

INTRODUCTION

The Bronze Age settlement of Akrotiri in the Aegean island of Thera has always been a prolific site in terms of the quantity and quality of archaeological finds.¹ The devastating volcanic eruption that caused its total destruction in the 17th/16th century BC is nonetheless also to be credited for the exceptional taphonomic conditions which resulted in the preservation of large bulks of material remains. The thick volcanic pumice layers that shrouded the entire island prevented what is the rule following settlement destructions: the plundering of surviving objects and their disappearance in the course of time.

The material remains of the Volcanic Destruction Level (henceforth VDL) at Akrotiri appear therefore to represent a freeze-frame: what has mostly attracted the interest of scholars and public alike is this latest phase in the life of the settlement.² After an initial phase in the archaeological investigations from 1967 onwards, when the layouts of buildings were first detected beneath and amidst thick layers of volcanic debris, research subsequently focused on the interior of buildings, in the streets and squares of the LC I town. However, not even this picture proved to be ‘frozen’: there is sufficient evidence to support the original theory of the then excavator, S. Marinatos, concerning the activities of the so-called squatters throughout the settlement after the very last earthquake that preceded the volcanic eruption.³ It is believed today that the people once so-thought of as ‘squatters’ were in all likelihood the inhabitants of Akrotiri, who were mobilized in various ways in the aftermath of the strong earthquake and began repairing their damaged houses.⁴ At this point of our investigations, it is not possible to calculate how much time elapsed, i. e. if it was a matter of hours, days or weeks, before the volcano caught up with them.⁵

New finds continue to come to light. The excavation has celebrated its 40th anniversary⁶ and its 50th was celebrated in 2017. During its fourth decade extensive excavations were carried out for the installation of a new shelter over the site; they yielded finds of impressive quantity as well as quality, which were retrieved from the trenches dug for the placement of the shelter pillars.⁷ Trenches for the installation of pillars had also been dug from 1969 onwards in order for a Dexion shelter to be erected.⁸ The finds from these recent excava-

1 On the excavation campaigns see Mamet – Gorceix 1870; Gorceix – Mamet 1870; *Thera* I–VII; *Praktika* 1975–77; 1984–85; 1987; 1990; 1992–96; 1999–2001.

2 Most doctoral theses and monographs produced with material from the site deal with the LC I phase: Marthari 1993; Televantou 1994; Palyvou 1999; Michailidou 2001; Nikolakopoulou 2002; Kriga 2003a. The studies that concern earlier phases (EC, MC) are also filtered through the prism of the latest phase, since they examine mostly material that was retrieved in the LC I strata: Papagiannopoulou 1991; Sotirakopoulou 1999.

3 Not to be confused with the seismic activity that resulted in the Seismic Destruction Level (SDL), which occurred during the early phase of LC I at Akrotiri (Marthari 1984; Palyvou 1984).

4 *Thera* III, 7; Nikolakopoulou 2003.

5 On the basis of ¹⁴C evidence it has recently been suggested that it could have been years (Maniatis 2012).

6 Doulas forthcoming.

7 *Ergon* 1999; *Praktika* 1999; *Ergon* 2000; 2001. The pillar trenches were excavated under the same method as any regular excavation trench would be and are designated in this study as New Pillar Pits (NPP).

8 They are reported for the first time in *Thera* III, 24–33, where they are called ‘wells’. They continue to be dug and reported as late as 1974, when they are all marked in *Thera* VII, plan B. In the present study the old shelter trenches are referred to as ‘Pillar Pits’ (PP).

tions from the pillar trenches, currently under study and publication, have managed to overshadow the previous results for a number of reasons. They have doubled the amount of pottery retrieved from the excavation; they have provided, for the first time, ample information for the earlier phases, namely the EC and the MC periods, thus allowing experts to elaborate and enhance their knowledge in terms of pottery sequences, architecture, town planning etc.⁹ Nonetheless, the results of the older excavations are far from insignificant, not least because they remain essentially unpublished.¹⁰ Although our knowledge of LC I Akrotiri is far more complete and clear than for any of its contemporaneous sites, every piece of evidence coming from the site continues to garner lively interest and attention.

The largest portion of material presented here, the sealings, belong to the category of exceptional finds that date to the latest pre-eruption period. One might even say that finds such as these were to be expected from prolific Akrotiri, but their discovery has had wider repercussions than previously imagined. A series of questions arose, since most are document sealings of Cretan provenance that were impressed in their majority by gold signet rings, including some that could be listed under the so-called Minoan replica rings.¹¹

The initial aim of this monograph was to present these sealings. It seemed, however, additionally opportune to the director of the excavation, C. Doumas, to suggest to me the inclusion of seals and seal impressions retrieved on the site thus far, both published and unpublished. A large part of this book is accordingly dedicated to the contexts of the items in question. The contexts are examined in order to establish whether they are meaningful or not in our interpretation of the seals, the sealings and the items bearing seal impressions. However, on the basis of what we now know about the inhabitants' activity on the site until the very end, it has to be stressed that any study of the latest pre-eruption phase at Akrotiri is bound to be confronted with the question posed by Macdonald:¹² "To what extent are the contexts in which objects are found in Akrotiri the context of their use, as opposed to their storage contexts, or as opposed to their "storage for protection against earthquake" contexts?"

