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THE LATE HELLADIC III C – PROTOGEOMETRIC TRANSITION
AT MITROU, EAST LOKRIS*

The site of Mitrou is a small tidal islet (3.6 ha) located in East Lokris on the North Euboean Gulf, 20 km north of Orchomenos and Gla, 50 km north of Thebes, and 60 km northwest of Lefkandi (Fig. 1). Its surface is quite flat, rising gently to the north to about 12 m above sea level. Archaeological remains cover the entire islet and continue below sea level for about 50 m to the east and west of the islet, to a depth of 3 m. Thus in antiquity, sea level must have been several meters lower than at present, and the site probably was part of the mainland, situated on a low rise close to the shore.

The University of Tennessee and the 14th Ephorate of the Greek Archaeological Service are conducting a 5-year (2004–2008) collaborative program of excavation and survey of the islet of Mitrou under the direction of Eleni Zachou and the author. The site had never been systematically excavated before the current project. No architectural remains are visible on the surface, but a surface survey conducted in 1988–1989 by Cornell University recovered pottery from the Neolithic through Late Roman periods, the large majority dating to the Late Bronze Age and Protogeometric period (KRAMER-HAJÓS and O’NEILL 2008). In addition, natural scarps created by the sea on the east and west sides of the islet revealed the presence of deep stratigraphic sequences with readily identifiable architectural features.

With its seemingly uninterrupted sequence of Bronze Age and Early Iron Age strata, Mitrou is an ideal place to study crucial and poorly understood periods of Greek prehistory, such as the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age – the topic of the present volume. Adding to the site’s importance is its location on *the* main passageway, both by land and by sea, between northern and southern Greece. If the changes seen in Greece at the Bronze Age – Iron Age transition were at all related to population movements or cultural influxes between north and south, one would expect these to have left traces at Mitrou. Thus Mitrou is an excellent site at which to study the Bronze Age – Iron Age transition.

Our excavation focuses on two areas located in the northeast and northwest of the islet (Fig. 2). Their choice was based on the results of our 2003 and 2005 geophysical surveys, which suggested that they contain imposing architectural remains (TSOKAS *ET AL.* forthcoming). In the northeast excavation area we indeed uncovered a sequence of three superimposed large

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structures: apsidal Building A of Early to Middle Protogeometric date, built inside orthogonal Building B of LH III C date, which in turn had been constructed on top of early LH Building D (Fig. 3). Walls of other Late Bronze Age structures uncovered nearby are thinner and less impressive, and presumably form part of a settlement. Much of this settlement area was turned into a burial ground during the Bronze Age – Iron Age transition.

In the northwest excavation area our magnetometry survey of 2005 showed the apparent outline of a large apsidal building. In 2005 and 2006 we excavated five trial trenches in various areas of this putative building, but were unable to establish whether there is indeed a single large building or a complex of smaller buildings. The dating of these architectural remains is still under study, but it appears that the early part of the LH period is well represented. In the Protogeometric period this area, too, was used as a burial ground.

In the following, the LH III C and Protogeometric remains uncovered at Mitrou in 2004–2006 will be discussed in some detail. However, in order to understand the significance of the LH III C occupation, we must first look briefly at the preceding phases, beginning with the formative period of Mycenaean palatial society.

FORMATIVE PERIOD OF THE LATE BRONZE AGE PALATIAL SOCIETY AND BEGINNING OF PALATIAL PERIOD

The earliest architectural remains uncovered at Mitrou thus far date to the Middle Helladic/Late Helladic I transition (ca. 1600 B.C.E.). These show that throughout the formative period and into the beginning of the palatial period (LH III A2 Early pottery phase, early 14th century B.C.E.), Mitrou had a dense urban settlement with orthogonal buildings arranged along 3 m wide orthogonal streets with pebbled surfaces (Fig. 4). The most important structure of this period so far exposed is Building D in the northeast excavation area. Even though it was not very large (13.5 × 8.25 m), Building D can be considered to be monumental because its wall socles average 1 m in thickness – much thicker than those of any other building at the site – and they were constructed with roughly cut limestone blocks that are larger than any others used at the site. Because of the flattish tops of its stone wall socles and the presence of much disintegrated mudbrick inside and outside the building, it is clear that it carried a mudbrick superstructure. For reasons still unknown, Building D and its adjacent buildings were utterly destroyed by fire in LH III A2 Early.

