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Excavations at Sissi V

Preliminary Report on
the 2017-2019 Campaigns

VOLUME 1&2

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6.1. The Sissi Court-Centred Building

Introduction

Jan Driessen

The realisation that we were excavating a large monumental complex at Sissi only 4 km east of the palace at Malia was undoubtedly the greatest surprise of the 2011 and 2015 campaigns (*Sissi III*: 152-153; *IV*: 151-153). It was certainly not an objective that formed part of our original research project but it definitely added unsuspected angles of intra-regional comparison to our research. It also forced us to rethink the site in general as well as adapt our excavation strategy. Including the earlier work during 2008-2011 and 2015-2019, it has taken us all in all nine campaigns of six weeks (*i.e.* 270 days) with between six to 40 people to clear most of the complex. When excavations resumed in 2015, geophysical survey by A. Sarris alluded at the presence of a large court and suggested that this court was not only much larger than originally assumed but was also of an odd trapezoidal shape rather than rectangular as we expected (Driessen & Sarris 2020). Subsequent excavations confirmed the picture suggested by the georadar, including the presence of an obliquely set building to the south west (the *Basin Building*) and a Prepalatial village to the northwest on the Upper Terrace. Although some more tests are necessary, notably where the chronology of some walls of the Court-Centred Building is concerned, we think we have basically excavated the entire complex (figs 6.1.1, 6.1.2 & 6.1.3).



FIG. 6.1.1 AERIAL PHOTO OF COURT-CENTRED BUILDING (CCB) AFTER THE 2017 CAMPAIGN (NORTH AT LEFT) (©EBSA; N. KRESS)



FIG. 6.1.2 AERIAL PHOTO OF COURT-CENTRED BUILDING (CCB) AFTER THE 2018 CAMPAIGN (NORTH AT LEFT) (©EBSA; N. KRESS)



FIG. 6.1.3 AERIAL PHOTO OF COURT-CENTRED BUILDING (CCB) AFTER THE 2019 CAMPAIGN (NORTH AT LEFT) (©EBSA; N. KRESS)

6.1. The Sissi Court-Centred Building

As is made clear in the following reports by the area supervisors, we have not been entirely successful in finding the outer limits of the complex. Erosion no doubt plays a role here. But it is also evident that the builders worked from the inside (the court) outwards. Indeed, facing the court we find well-built facades, usually made of ashlar that may have been quarried in the very northern part of the Sissi Bay (§ 5.4). The fact that the complex was almost squeezed into a bedrock depression may also be to blame. The bedrock ledge to the west may originally have carried the west façade of the complex but only a single limestone boulder remains more or less in position to back up this hypothesis. The large number of ashlar blocks that were dumped into the *Basin Building* could conceivably derive from this façade because of their proximity. The wings around the court seem to have been rather small, only 10 to 15 m deep. This even more accentuates the size of the Central Court. Most importantly, during the last seasons, we cleared several monumental entrance passages leading directly into the Central Court from different sides, stresses the great permeability, at least originally, of the complex (fig. 6.1.4). There is some evidence for the blocking of some of these accesses during the Neopalatial period, something that finds a parallel in other court-centred buildings during the advanced LM I phase (Driessen 1995), potentially reflecting similar moves to social exclusion or increased security concerns during the period. It may also be remarked that, whereas many doorways open from the Central Court towards the East Wing, the West Wing is not accessible, apart via Space 6.17, something which may again underline the importance of this small room, added to the north-west of the court.



FIG. 6.1.4 SISSI CCB: ACCESS SYSTEM AND ENTRANCES; THE REMAINS OF THE PREPALATIAL EM IIA VILLAGE ARE VISIBLE AT BOTTOM LEFT (©EBSA; N. KRESS, J. DRIESSEN)

