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A NOTE ON THE (POSSIBLE) ORIGIN OF THE *PELESET*

Jan Driessen

Abstract · There has been plenty of discussion on the origin and nature of the *Peleset*, a group of warriors depicted on the Medinet Habu temple of Ramesses III. If the ethnonym should be read as pulasti or poulasti, as has been suggested, a link may be made with the toponym Pylos/Pyla and a Linear B reading of the ethnonym *pu-ra-wa-tu/*Pyla-wastu* is proposed. This could then imply that the Peleset may have had a link with the Bronze Age settlement of Pyla on Cyprus, occupied and deserted precisely in the time span described by the Medinet Habu reliefs.

Keywords · *Peleset*, Pyla-*Kokkinokremos*, Cyprus, Sea People, Ramesses III.

Since their identification as one of the groups forming part of the 'Sea Peoples' coalition in the reliefs of the Medinet Habu temple of Ramesses III, the origin and nature of the group usually described as the *Peleset* has invited much discussion (e.g. Fischer, Bürge 2017; Baumann 2020). The feathered headgear they are often, but not exclusively, represented with in the reliefs occurs in several areas of the Mediterranean and could, more generally, reflect a helmet used by many warriors during the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age transition (e.g. Giannopoulos 2022; Emanuel 2021; Van de Moortel 2020; Verduci 2019; Grandet 2017, all with references). For some, the representation of the *Peleset* at Medinet Habu with women and children on oxen-driven carts suggests their urban origin (Ben-Dor Evian 2019, 134), for others, however, it is simply a metaphor for a crushing defeat (Bauman 2020, 351). Egyptian texts mentioning the *Peleset* have conveniently been collected by Adams, Cohen (2013). Apart from at Medinet Habu, the ethnonym, linked to specific types of warriors and/or captives' representations, is also mentioned in contemporary documents such as the *Papyrus Harris*, the Rhetorical Stele from Chapel C at Deir el-Medina, the *Onomastic of Amenope* and the later *Pedeset* Inscription.

After their defeat by the Egyptians in the Battle of the Delta, the *Peleset* are supposed to have (been) subsequently resettled in Canaan (esp. the *Pentapolis* Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gath and Gaza) and are assumed to be the ancestors of the later Philistines (e.g. Yasur Landau 2010; 2013; Maeir 2022, Wylie, Master 2020, but the bibliography is endless). The *Peleset* are not mentioned in Ugaritic or Hittite texts but some (e.g. Singer 2012; Emanuel 2015; 2021) have argued that a recently found inscription from Aleppo referring to King Taita of *Padasatini*, should be amended to *Palistin*, while Taita is also connected to *Walistin* in other 11th c. BCE inscriptions (Emanuel 2015; Starke 2019; but see Schneider 2010b and Maeir 2019; 2022). This at least suggests that another kingdom, initially called *Palastin/Walistin* also existed in the northwest of Syria around the 'Amuq valley and here too Aegean pottery forms part of the first material evidence of the 11th century BCE (Emanuel 2015; Pucci 2019; Banyai 2021). All this is well-known and does not need to be repeated here in detail.

Hence, while we have a good idea now where the *Peleset* may have ended up after their defeat in the Delta, their origin remains disputed. The discussion evidently goes back to Emmanuel de Rougé (1867) and Gaston Maspero (1875) and while there is little doubt that they had a connection with the sea and the islands situated therein (Grandet 2017), attempts to detect their specific

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homelands remain unsatisfactory. The Bible gives their origin as Crete (*Caphtor* cf. *Deuteronomy* 2:23; *Jeremiah* 47:4; *Amos* 9.7) and suggestions as to the etymology of the *Peleset* group often imply a link with the Pelasgians (*Pelastai*), with the Semitic root *p-l-s* that could mean 'to cross' or 'to invade',[1] or with Mycenaean Greek *Plōwistoi* (Schneider 2010b, 570). While the later Hebrew term *Plishtim* is mentioned often in the Bible and the Assyrians called the area *Palashtu/Palastu* or *Pilistu*, the original Egyptian term, Pršt(w) *or p-w-r-š* (or *s3*)*-tj-j* of the Medinet Habu inscriptions was already read as *pulasati* by Macalister (1913, 22, 24) and as *pu-l-śá-tá* by Helck (1979, 135) and Werner (1967, 93). Pierre Grandet (2017) has proposed a reading as *Poulasti* and Aren Wilson-Wright (pers. com.) also thinks that the Egyptian rendering of the toponym *p-w-r-s3-tj*, most likely reflects something like **pulast*, while the biblical transcription *pəlešet* goes back to earlier **pvlast-*. Starke (2019, 627) has treated the question in detail and puts forward convincing philological arguments now to read *[Pila/ista]*, a reading close to that of Schneider (2010b, 571).