PALATIAL PERIOD

After this destruction there was a near-total absence of building activity in the northeast excavation area for the remainder of the palatial period, in the LH III A2 Late and LH III B phases (early 14th century – ca. 1200 B.C.E.). Building D was not rebuilt but left as a visible ruin for some 170 years. The pebbled street west of Building D was choked and rendered unusable by numerous dispersed large wall blocks, which to all appearances came from Building D. Evidence for human activity in this period is limited to pottery dumps, some flimsy wall fragments, and a few informal surfaces in the northeast excavation area. Some of these surfaces are located close to Building D and well below the tops of its ruined walls, so that it is clear that the ruins of Building D were visible at that time. Pottery is still plentiful and of high quality, and it includes fine decorated Argive vases. Thus we know that Mitrou was not abandoned, but the use of the northeast excavation area changed in a way as yet not understood. The comparatively small surface exposure – only 1.2% of the site's surface area had been excavated in 2004–2006 – makes it difficult to assess the significance of the scarcity and flimsy quality of LH III A2 Late and LH III B architecture.

POST-PALATIAL PERIOD:
LATE HELLADIC III C THROUGH LATE PROTOGEOMETRIC PERIODS

In an equally dramatic turn of events, after the demise of the Mycenaean palaces (ca. 1200 B.C.E.), and possibly as early as LH III C Early, the excavated settlement area at Mitrou was rebuilt in its Prepalatial form. Building B was constructed on top of Building D, apparently as its successor (Fig. 3, 4). We have parts of Building B's west wall (wall 3), two crosswalls (walls 4 and 5), and small parts of its northeast corner (walls 36 and 37). To judge from the excavated remains, Building B was rectangular and fairly similar in size to Building D. The very southwest corner of Building B is missing, so we do not know whether its west wall formed an angle with its south wall, stopping about 2 m short of the south wall of Building D, or whether Building B's west wall continued to form a south porch over the southern extremity of Building D.

The rubble wall socles of Building B are 0.70 m to 0.80 m wide. They are much less impressive than those of Building D, but more substantial than the wall socles of any other LH III C building at Mitrou. All of these buildings appear to have had mudbrick superstructures. The size of Building B's walls and its location on top of Building D allow us to conclude that Building B was an important building in the LH III C settlement, in spite of its rather modest size and simple construction.

Nothing specific is known about Building B's function. In the interior space north of wall 5, we found two superimposed earthen floors (at ca. +5.30 and ca. +5.45), but no floor deposits. The latest pottery fragments from below the lower floor are dated to LH III C. The latest pottery fragments below the upper floor date to LH III C Middle to Late, providing a tentative *terminus post quem* for the construction of this floor and the demise of the building (cf. RUTTER 2007, 289).

The remainder of Building B's interior is largely unknown due to later disturbances. Wall 41 as well as thin curved wall 60 were built in LH III C or later; they may have been part of Building B, but they also may postdate it. The interior space of Building B south of wall 5 was much disturbed in the Protoegeometric period by the construction of apsidal Building A. We have not yet found a single trace of Building B's floor below the apse of Building A, but have not finished excavating there.

A *terminus ad or post quem* of LH III C Early for the construction of Building B is provided by the LH III C Early date of the latest pottery fragments found below a cobbled surface bordering Building B on the west (RUTTER 2007, 289). The northern part of west wall 3 of Building B had been set against this surface as a terrace wall. Further to the south, the gaps between the large stones on top of the Prepalatial pebbled street were filled some time in the LH III C period, possibly also in the Early subphase, and a rough earthen surface with gravel and cobble patches was laid on top of the large stones, forming a broad straight road about 3 m wide, tapering to the south – a poorer successor to the carefully constructed pebbled Prepalatial street below. Also elsewhere in the settlement, LH III C walls often were built on top of earlier, Prepalatial, walls.