As far as we can judge from the mobile finds – which are very few as a result of the abandonment of the complex – none of the ground floor spaces can be assigned a special function. Exceptions are the filled-in basin 10.6 and the bench with cups in Space 6.9, found in 2011 (*Sissi III*: 137-138; *IV*: 233-237, 275-279; Caloi 2018). Both cases can be considered as structured depositions taking place before the abandonment, however. On the basis of architectural and structural elements, however, and despite the sometimes-mediocre state of conservation, it is clear that several spaces received special attention. Hence, columnbases, even if only represented by roughly dressed blocks, were found in Spaces 6.21, 15.2, 15.3, 15.4 and 10.22, suggesting the presence of areas that may have functioned as reception rooms. In both Space 6.21 and 10.22, these bases were found in association with terracotta slab floor panels. In the West Wing, there are several ground floor spaces (10.12, 10.14) that had

plastered floors (Sissi IV: 246) and the elaboration of Space 6.17 was already stressed in a previous report (Sissi IV: 219-226). Moreover, there is ample evidence that many of the walls of the rooms in both the North-East and North-West Wings were plastered (*e.g.* Spaces 6.19, 6.20). Ongoing study will show whether these plasters were decorated or not. A preliminary report on the plaster is given elsewhere in this volume (§ 12).

The three ‘main’ palaces at Knossos, Malia and Phaistos each have a large west court, laid out since the mature Prepalatial period (already Driessen 2007). These were retained throughout the history of these buildings. Such a court is absent at Petras, Zakros and Galatas but partly present, although quite small, at Gournia. To find out whether a court existed at Sissi, we tested the Upper Terrace to the west and somewhat unexpectedly (although the georadar survey had shown its presence) came upon architectural remains dating back to the Prepalatial period (EM IIA) but nothing later (**fig. 6.1.4**). This conceivably opens the possibility that the area west of the Court Building at Sissi was already levelled and left free of constructions, at least following the Prepalatial period, similar to what we see at Knossos, Phaistos and Malia. The ample Prepalatial remains to the west of the CCB were not at all interfered with afterwards. These and the evidence from the West Wing are discussed by Quentin Letesson below. Most of the architectural remains of this EM IIA village are surprisingly well preserved and this despite their nearness to the surface and despite the presence of the CCB immediately to the east. This could indicate that the area was levelled and used as a court after EM IIA apart from the more eastern spaces that were incorporated or overbuilt when the CCB was constructed. The EM IIA village was found with its assemblages in place and since settlement deposits of this phase are still relatively rare on Crete, its study and publication will provide a welcome addition to our knowledge. The evidence found within the complex by both Letesson and Sylviane Déderix clearly shows that EM IIB deposits were resting against walls, later incorporated within the Neopalatial building (**fig. 6.1.5**).



FIG. 6.1.5 AERIAL PHOTO OF THE NEOPALATIAL WEST AND NORTH-WEST WINGS WITH PREPALATIAL WALLS HIGHLIGHTED (©EBSA; N. KRESS, J. DRIESSEN)

One of the major walls, which has such Prepalatial deposits resting against it, is the large boulder façade (F58, *cf. Sissi IV*: 239) in the north-west corner of the Central Court. This observation has important consequences since it means that already in EM IIB (if not earlier), a relatively monumental complex existed at the spot where the later CCB would be constructed. As shown below by I. Caloi (§ 9.2), EM IIA ceramics are also present within the boundaries of the later building but thus far they cannot directly be associated with architectural features, in contrast to EM IIB. The Prepalatial boulder façade, because of its nature and appearance, should have been facing an open area. Whether this open area was specially furnished with an artificial floor level can only be confirmed by future tests in the Central Court. A small test in the north part of the court in 2015 yielded some eroded MM I sherds (*Sissi IV*: 173). The geophysical exploration of the court, in any case, did not yield any signals (Driessen & Sarris 2020), which either implies that there are no earlier walls in this area or that the area was entirely levelled at some stage. The monumentality of the Prepalatial complex and the presence of Vasiliki ware, mottled ware, gold leaf and perhaps even sealings (§ 11)¹ found, however, redeposited in the East Wing, suggests that Early Minoan IIB represents a moment of major change within the Sissi settlement. This compares well with what has been noted for Malia, Knossos, Phaistos and Vasiliki (Driessen 2007; 2021).

When the Neopalatial complex was constructed, most of the Prepalatial deposits and walls were simply left in place and incorporated (fig. 6.1.6). There seems hence to have been a deliberate intention to connect with an ancestral construction and the Neopalatial structure may have derived some of its social power from the inclusion of these Prepalatial remains.