Recent aDNA studies (Feldman *et al.* 2019) on skeletal remains of Ashkelon, one of the Philistine cities, suggest a southern European (Greece and/or Cyprus) influx at the end of the Bronze Age or beginning of the Iron Age, which, however, was of limited genetic impact on the long-term population structure.[2] While this did not come as a great surprise in view of the Aegean features in later Philistine material culture and potential linguistic elements (Schneider 2010b) and the link with Cyprus of early pottery styles in 12th c. BCE Philistine settlements (already Dothan 1982; Mountjoy 2018) (even if this link should not be exaggerated (Stockhammer 2017; Maeir 2019; 2021), I use this evidence to propose another hypothesis, which connects the *Peleset/Poulasti/Pila-ista* explicitly with the settlement of Pyla *Kokkinokremos*.

The site of Pyla *Kokkinokremos* is located on the southeastern coast of Cyprus, in the east part of Larnaka Bay (Fig. 1). Since its initial exploration by Porphyrios Dikaios in 1952-1953 (Dikaios 1971, 895-907), the site has occupied a special position in the discussions about the collapse of the Late Bronze Age societies around 1200 BCE and the potential role of the Sea Peoples mentioned in Egyptian and Near Eastern sources in this collapse (Cline 2021; Knapp, Manning 2016). Successive archaeological explorations afterwards, in 1981-1982 (Karageorghis, Demas 1984), in 2007-2009 (Brown 2017), in 2010-2011 (Karageorghis, Kanta 2014), in 2012 (Karageorghis, Kanta 2014, 103-111) and since 2014 (Bretschneider *et al.* 2015; 2017; 2021; 2023; Driessen *et al.* 2023) have revealed large parts of a substantial town comprising similarly laid-out, multi-room residences often with courtyards. The outer wall of many of these residences forms a continuous curtain wall (labelled 'casemate' by Karageorghis, Demas 1984, 15, 24) that follows the edge of the plateau and is provided with access gates at least to the north-east, south-east and south-west, as well as with some projecting bastions to the south-east and south-west. Within the walls of the houses, all suddenly abandoned with their material in place, and besides the ubiquitous local Cypriot domestic and fine wares, many objects of which the origin can be traced outside the island were found: Sardinian *olle* and tableware, Mycenaean kraters, Minoan mugs and jugs, Canaanite jars, Trojan Grey Ware Egyptian alabaster vases and meat jars (e.g. Kostopoulou 2021; Crabbé, Bretschneider 2021; Kostopoulou, Jung 2023). Established in the second half of the 13th c. BC, the site was abandoned, seemingly in a hurry, sometime between 1200 and 1180 BCE (end of Late Cypriot IIC) and never resettled. The presence of LH IIIC Early decorated deep bowls found at several places in the excavation (e.g. Karageorghis, Demas 1984, 91; Bretschneider *et al.* 2015; 2017, 83; 2023; Kostopoulou, Jung 2023) and in the destructions at Tell Tweini and Tell Kazel (Jung 2022 with detailed discussion) suggests a contemporaneity between the final abandonment deposits at Pyla and the 8th year of Ramesses III when he defeated the Sea Peoples, following Schneider's chronology (2010a), in 1187 BCE.

Despite a perhaps simplistic analogical inference, we here argue for a link between the *Poulasti/Pila-ista* of the Medinet Habu reliefs and the toponym Pyla/Pula/Πύλα, the name of the

[1] Another hypothesis which connects the Philistines with *phyle histia* – the tribe of hearths has few followers (cf. Jones 1972). See Starke (2019, 623-629) for a detailed discussion.

[2] There is evidently also the much later inscription of Ekron of a king called Achish, possibly 'the Achaean' (Schäfer-Lichtenberger 2022; Naveh 1998).