The LH III C settlement experienced two or three architectural phases, and thus appears to have been relatively long-lived. It is unfortunate that none of the settlement remains can be dated to a specific subphase of the LH III C period, since they do not have securely datable floor deposits. With its rectilinear buildings, straight road, and dense urban character, the settlement at Mitrou is comparable to other LH III C settlements such as Kynos (Pyrgos Livanton), Lefkandi, Tiryns, and Koukounaries on Paros (DAKORONIA – KOUNOUKLAS this volume. – POPHAM – EVELY – SACKETT 2006. – SHERRATT 2006. – CRIELAARD 2006, 280–281. – MARAN 2004. – DEGER-JALKOTZY 1991, 21. – SCHILARDI 1984).

The resumption of the Prepalatial settlement pattern and its monumental building at Mitrou after a hiatus of about 170 years is remarkable. It is possible that the LH III C inhabitants and their leadership merely made opportunistic use of the visible ruins. However, their

adherence to the locations of the road and the most prominent building of the settlement suggests something more. At least in the excavated area, a memory may have been maintained of property boundaries and settlement organization. Building B may well represent a conscious effort to revive Prepalatial monumental Building D, belonging to a period that had been so flourishing at Mitrou. This effort would be comparable to apparent revivals of the palatial period observed at other LH III C sites, such as Tiryns (Building T, etc.) and Pteleon (reuse of tholoi), and interpreted by modern scholars as attempts by rising post-palatial political elites to legitimize their status (DEGER-JALKOTZY 1995, 376. – CRIELAARD 2006, 281. – MARAN 2006). The widespread reuse of older walls at Mitrou contrasts sharply with findings at Kynos and Lefkandi. At Kynos, LH III C structures had a different orientation from their LH III B2 predecessors (DAKORONIA 2002, 42–43. – For more references, see VAN DE MOORTELT 2007, note 15). At Lefkandi, the LH III C settlement seldom reused the walls of the underlying LH III B occupation (SHERRATT 2006, 304–305. – POPHAM – EVELY – SACKETT 2006, 8). At both sites the break in architectural continuity is not well understood, but could reflect a change in society. In spite of the limited exposure of palatial-period remains at Mitrou, Kynos, and Lefkandi, it seems safe to conclude that all three Euboean-Gulf settlements were much more substantial and flourishing in the LH III C period than in the palatial period. These findings support Deger-Jalkotzy's conclusion that regions outside the Mycenaean core area, such as East Lokris, Phokis, Attika, many Aegean islands, and Achaia, revived after the fall of the Mycenaean palaces, having been freed from their domination (DEGER-JALKOTZY 1991, 21. – DEGER-JALKOTZY 1995, 375).

After Building B went out of use in LH III C Middle or Late, a small rectangular structure, which we call Building C, was constructed over its northwest corner. It measures 2.7×2.4 m on the exterior and 2.1×1.42 m on the interior. Its rubble walls are about 0.50 m wide and only one course high; they do not have exterior faces. Pottery fragments in the fill below its earth and pebble floor date its construction to LH III C Late. Even though we are not certain about its function, it is clear that Building C was not an ordinary domestic structure but had a special use. Its interior was found filled with multiple layers of a rather homogeneous loose dark brown soil alternating with harder lenses containing occasional fragments of mudbrick, pebbles, and limestone as well as patches of dark greasy sediments. This appears to represent a deliberate fill that occasionally was trampled down; it is quite different from the harder pale disintegrated mudbrick mixed with architectural fragments usually encountered in and around ruined buildings. Careful stratigraphic excavation in 2007 on the west side of Building C suggests that this structure had been covered by a mound of earth and cobble-sized stones (0.065 – 0.25 m), which had been disturbed by later plowing.

The floor of Building C (ca. +5.52/5.55) was made of clay packed with pebbles and potsherds. Standing on top of this floor in the southwest corner of the structure was a wheelmade cooking pot (LN784-018-014) covered with the base fragment of a large painted krater as a lid. It held the thighbones of a young pig, three to five months old, placed on top of the neatly stacked thighbones of four foetal piglets (Fig. 5; VAN DE MOORTELT – ZAHOU 2006, 44, fig. 6; identification Thanos Webb).