The study was greatly facilitated by the arrangement of the material in a small Filemaker database, where all the available information, including photographs and drawings, was inserted. The database helped make the study more systematic and allowed for a clearer look into groupings and divisions within the sealings material.

Chapter 1 deals with seals **S1–S16** retrieved from Akrotiri to date and dating from the MC period to the final volcanic destruction phase. Almost all were found in the excavations at the site from 1967 onwards; only one seal, reportedly found in excavations carried out by French investigators in the 19th century is nowhere to be traced today.¹³ None of the seals found so far on the site has produced any kind of impression, at least none that we have yet been able to trace. Sealings **N1–N74** found in Rooms D18a and D18b, as well as the unique

9 For the multi-faceted problems in the investigation of earlier phases, see Marthari 1990, 57–58.

10 The small volumes *Thera I–VII*, which are used extensively throughout the present study, are, as a matter of fact, reprints (translated in English) of the annual excavation reports Marinatos submitted to *Praktika* (the annual reports journal of the Archaeological Society at Athens that oversees the excavation of Akrotiri) each year from 1967 until his passing. A notable exception is Doumas 2007a.

11 For the term, see Chapter 4, pp. 186–94.

12 Macdonald, in response to Marinatos 1990, 377.

13 Mentioned in Fouqué 1879, 112; only a drawing of the seal has recently been recovered (Karnava 2014b, 48 no. 42b).

small sealing fragment N75 retrieved from the area to the S of Xeste 2, constitute the subject of Chapter 2. The seals that impressed these sealings have not been found in Akrotiri or elsewhere.¹⁴ Chapter 3 includes seal impressions I1–I3 found on a few different objects.

Each of the above chapters starts with the presentation of contextual archaeological data. The seals were retrieved in 14 different findspots, the sealings in three and the stamped objects in another three: all in all, 20 different findspots within Akrotiri had to be discussed, none of which has a proper primary publication. The brief commentaries that conclude the presentation of each context convey this author's interpretation of the relevant context on the basis of the available data, and were drafted after extensive consultation of the excavation daybooks. After the contexts, each chapter continues with matters of typology and function, proceeds to iconography, and concludes with a discussion on the material presented; the discussion also summarizes some of the points made in the chapters.

Chapter 4 starts with a historical overview of sealing studies in the Aegean and then discusses certain aspects of Minoan Neopalatial administrative practices on the basis of the evidence extracted from the Akrotiri sealings, since they offer invaluable new insights on the matter. This rather unorthodox placement of reviewing the literature and previous studies was deemed necessary, because some basic concepts in our understanding of Minoan Neopalatial administrative practices were revised on account of the new Akrotiri evidence. It was therefore necessary for the Akrotiri data presentation to take precedence and then for the review to follow. The reader is of course at liberty to follow his/her own reading sequence.

The Concluding Remarks bring this monograph text to a close. My aim has been for the primary presentation of this material to be as complete and objective as possible, so that the reader can appreciate the evidence on his/her own. For this reason, interpretations are kept to a minimum and the final remarks, which touch on a variety of topics, are neither exhaustive nor definitive. Some overlap between the final discussions in Chapters 1–3, Chapter 4 and the discussions in this last section is necessary in order to secure the autonomy of each chapter as well as that of the Concluding Remarks. It is also true that, owing to the wealth of publications and information available nowadays, readers often resort to 'diagonal reading' or move directly to the conclusions of papers and books. In order to rescue the reader from missing out on important yet subliminal points scattered throughout the book, I have deliberately chosen to repeat them.

The book closes with a catalogue of the material under discussion. Each entry takes up a single page and contains textual and image data (photographs and drawings). The relatively small quantity of material under examination has permitted this exhaustive, holistic documentation with between four and ten illustrations for each entry. The specific way that the sealings in particular are presented, with photographs taken of their different sides, appears here for the first time in print and aims to provide the reader with a sense of what an actual sealing looked like. Sealings are rare archaeological finds and it is unlikely that even experienced field archaeologists or rugged Cretologists would ever have excavated or studied such finds.

14 As a matter of fact there is only one instance in the whole of the corpus of Aegean seals and seal impressions where a possible match between a seal and an ancient impression has been suggested: a seal said to be from Elis (*CMS XI* no. 27) and a sealing found in the Mycenaean palace of Pylos (Pini *et al.* 1997, 9 no. 15; *CMS I Suppl.* no. 180).

As a closing comment I would like to add that it is virtually impossible today to take into account all relevant bibliography and to also explore all possible research trends arising from the study of a specific set of archaeological material. I trust that I have taken into account the appropriate publications regarding Akrotiri, which has almost become a field on its own, the Cyclades, Minoan Crete, ancient administration and many other exotic or not-so-exotic topics, but I am certain that I have also missed much potentially interesting or relevant literature.

I hope that the archaeological community will proceed with the critical appreciation of the set of evidence presented here and that this monograph will provide a starting point for further discussion and research.