

Dark Age Organization: Planning and Inequality at the Early Iron Age Refuge Settlement at Karphi, Crete

Karphi is the best-preserved and investigated Late Bronze Age–Early Iron Age refuge settlement on Crete. It is often used as a comparative example to emphasize the decline of Greek society from the Minoan and Mycenaean palaces into the “Dark Ages” and receives little other attention. Yet, Karphi’s inhabitants should be much more than convenient foils to the Bronze Age palatial lords. The Karphians lived full and successful lives, maintaining their “Dark Age” settlement across generations. This paper recasts Karphi as a complex society with a novel approach. Through the digitization and analysis of plans of Karphi, we can gain remarkable insight into the social lives and organization of the town.

With no writing and a decreased material culture, nearly all that remains of Karphi are the crumbling rubble walls of buildings. Yet these walls have been often overlooked in studies of the settlement. Thus, I produced a new digitized map of the site and from the published plans and included local topography (Pendlebury et al. 1938: pl. 9; Wallace 2020: fig. 1.1). This new map is analyzed to answer the following questions: (1) Is there any indication of city-planning at Karphi? A corollary to that, (2) is there any predominant orientation with any significance? And, (3) what does the layout of the city say about the social organization?

This study, in taking advantage of the analyses provided by digital mapping, provides several important points that develop a narrative of the settlement. Karphi was not aligned with the local topography—a break in Cretan tradition. Likewise, there was no major orientation in the settlement that is indicative of site-wide planning. These observations provide evidence that Karphi was indeed settled and built in a hurry, without a central organizing force.

While the large conglomeration of rooms to the west of Karphi peak is mostly randomly aligned, there are three clusters of construction that are made up of rooms along the same orientation. These planned clusters are presumably later additions to the settlement, built after the initial rush to acquire shelter. Once Karphi was settled, the people were able to put more investment into their new constructions—a reflection of an increased sense of security and central organization.

An analysis of the digitized plan using household floor area as a proxy for household wealth, indicates that Karphi certainly had wealth disparity (see Stephan 2013 for an extensive study using this method applied to the Roman Empire). Using data from the plan, wealth distribution was quantified with Gini coefficient, a common measure of wealth inequality in a society (Siegel and Swanson 2004: 116–7). The calculated value of 0.36 is lower than contemporary Knossos and later Archaic Greece. The later planned complexes mentioned above included households that were 20% larger than the households of the western unaligned conglomeration. Thus, we can establish that social stratification increased as Karphi became a stable settlement.

Three public shrines have been identified by the presence of ceramic cult statues and accompanying ritual paraphernalia. On the plan their rooms have no determinable special orientation nor size in relation to the other rooms of the settlement, yet they make up six percent of the excavated indoor floor area of Karphi—a non-insignificant time and resource investment, yet consistent with other contemporary Cretan sites. Furthermore, several households had offering stands, traditionally seen as indicative of domestic shrines and wealthy households, yet these households are no larger than the average across the settlement. The people who did not

have time to initially organize their settlement certainly invested considerable time in constructing shrine to honor the gods.

This study reveals several important aspects of the social makeup of Karphi at settlement and its development over its 200-year inhabitation. It gives insight into the values and social relationships of the Karphians. The new digital plan and analyses paint a new Karphi—one inhabited by a more complicated society than previously thought.

Works Cited

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