Scattered in the fill and lying on the floor were 22 handmade unburnished miniature vases as well as a large pithos fragment (LO784-048-054) that may have served as a tray (cf. RUTTER 2007, 295–296, figs. 6–9). Some miniature vases are open shapes imitating LH III C Middle shapes (LIS this volume). The following is a preliminary list (Fig. 6):

- 1 two-handled kylix (LO784-048-057)
- 3 pedestal-footed kalathoi with two horizontal handles (LN784-018-023, LO784-041-013, and LO784-048-044)
- 1 deep cup with vertical handle (LO784-048-050)

- 3 shallow bowls with two horizontal handles (LN784-018-016, LN784-018-019, and LO784-048-047)
- 2 deep one-handled bowls (LO784-048-036, LO784-048-041)
- 3 shallow bowls with broken handles (LO784-048-040, LO784-048-042, and LO784-050-015)
- 3 deeper bowls with broken handles (LO784-048-043, LO784-048-048, and LO784-048-059)
- 4 ring-based bowls with one handle (LO784-041-012, LO784-048-037, LO784-048-055, and LO784-048-056)
- 1 small tray (LN784-018-026)
- 1 round-bottomed dipper with high-swung handle (LO784-048-011)

A small fragment of a miniature handmade deep cup or kylix with vertical loop handle (LO784-013-013) was found to the south of Building C, and two largely preserved deep bowls (LO785-005-014 and LO785-030-014) as well as a small fragment of another bowl (LN786-005-013) were found to the north. Because of their similarity to the miniature vases from Building C and their proximity to this structure, they probably came from Building C, and were dragged here by later plowing. In this interpretation, Building C would have held 26 miniature vases. Only one non-pottery artifact was recovered from inside the structure: a bone awl (LO784-041-014) found near the east entrance. Its function in this context is unknown.

Consisting of drinking and serving vessels, some stacked together, the miniature vases of Building C are likely to have had a special use. Most were found distributed into two groups, each of which contained a pedestaled kalathos and several shallow and deeper bowls (Fig. 7). The northern group in addition contained a deep cup with vertical handle, and the group to the south a kylix as well as a small tray, the pithos fragment, and the wheelmade cooking pot with the piglet bones. This distribution may well be indicative of a group ritual in which the bowls were used by the majority of participants, and the kylix, deep cup, and kalathoi, because of their more prominent shapes and relative rarity, by people who were in some respect more important. Alternatively, these more prominent vessels may have been used for drinking and the bowls for serving food. Other interpretations are conceivable as well. Samples have been taken from all these vases for residue analysis, which we hope will throw more light on their use. Animal bones and shells were found scattered in the fill within Building C as well as in the tumulus fill to the west, but they have not yet been analyzed. The demise and filling in of Building C are dated to an early stage of LH III C Late by the shapes of some of the miniature vases as well as by the latest associated pottery fragments (LIS this volume).

Below Building C we found a partial earthen surface (at ca. +5.45) of unknown use, disturbed by foundation trenches for the construction of the north and south walls of Building C. Below this earlier surface was a small pottery deposit sitting on a thin layer of earth (at ca. +5.25) at the foot of a stepped stone structure of unknown use (Fig. 8). This deposit consisted of a handmade handled bowl of regular size (LO784-408-011), a pair of similar bowls – one set as a lid on the other (LO784-408-012 and LO784-408-013), as well as a large fragment of a large cooking pot (LO784-408-014) of non-standard shape. It is remarkable that these vases are similar in style to the vases found on top of Building C's floor, but they are consistently larger. The significance of this deposit and the size of its vases is not yet understood.

Suggestive of a close relationship between the two deposits is the fact that the cooking pot fragment from this lower deposit joins with a fragment (LO784-048-052) found on top of the earthen floor of Building C (at +5.53). A small ceramic handle found in the earth below the level of these four vases (at +5.15/5.25, in LO784-410) likewise joins with one of the miniature bowls (LO784-041-012) found above Building C's floor (+5.66/5.76), some 40 to 60 cm higher. It is obvious that the bowl and the cooking pot had broken before the earthen surface at ca. +5.45 and the floor of Building C at +5.52/5.55 had been laid. The joins as well as the similar style of the vases below the lower surface and on top of the floor of Building C indicate that the

deposition of the fill and the vases at the foot of the stepped stone structure as well as the laying of the earthen surface and the construction and abandonment of Building C happened in a relatively short time. Several more miniature bowls of the floor deposit were found with broken-off handles. It is possible that the handles had been removed deliberately so that the bowls could be stacked together more easily. The use of Building C and of the stepped stone structure below it is still unknown, but it is possible that they had a funerary function in view of the changes that took place in the vicinity at this time or soon afterwards.