After the EM IIB fire destruction, there is a chronological gap. The area seems to have been abandoned for at least a few centuries since, apart from isolated sherds, there is no good evidence for occupation before MM IIB and even this phase is only sporadically attested in the East Wing, usually found as sherds forming part of re-deposited fills, perhaps brought in during construction in MM IIIA or MM IIIB. MM IIIA sherds are found in almost every room and this seems to reflect the original construction of the CCB. The deposit interpreted as a building celebration deposit (Caloi 2018) is probably connected to a major reconstruction of the complex in MM IIIB. Massive levelling deposits suggest an earthquake destruction at this time, necessitating considerable rebuilding of the complex. MM IIIB is also when the depression in Space 10.6 started to be filled in while an almost complete amphora of likely MM IIIA date seems to have formed part of the original context. Since this basin existed at the same time as the West Wing², MM IIIA may be considered as the date of construction of the main complex. In MM IIIB, the court may have been enlarged to the south as discussed below.

The Sissi CCB was abandoned in LM IA and very little of importance was left within its rooms. The abandonment may have been accompanied with attempts to block the access to the complex at least from the southwest and northeast. The most advanced pottery encountered in the building is advanced LM IA but it was only found in the North-East Wing; all the other pottery left in place seems early LM IA. There are only a few isolated traces of fire destruction. Hence, part of the Western Entrance Passage (17.11) was found choked with fire destruction debris and burned ashlar but only in a small part of it and not in the surrounding rooms, which is why it is not impossible that this blocking was intentional. Within the West Wing too, there is a burned floor and ditto deposit and limited traces of fire destruction have been noted in the North-East Wing and the South-East Wing. Nothing that can be identified as LM IB was identified in the CCB nor are there traces for LM II-III A. It is only in the advanced LM IIIA2 or B phase that part of the East Wing (Building F) was reoccupied and some of the ruins may have been interfered with, as in the South Basements (fig. 6.1.6). In any case, in later periods, building materials were scavenged or removed while some were dumped in the cistern of the *Basin Building*, south of the West Wing. The area of the Central Court, however, may well have been left open and still in use, at higher level. Much later, in Byzantine times, a thin terrace wall, perhaps longing a ramp, was built over the south retaining wall of the Central Court.

1 Anastasiadou (§ 11) dates these sealings 19-15-2518-OB012a & b to in between EM III/MM IA and MM II, with a preference for MM II, but these phases are not clearly attested in the CCB and EM IIB is the only fire destruction that could have caused the firing of the sealings. Peg sealings as these already occur in EM II and at EH II Lerna.

2 It is not impossible, however, that it was created before the south facade of the West Wing was built.



FIG. 6.1.6 SISSI COURT-CENTRED BUILDING: PRELIMINARY PLAN WITH PHASING (©EBSA; E. ZOGRFOU)

The 2017-2019 campaigns have yielded considerable evidence for different architectural phases within the Neopalatial period (**fig. 6.1.6**). These may briefly be summarised but the details are given in the following chapters.

For a start, the prior existence of the large boulder façade F58 means that Space 6.17 forms a secondary addition (*Sissi IV*: 219-230) and that it is likely that, in a first Neopalatial phase, the boulder façade was entirely visible from the Central Court and left in place when the ashlar façade of the West Wing was constructed³. The addition of Space 6.17, accessible via a north-south, low staircase, reduced the width of the court in its north part with several metres. The elevated platform constructed against the south wall of Space 6.17 represents a third phase and this addition seems to have forced the builders to reduce the entrance to Space 6.17, following the construction of an east-west staircase, set on top of the earlier north-south steps. This staircase collapsed, however, but a potential reconstruction is given in **fig. 6.1.7**.



FIG. 6.1.7 POTENTIAL RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ARCHITECTURAL MODIFICATIONS SOUTH OF SPACE 6.17 (©EBSA; E. ZOGRAFOU)

