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## The Itanos Archaeological Survey

Alain Duploux, Anna Lucia d'Agata, Oliver Rackham, Jennifer Moody

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**ΠΕΠΡΑΓΜΕΝΑ**  
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*Επιφανειακές-γεωφυσικές έρευνες*

*Τοπογραφία – Οικιστική οργάνωση – Αρχιτεκτονική*

*Κρήτη – Αιγαίο – Ανατολική Μεσόγειος*



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Επιμέλεια τόμου: **Ειρήνη Γαβριλάκη**

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## The Itanos Archaeological Survey

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL research program at Itanos in Eastern Crete began in 1994, under the scientific patronage of the Institute for Mediterranean Studies of Rethymno, the French School at Athens, and the 24th Ephoria of Prehistorical and Classical Antiquities. The Greek city of Itanos had already been investigated by the French School in 1899 and, again, in 1950. In order to complete the exploration of the city and to survey its territory, a new team was formed in 1994 and, soon afterwards, the survey of the territory of Itanos was launched. The survey area is bounded to the North by a military base and to the South by the road going westwards to the Toplou monastery. The survey area covers nearly 20 sq. km, that is about 15% of what is supposed to be the territory of late Hellenistic Itanos.

Contrarily to a common trend in Cretan archaeology, we were initially looking for a Greek countryside. The city of Itanos is among the few Greek cities whose limits are known from an ancient text. In the Late Hellenistic period, the territory of Itanos spread from Cape Sidero to the North to the highlands, linking the gulf of Karoumes to the gulf of Sitia, covering about 130 sq. km. Located on the sea, Itanos was undoubtedly an unusual Greek *polis* in the whole Cretan landscape. The survey aimed at understanding how a well-known maritime city made use of its land. Instead of a Greek countryside, however, we first discovered a landscape fully shaped by Bronze-age structures. The scope of our survey turned out to document and understand the various settlement patterns in the territory of the city of Itanos.

### THE LANDSCAPE OF ITANOS

The Itanos peninsula is geologically complex. It lacks mountains, but has a series of ridges, cliff-bound mesas, and basins between them. It is a low-rainfall

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area whose soils and hard or crumbly bedrock do not retain moisture, making it one of the most arid parts of Crete. It is conspicuously lacking in trees; even maquis is confined to lentisk and wild olive.

Its remarkable archaeological feature is the complete collapse of the city of Itanos, the abandonment of its territory in the Late Roman period and the lack of later successors. The reason for the desertion probably lies in exposure to pirate attacks. Once Itanos itself had fallen, the whole peninsula became indefensible; the land was marginal because of aridity and would not have been worth cultivating in the face of mounting insecurity. Itanos, locally known as Erimoupolis, remained deserted and its territory is still today devoid of permanent settlement.

Especially remarkable –indeed unique in our experience– are the remains of ancient infrastructure: several sq. km of terraces, check dams, enclosure walls, roads and quarries. In antiquity nearly the whole of the peninsula, even what are now areas of bare rock, was used. There are two major periods of terrace construction and repair, easily spotted by the size of the building stone. The east side of the peninsula is being actively eroded, exposing and destroying Minoan and later sites. A combination of trampling by sheep and goats and high winds result in the deflation of the surface, while episodic downpours form gullies. The instability of this landscape is epitomized in the small badlands that have developed since post-Roman times, in various areas.

Part of the peninsula is famous for the palm-wood of Vaï. This has been in existence (as its name Vaï, *Palm*, implies), at least since Venetian times. For much of the time, the palms appear to have been reduced to the stature of bushes; only in recent decades have they grown up into tall trees.

The Itanos peninsula is probably the best example of the dry and rugged corners of Crete, where lack of trees and lack of tall competing vegetation gives rise to semi-desert plant communities. An example is the tiny endemic annual *Ammanthus filicaulis*, found nowhere else in the world. Their presence and survival here results from a unique combination of environmental and historical factors. Most of the peninsula has been designated as an area of ecological conservation under the NATURA 2000 scheme.

#### THE BRONZE AGE OCCUPATION

55 Bronze Age sites have been identified on the peninsula of Itanos. In fact this was the most intense phase of occupation ever known in the area.

Earliest colonization dates back to the Final Neolithic/Early Minoan I. Lo-



cated on the north-western hills in defensible positions overlooking the coast, the few settlements to have been identified had to exist in a landscape with little productive potential, such as Vamies 17. They must have been in contact with the coastal centres on the bay of Sitia, which maintained close ties with the southern Aegean and were specialised in the acquisition of raw materials, such as obsidian and metals. The abandonment of the FN/EM I sites and the whole peninsula of Itanos during the Early Bronze Age can be linked to the difficulty of exploiting this peculiar territory and the phenomena of settlement nucleation that characterised the Prepalatial phase starting from EM II.