To the west, north, and east of Building C, the LH III C settlement went out of use and became a burial ground. This change in spatial use began before the end of the LH III C period. Relatively few of the graves can be dated with precision, however, and thus we do not know yet whether this transformation happened rapidly or was a gradual process continuing in the Early, Middle, and Late Protogeometric phases. At the end of the 2006 excavation season we had excavated 20 cist graves of the LH III C through Late Protogeometric phases, mostly belonging to children; only three graves contained adults (Fig. 3). Grave goods were seldom present and were limited primarily to a few clay vessels and sometimes one or two metal pins, a bronze coil, a bone tool, a polished pebble, and some shells. The earliest cist grave was found in the west scarp of trench LL786, ca. 15 m northwest of Building C, and belonged to an infant (grave 5). It was only partially excavated and is dated by a cup found inside it to LH III C Late (Fig. 9; *Lis* this volume). No Attic Submycenaean pottery has been found in any of the graves, but a fragment of a painted stirrup jar painted in this style was found in the plow zone over Building A and presumably comes from a grave (RUTTER 2007, 295, fig. 10). Four cist graves can be dated by their pottery to the Middle Protogeometric phase (graves 1, 3, 4, 13), and two to the Late Protogeometric phase (graves 12, 18). Cist grave 11 was found without pottery, but is datable to the Middle Protogeometric phase by the latest pottery fragments found among the wedging stones outside it. Cist grave 26 contained 6 intact vases, but they have not yet been dated. The remaining 11 cist graves cannot be dated more closely than LH III C/Protogeometric. Three of these (graves 2, 6, 17) as well as Middle Protogeometric cist grave 11 intrude upon LH III C walls and must postdate those structures.

Unlike the settlement, the area of Building B was not intruded upon by graves. Instead, apsidal Building A was constructed inside the southern room of Building B. Whereas initially we believed that Building A continued to the southwest of our excavation area (VAN DE MOORTEL – ZAHOU 2006, 44–45), we now know that only its apsidal part is preserved, and that the remains to its southwest belong to a later structure, Late Protogeometric Building E. Building A is 6.9 m wide, and its apsidal wall is 0.60 m thick. The apse was closed off with two transverse rows of wooden supports resting on large rectangular stone bases, 0.30 m to 0.60 m long. Two of the bases show pecking marks in a rectangular pattern, indicating that these wooden supports were ca. 0.15 × 0.175 m in section. The construction of Building A is tentatively dated by *B. Lis* to the Early Protogeometric phase because Early Protogeometric pottery, including mendable vases, were found together with Middle Protogeometric pottery in disturbed sediments below the apse – the reasoning being that this Early Protogeometric pottery must derive from the construction and first phase of Building A. There is evidence for two major architectural phases. In the first phase only one support base (sb 1) was in use, located centrally in the apse over an earlier, rounded stone base of uncertain date. During the second architectural phase, which took place in the Middle Protogeometric phase, the remainder of the rectangular bases were put in place. Building A went out of use either still in the Middle Protogeometric phase or early in the Late Protogeometric phase, leaving a substantial floor deposit on its earthen floor (Rückl: pers. com.).

It is possible that there are more apsidal structures located south of Building A. Our 2003 electrical resistivity survey found curved walls here that presumably belong to apsidal buildings (TSOKAS *ET AL.* forthcoming). Since these remains are located outside our present excavation area, we do not yet know their date for certain. However, from their thick black lines it appears

that they are located close to the surface, and thus they may be Protogeometric in date. Pottery units recovered by our intensive, close-grained surface survey in the southern part of this area consistently include Protogeometric fragments, supporting the hypothetical late date of these structures. Thus we can say that Mitrou underwent a change from dense urban occupation with orthogonal structures in the final stage of the Late Bronze Age to a settlement with at least one apsidal building, and possibly several more, scattered apsidal structures in the Early Iron Age. Comparable transformations have been observed at Lefkandi, Nichoria, Asine, and elsewhere (MAZARAKIS-AINIAN 1997, 396. – LEMOS 2002, 149–150. – CRIELAARD 2006, 285. – POPHAM – SACKETT 1979/80, 23–25. – COULSON 1983. – McDONALD – COULSON 1983, 322–328). It remains to be seen whether this change at the transition from the Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age represents the influx of a new population or can be explained by local dynamics. In future analyses we will pay close attention to changes in behavioral patterns related to *all* aspects of life and death at Mitrou in hopes of answering this question.