Since the ashlar wall of Space 6.17 is quasi-identical to the east facing wall of the West Wing, these walls were either built at the same time or very close in time. This may then also imply that the Neopalatial West Wing did not have an ashlar wall at first. It is also clear that in some places of the Central Court two levels of plaster flooring are preserved and perhaps even three in front of the entrance into Space 15.3 where the plaster covers the slabs. This too seems to reflect a longer use-life of the building. More telling is perhaps the fact that the boulder wall flanking Space 10.3 in the south part of the West Wing continues beneath the ashlar façade that forms the east façade of the West Wing and should therefore be older. The north wall of Space 10.3, however, was built against the south façade of the West Wing since the white plaster covering this south façade is still visible. This north wall is hence later, which means that three different architectural phases are implied. Within Space 6.21 in the North-East Wing, two clear floor levels are preserved, both with a panel of fired terracotta slabs and situated almost directly one on top of the other. There is about 0.15 to 0.20 m between the two levels. It reflects considerable rebuilding but also that the builders of the second phase took care to repeat the installation of floor panels, suggestive of great continuity. The same is suggested by the discovery of a stone drain in Space 6.12 in which, in a second phase, a terracotta drain was inserted. In a third phase, the access to this passage was blocked and the drain may have gone out of use. There is also a door blocking in the North-West Wing (Space 11.11). The side walls of the Northern Entrance Passage (Space 11.11) were constructed partly on top of the paving slabs. Finally, the discovery of a *kernos* reused in a wall of the South Wing basements also suggests a change. Perhaps this *kernos* was replaced by the larger block that is now in place against the west façade of the East Wing.

One of the most surprising features of the CCB is evidently the awkward shape of its Central Court, which is neither rectangular nor uniformly oriented nor of regular proportions even if it seems clear that the concepts of rectangularity, a single orientation and a proportional system may well have been present in its conception (**fig. 6.1.8**). While its provincial character may be to blame or even its relatively early construction date in MM IIIA, there are perhaps a few other additional elements that may be responsible for the deviating shape.

³ I wonder whether the boulder façade originally linked up with the medium-sized boulders that form a wall foundation surviving to the south of the West Wing façade and pre-dating it.



FIG. 6.1.8 CCB AT SISSI: CONSTRUCTIONAL UNITS AND VARIETY OF ORIENTATIONS. THE RIGHT SKETCH PLAN SHOWS THE DIFFERENT POTENTIAL ORIENTATIONS OF THE CENTRAL COURT ACCORDING TO THE CONSTRUCTIONAL UNITS (©EBSA; N. KRESS, J. DRIESSEN)

Some suggestions can be made as to the potential progression of construction. The boulder terrace wall of Prepalatial date seems to have set the orientation for the first stage of Neopalatial construction since the north part of the East Wing parallels this Prepalatial orientation and seems to have adapted to its prior existence (bright yellow and blue in the sketch plan of **fig. 6.1.8**). These parts have a northwest/southeast orientation. While the first addition to the south part of the East Wing seems to follow the same orientation (white on **fig. 6.1.8**), no other part does. The West Wing proper (red on **fig. 6.1.8**) has a more outspoken northeast/southwest orientation. Why this was so remains problematic. The CCB was installed in a large depression of the bedrock where there was sufficient space for a flat court. This work may have implied the levelling of several outcrops or filling in of depressions in the area of the Central Court. Several serious bedrock outcrops, however, still exist around the court, especially to the east and west, running roughly parallel (**fig. 6.1.9**). These the builders had to consider and the Central Court may, to some degree, have been squeezed in the space left between these two parallel outcrops. This may partly explain why the East and West Wings are quite small.

It is also possible that the court was fitted in to conform to an already existing street system that was in place before the decision was made to construct a court-centred building. Both the paved North and West Entrance Passages may originally have formed part of a ring road that encircled the top of the hill, linking up with parts of identically paved road surfaces found next to Building CD to the northwest and Building E to the southwest. These existing roads could have forced the builders to adapt the plan of the CCB. At least the paving of the North Entrance Passage already existed in part before some of its side walls were constructed on top and, in any case, the east wall of the North-West Wing encroaches on the North Entrance Passage, showing it is later. Whether this means that certain parts of the Court-Centred Building originally formed separate, isolated units, perhaps even residential ones, before their incorporation into a single complex, is not clear yet. Such a hypothesis has been suggested for the palace at Galatas, said to have developed out of an existing mansion (Rethemiotakis 2002), but there are thus far no indications that the same happened at Sissi.

It is also likely that some of the southern parts of the West Wing were a later addition (**fig. 6.1.10**). While the differing orientation of the *Basin Building* may have been necessitated by a prior existing road, the wall construction that faces the Central Court east of the *Basin Building* consists of boulders while the façade of the original West Wing is in sandstone ashlar. Moreover, some of the walls north-east of the *Basin Building* were actually built against this ashlar façade, showing that they were additions. Similar observation can also be made for the East Wing, where the southern part seems clearly to represent a later modification.