For the MM or generically Protopalatial period, we have so few materials offering any certainty of attribution that, apart from the peak sanctuary known as Kalamaki Kephala<sup>1</sup>, for the moment we can only infer that the area was uninhabited. The settlement that took place in the early phase of the Neopalatial period manifests the features of an intensive occupation and appears to be coherent with the widespread urban growth observed, starting from MM III, at Palaikastro. At this time, the inhabited area covered above all the low-lying strip of lands stretching away mostly on the southern side of the central plain. The topographic location and the grandness of building that occupies it suggest that the site of Vai 69 –known in previous archaeological literature as the *Villa of Vai*<sup>2</sup>– was the central place that presided over the new occupation of the peninsula, probably under the aegis of Palaikastro. The Villa was the hub of a complex system of exploitation and control of the territory, which included farms, agro-pastoral sites, check dams and lookout structures. It is likely that the Villa was specialised in the collection and working of murex for the extraction of purple dye, as indicated by the significant traces of murex shells found in the surrounding area. The catastrophic explosion of the Santorini volcano put an abrupt end to the Neopalatial occupation of the peninsula.

Few materials dating to LM III have been identified and do not reveal a proper settlement pattern. The only exception was continuous activity at Vai 69. This site, however, was not destined to revive. During the Early Iron Age, the peninsula's central place disappeared forever from the hill of Vai and developed on the bay of Itanos, giving rise to a port city economically oriented towards the Eastern Mediterranean.

1. Davaras 1972, 651. Soetens 2006, 261-262.
2. Daux 1951, 195-198. Driessen and McDonald 1999, 234.

## THE SETTLEMENT PATTERN IN THE GREEK AND ROMAN PERIOD

No Dark Age site has been discovered in the survey area. From the Geometric period, the bay of Erimoupolis was the location of the major site in the area. Excavations revealed traces of a settlement going back to the 8th c. BC, although its extension has not been determined. With the exception of a few scattered pieces of Bronze Age pottery, the coastal site of Itanos was not previously settled and appears to be a new settlement, destined to become the urban centre of the Greek city. Four other sites in the surveyed area yield Geometric pottery, which was found near earlier Bronze Age architectural structures. It seems that these structures remained in use throughout the Greco-Roman period.

In the Orientalizing, Archaic and Classical periods, while the centre of Itanos was rapidly evolving into a nucleated settlement, its rural hinterland remained sparsely frequented. Notable exceptions are a possible small coastal sanctuary (Alatopatela 158) and the suburban sanctuary of Vamies 63. No major site, however, was founded during this period, although a growing number of Bronze Age sites contained some Archaic and Classical pottery. No new permanent settlement is to be supposed and no rural architectural structure dates to this time. Material evidence points to agro-pastoral (and probably seasonal) use for people living in the city centre. In the survey area, no site was further than 4 km from Itanos, which is no more than 1- to 2-hours walk.

During the Hellenistic period, the Itanos territory became more densely occupied. The 25-recorded sites occur in two situations: reoccupation of Bronze Age sites and new rural structures in previously unoccupied areas, such as the hamlet in Travouni with its 42 ha enclosure wall. This pattern of rural settlement contrasts markedly with contemporary Praisos, even though the latter was at the peak of its development. According to James Whitley<sup>3</sup>, the Praisian hinterland was almost devoid of permanent settlement. But in Itanos rural activity was no longer tied to residency in town with daily trip to the fields, as it seems to have been the case from the 8th to the 4th cent. BC.

Looking for an archaeological explanation, Itanos fits well within a general pattern of a marked growth in late Hellenistic Crete in the number of small rural settlements<sup>4</sup>. Besides this general trend there might also be a local and historical explanation. For more than a century, from c. 266 to 146 BC, Itanos was a Ptole-

3. Whitley, Prent and Thorne 1999, 256.

4. Raab 2001, 22-44.

maic protectorate<sup>5</sup>. During these years, a Ptolemaic garrison was stationed in Itanos and the Ptolemaic naval fleet may have anchored in the harbour. In an area of contested territories, the Ptolemaic protectorate may have favoured a more rural and scattered settlement pattern. Later, after the withdrawal of the Ptolemaic garrison and the destruction of Praisos by Hierapytna in the 140s, the security of the Itanos territory was guaranteed by the Roman Senate –no less– after the final settlement of a dispute over boundaries with its new western neighbour.

Moreover, being a maritime city from the start, Itanos was not affected by the well-known shift in the settlement pattern from inland to coastal sites that occurred in early Hellenistic Crete<sup>6</sup>. On the contrary, for the first time, inland sites seem to be permanently settled.

The transition to Roman times had little impact on Hellenistic settlement patterns. Indeed, the site-distribution maps of the two periods are hardly distinguishable. Occupation density was high and rural estates and settlements, such as the hamlet of Travouni, flourished during the Roman period.

From an archaeological perspective, the immediate hinterland of Itanos remained linked to the town until they both were slowly abandoned during the 7th c. AD. Growing insecurity throughout the area left the peninsula deserted for centuries to come. The foundation of the Monastery of Toplou, a new central place, this time on the west side of the peninsula, marked the renaissance of the area in the course of the 15th c.

More results are available on our website: <http://prospection-itanos.efi.gr>

5. Spyridakis 1970.

6. Brulé 1978.

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