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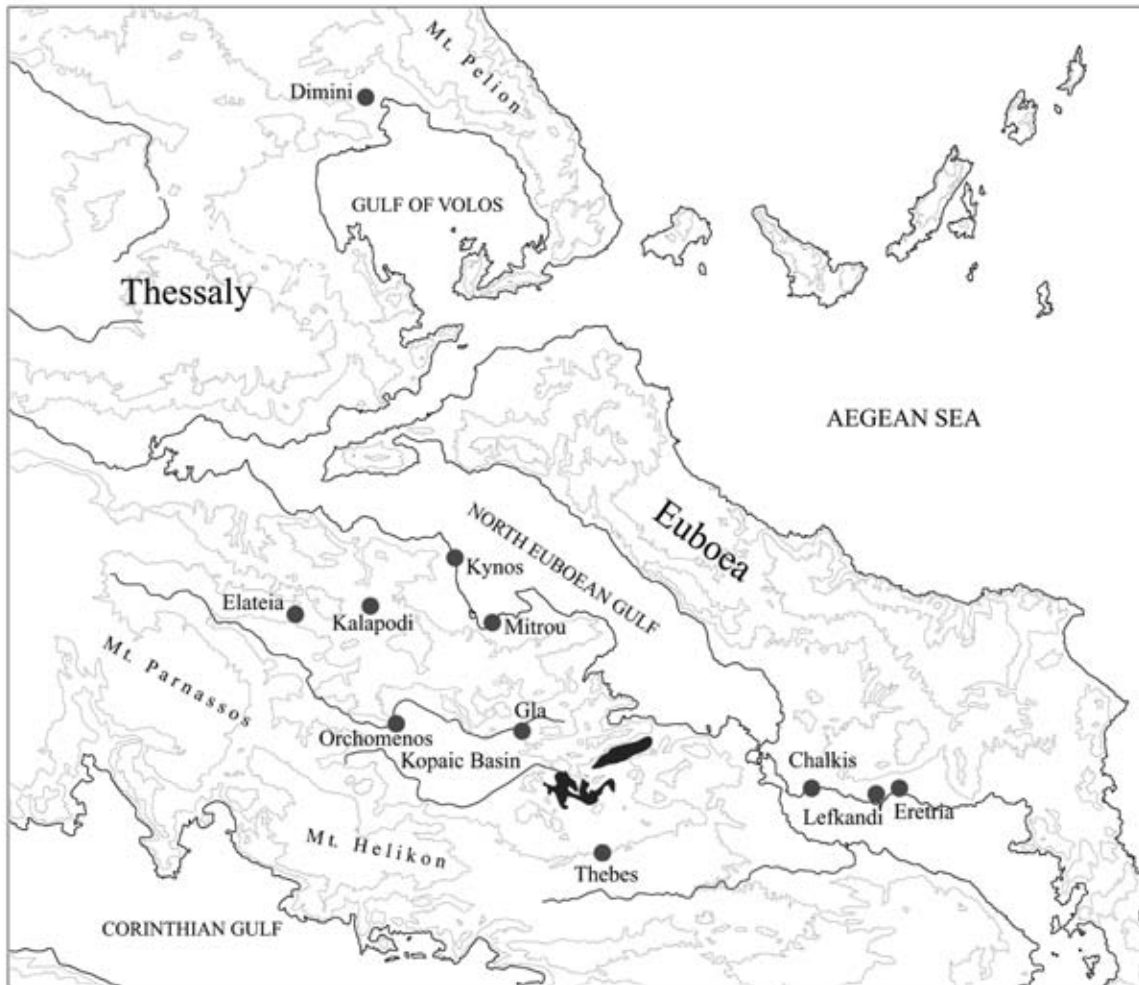


Fig. 1 Map of Central Greece with Mitrou and major Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age sites (M. Kramer-Hajós)



Fig. 2 Balloon photo of Mitrou islet after the 2006 excavation season. The northeast excavation area is the encircled part with trenches to the upper right of the center; the northwest excavation area is the encircled part in the olive grove (K. Xenikakis)

