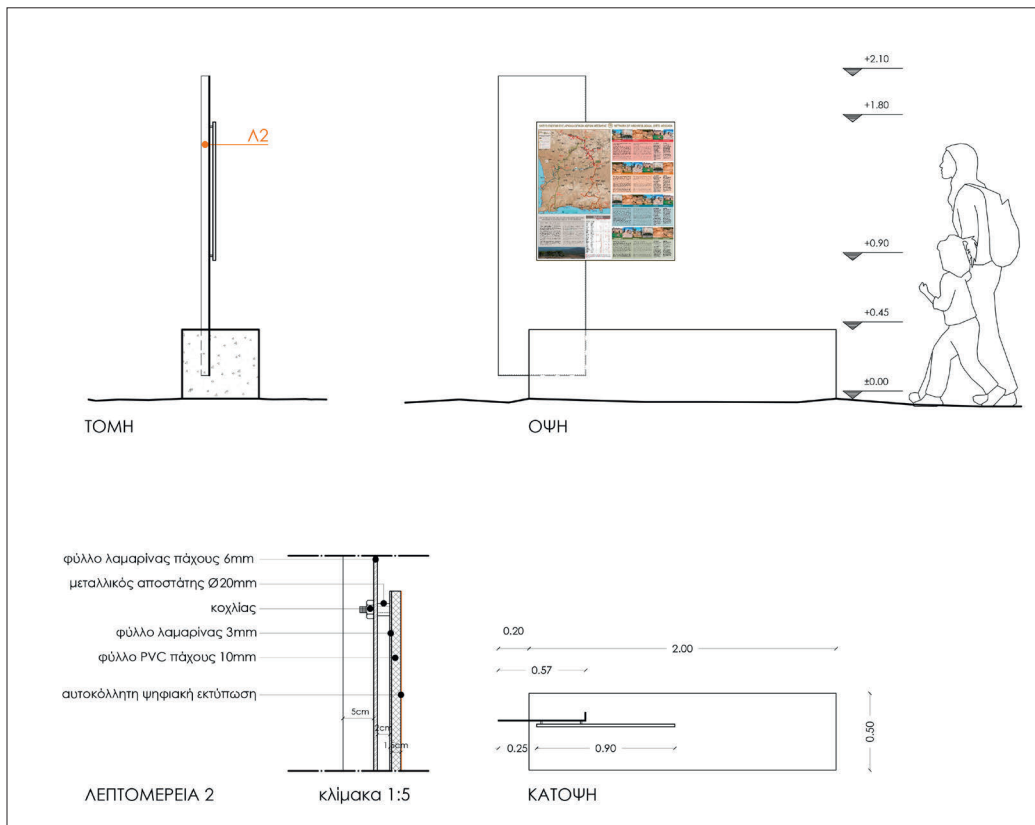
### Construction and implementation of the infrastructure of Phase A

In order to achieve the above objectives, the following actions and interventions were proposed:

#### 1. Delimitation—route marking and information via signs.

To inform the visitors about the routes and guide them through their tour in the conventional way, three levels of information signs are used:

- information booths (Fig. 9–10) which provide general information about the network (general map, general information, and main sites of interest);
- information signs (Fig. 11–12) for orientation and directions for each of the routes (map of the route, general information, and main sites of interest);
- road signs;
- information boards (Fig. 13–14) in each specific site.



**Fig. 11** Design of the route information sign (© G. Petrakis/Region of Crete)





**Fig. 12** Example of the general information board for the route sign (© G. Petrakis/Region of Crete)

## 2. Individual information (printed and electronic).

Within the framework of the Network's promotion, an integrated action of print and digital promotion of the NCRM will be carried out using conventional forms and cutting-edge digital technologies including:

- printed information which includes a tourist guide of the routes, maps, and a photo album;
- digital promotion via a web-page;
- guided digital tour via a mobile application;

Besides the website, digital information will be based on the implementation of a digital tour of the Messara monuments and will interconnect each point of interest with the



**Fig. 13** Information sign for a specific monument (3D graphic representation) (© G. Petrakis/Region of Crete)

relevant thematic section of the new museum. The application will initially consist of a web service that will be accessible via an internet portal as well as via mobile applications for smartphones that will be available in the appropriate app-stores (e.g. iTunes and Google Play). With the use of beacon technology and in combination with QR codes, digital display content will be provided for the monuments of the wider areas along the routes. At the same time, the location of the user will be displayed on the map via GPS/Location Identification. The user will be able to navigate the map and select the route that he/she will follow to see the sights. The content could include photos, text, narration, video, and 3D reconstructions, depending on the nature and type of each particular monument or exhibit.

- educational application.

In cooperation with the Ephorate of Antiquities of Herakleion, the creation of a Digital Educational Application is proposed which will be designed in the form of a game that will bring the new museum closer to children and young visitors who are particularly familiar with the current technologies and social media.