6.1. The Sissi Court-Centred Building



FIG. 6.1.9 CCB AT SISSI WITH MAIN BEDROCK OUTCROPS HIGHLIGHTED IN GREEN (©EBSA; N. KRESS, J. DRIESSEN)



FIG. 6.1.10 OBLIQUE AERIAL VIEW FROM THE SOUTH OF THE CCB AT SISSI, SHOWING THE TERRACE WALL THAT SUPPORTS THE CENTRAL COURT AND THE CONSTRUCTIONS SOUTH OF IT (©EBSA; N. KRESS)

All this evidently implies that the Court-Centred Building was a gradual undertaking. The different wall masonries and orientations suggest a progressive elaboration and enlargement of the complex. Since the north part of the court seems to form an original unit, it is very likely that the Central Court was enlarged during its use-life. This could imply that the complex originally had a U-shape and that the south basements were added at a later stage, enclosing the court from the south. That other Minoan palaces started their biographies as U-shaped complexes has also been suggested (Moody 1987). Since we have not tested the area sufficiently and the material is being studied, we cannot yet say how much time elapsed between the original MM IIIA construction and the addition of the south basements but all happened in the course of the Neopalatial period and well before LM IB. It seems clear, however, that throughout the building's history, an open view to the south was deemed necessary and that the consecutive changes during the Neopalatial phase were primarily targeted at enlarging the Central Court. But even with the enlargement, no functional spaces were added to the south of the massive megalithic retaining wall, only buttresses and terrace walls. Hence, keeping a view towards the Selena Mountains south seem to have an important aspect. This linkage with the natural environment is evidently present in most other Minoan Court Buildings (Shaw 2010).

With an irregular Central Court, which in its final stage measured *ca.* 33 by 15.50 m and had a surface of *ca.* 460 m², the complex thus far occupies about 2.000 m². It is both smaller and larger than other complexes that have been labelled 'palaces' but its court, for example, is six times larger than that of the Petras complex. The following table is useful for comparative reasons (**table 6.1.1**).

Site	Dimensions court	Size of court m ²
Knossos	28 x 52	1,456
Malia	27 x 48	1,296
Phaistos	22 x 46.5	1,037
Gournia	15 x 40	600
Galatas	16 x 37	592
Sissi	15.5 x 33	460
Zakros	12 x 30	368
Myrtos Pyrgos	7.5 x 15	112.5
Petras	6 x 13	78

TAB. 6.1.1 COMPARATIVE SIZES OF CENTRAL COURTS WITHIN PALATIAL BUILDINGS (AFTER VANSTEENHUYSE 2002: 247)⁴

The size of both the court and the complex are surprising, especially considering the presence of an even larger court at nearby Malia. Built, as far as we can tell for the moment, in Middle Minoan IIIA and modified in Middle Minoan IIIB, the Sissi complex was abandoned before or at the time of the Santorini eruption in Late Minoan IA, since we found volcanic ash sealing some deposits. This chronological range incidentally echoes that of the palace at Galatas (Rethemiotakis 2002). Several architectural features, however, seem to connect our complex with the palaces of Malia, Gournia or Zakros but these will be discussed in a future study.

The most intriguing fact is, evidently, that a court-centred building was *überhaupt* built at the site, so close to Malia and in a recently published study (Driessen 2021), I have tried to offer a few hypotheses to explain this. This is not the place to repeat these but I tend to think that the Sissi complex did not duplicate all functions performed by the Malia palace and that the absence of signs of administration, production and storage suggests that its function was mainly ceremonial and religious, functions well attested within the CCB (Driessen 2021). Every 'palace' isn't a 'palace'.

The following chapters discuss in detail the progress of excavation during the 2017-2019 campaigns, following a counter-clock order, with first the work in the North-East and North-West Wings, and then via the West Wing over the Court and South Basements to the East Wing (**fig. 6.1.11**).

⁴ McEnroe 2010: 84-85 gives somewhat different sizes for the courts of Knossos (28 x 53 m), Malia and Phaistos (22 x 51 m), and Galatas (15 x 35 m).