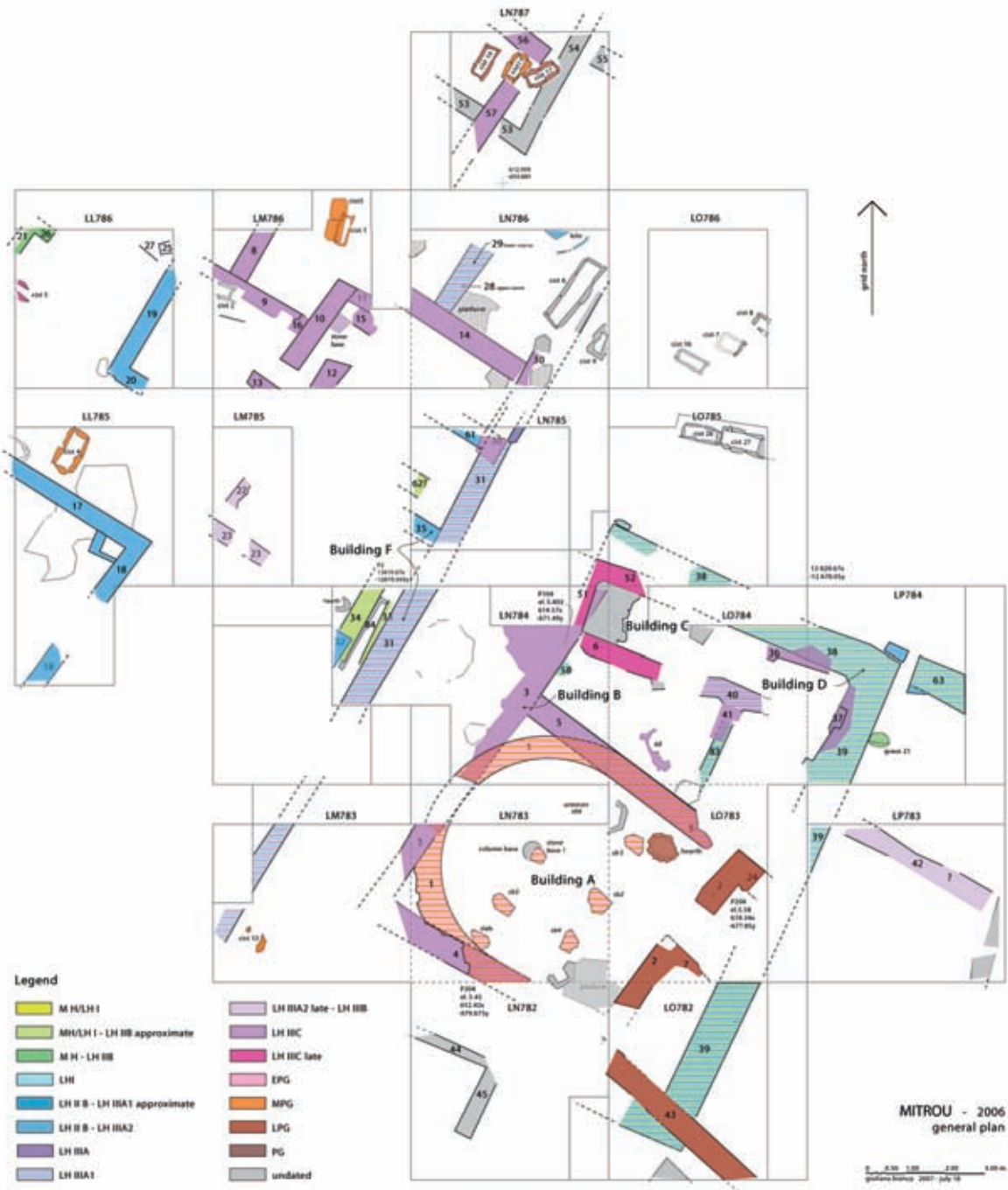


Fig. 3 Mitrou, northeast excavation area: 2006 site plan (G. Bianco)



Fig. 4 Balloon photo of the northeast excavation area after the 2006 excavation season; trenches excavated in 2005 and not reopened in 2006 have been pasted in. Building D is located in the center and Building F in the far left of the excavated area; in-between is the 3-m wide pebbled street filled with wall blocks from Building D. On top of Building D are later Buildings B, C, A, and E, cf. architectural plan of Fig. 3 (K. Xenikakis)