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nearby village of the archaeological site. The Cypriot toponym appears for the first time in Medieval chronicles as *Pila* or *Piles* when the place was in the hands of Prince John II of Galilee (Johan de Bries) ($^{+}$1315) and later of the de Giblet family, as discussed by De Mas Latrie (1855, 284, n. 5) in his *Histoire de Chypre*. The toponym is written as *Pila* on both the 1538 Mattheo Pagano map and the 1542 Leonida Attar map, and as *Pilla* on the Ortelius map of 1574 and on all later maps.[3] The Cypriot toponym has traditionally been connected to πύλη 'gate' or 'entrance' (Ceccaldi 1882, 20; Karageorghis, Demas 1984, 5; Georgiou 2012, 69), since the modern village is said to be located at the entrance of one of the access routes to the *Mesaoria*, the central Cypriot plain. East of Pyla *Kokkinokremos* is also a cape that carries the name Pyla, showing the entire area has a connection with the toponym.[4] Neither Ptolemy nor Strabo or other ancient sources mention a toponym for this particular part of the island unfortunately (Kearns 2018), but recent archaeological exploration suggests great continuity in occupation in the area at least between the Hellenistic period through the Late Antique period into modern times (Olson *et al*. 2021: 304; Keane 2021). Hence, although there is no proof that the present toponym already dates to earlier times, an ancient toponym *Πύλαι as suggested by Menardos (1906, 339) is perhaps likely.

Is it possible then that *Poulasti/Pila-ista* reflects the Egyptian pronunciation of Mycenaean Greek [𐀞-𐀨-𐀡-𐀶 pu-ra-wa-tu in Linear B signs] *pu-ra-wa-tu or *Pyla-wastu*, the city/inhabitants of Pyla? There are some arguments in favour. The Linear B term for city, *wastu/astu*, is already attested on a tablet from 14th c. BCE Knossos (V 114.b, v.1) where *pe-da wa-tu* is usually translated as πεδά Fάστυ /*wastu*/ 'to the city', as well as on tablet Tn 316 from late 13th c. BCE Pylos (*a-ke-qe wa-tu*).[5] In this last example, it has been suggested that it was not the city as such but its inhabitants that were meant (Deger-Jalkotzy 1995: 368). A link with Messenian Pylos/Πύλος, destroyed and abandoned at approximately the same time as Pyla *Kokkinokremos* (Vitale *et al*. 2022), cannot be made but even in present days, a village called Pyla (Πύλα) is located close to Ano Englianos and modern-day Pylos. The mere existence, however, of the toponym Πύλος in Late Bronze Age Messenia allows, I believe, to claim a potential early date of a toponym *Πύλαι on Cyprus. The inhabitants of Pyla could hence have been known as the **Pylawastu*. Is it then conceivable that the more than 7-ha large settlement of Pyla was the origin of one of the groups that attacked Egypt at the time of Ramses III and, after their defeat, failed to return, explaining the abandonment of the Cypriot settlement?

While the link between the *Poulasti* and the site of Pyla for the moment remains entirely hypothetical, some archaeological indications such as the time of the sudden abandonment of the Pyla-*Kokkinokremos* settlement (Driessen *et al*. 2023), which chronologically corresponds well with the date of the defeat of the Sea People, but also the mixed nature of Pyla's material culture,[6] potentially illustrating the presence of various non-Cypriot and Cypriot groups at the site, may be considered as circumstantial evidence. The latter, rather than suggestive of a single ethnic group, could possibly imply a mix of people from various origins that coalesced at Pyla and only received its ethnonym and hence a particular identity following its settling on the southeast coast of Cyprus. This avoids looking for a single origin for the group although it does suggest a substantial Mycenaean Greek participation in the establishment of the site of Pyla-*Kokkinokremos*, strong enough to give it a Greek toponym.

Did the defeat of the *Peleset* by Ramesses III – or as it said, 'the *Sikila* and *Peleset* were made into ashes' in the Papyrus Harris – prevent their return to Cyprus, turning them into a land group rather than the maritime marauders they had been before?

[3] See https://24glo.com/en/cy/map/history-all.html.

[4] The cape may have been called after the village since in medieval times it was apparently called Cape Agios Georgios (Delatte 1947, 124-126).

[5] Other Linear B names including /wastu/ are given in Deger-Jalkotzy 1995.

[6] A mixed population is also suggested by the presence of different types of loom weights at Pyla. See Bretschneider *et al*. 2023, 27, 91, 117, 212: some that are fired and of pyramidal shape in Sector 3; fired or unfired and of discoid, cylindrical, or rounded shape in Sector 4, but in stone and perforated in Sector 5, and either of rectangular, oval, triangular, or trapezoidal shape.

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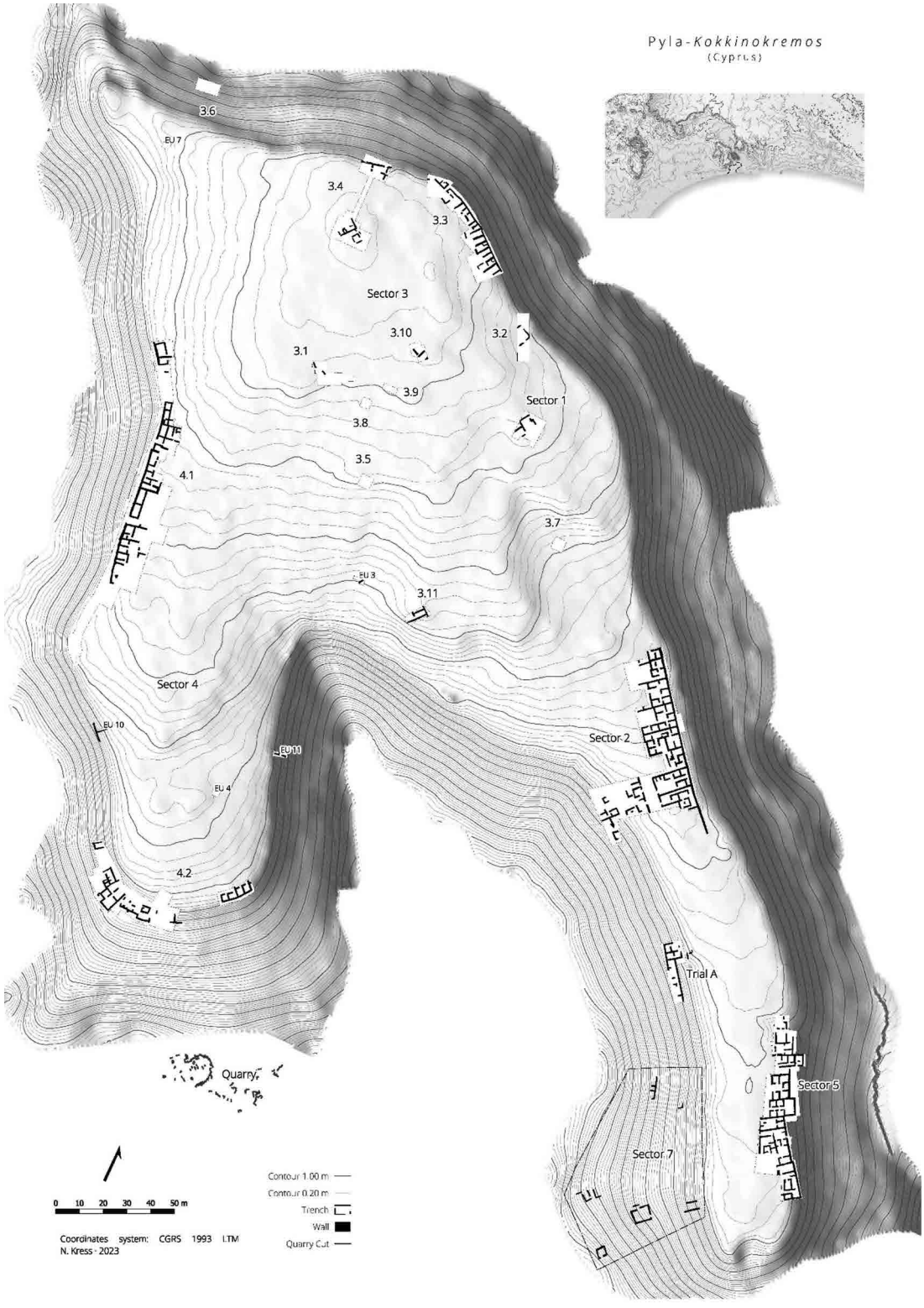


Fig. 1. Site plan of the Pyla-Kokkinokremos (© C-PEPL, N. Kress).

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