Fig. 5 The stacked thighbones of 5 piglets found inside cooking pot LN784-018-014 (T. Dabney)

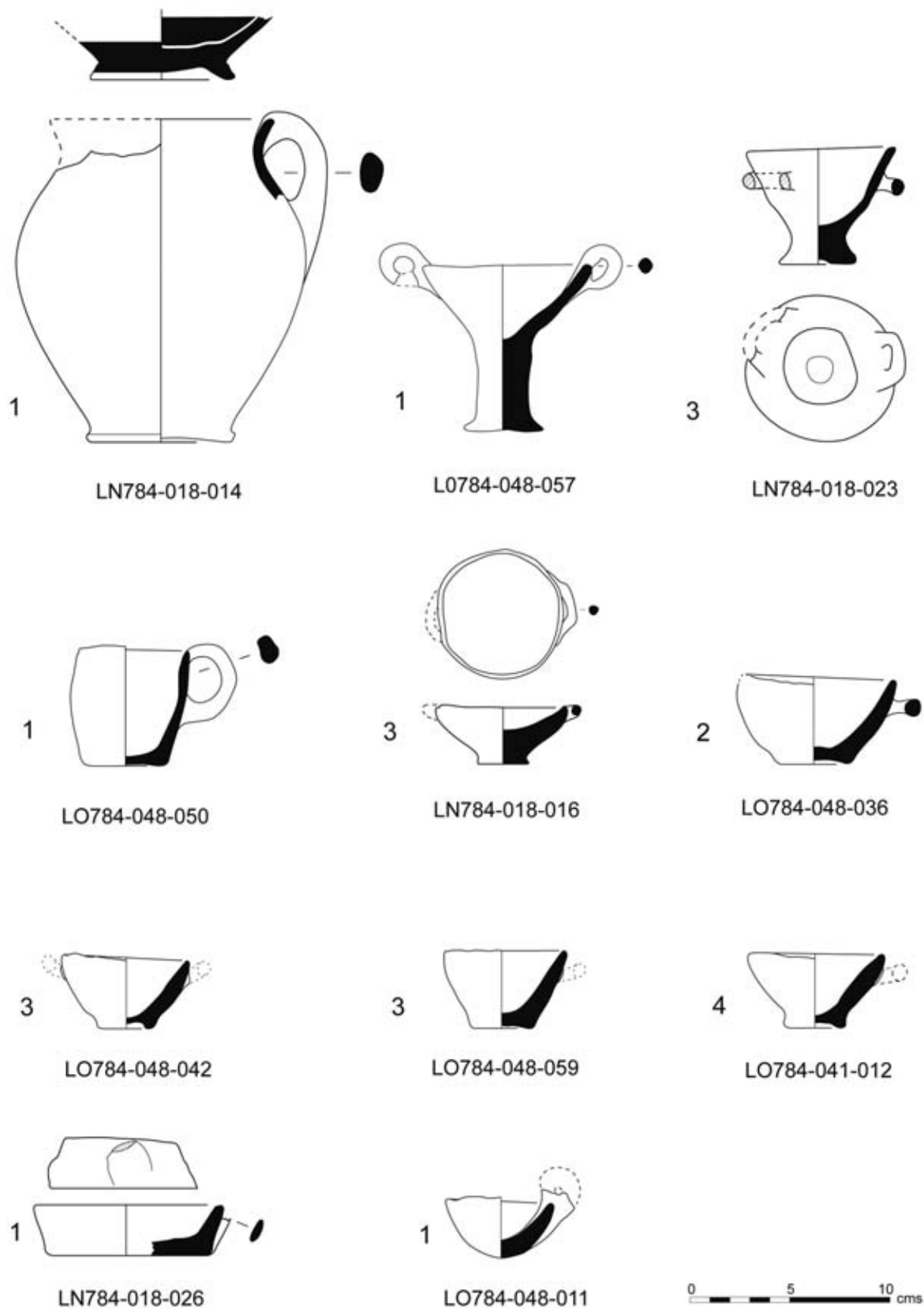


Fig. 6 Preliminary drawings of vase shapes found in Building C (drawn by T. Ross, R. Docsan, N. Wright; inked by T. Ross)

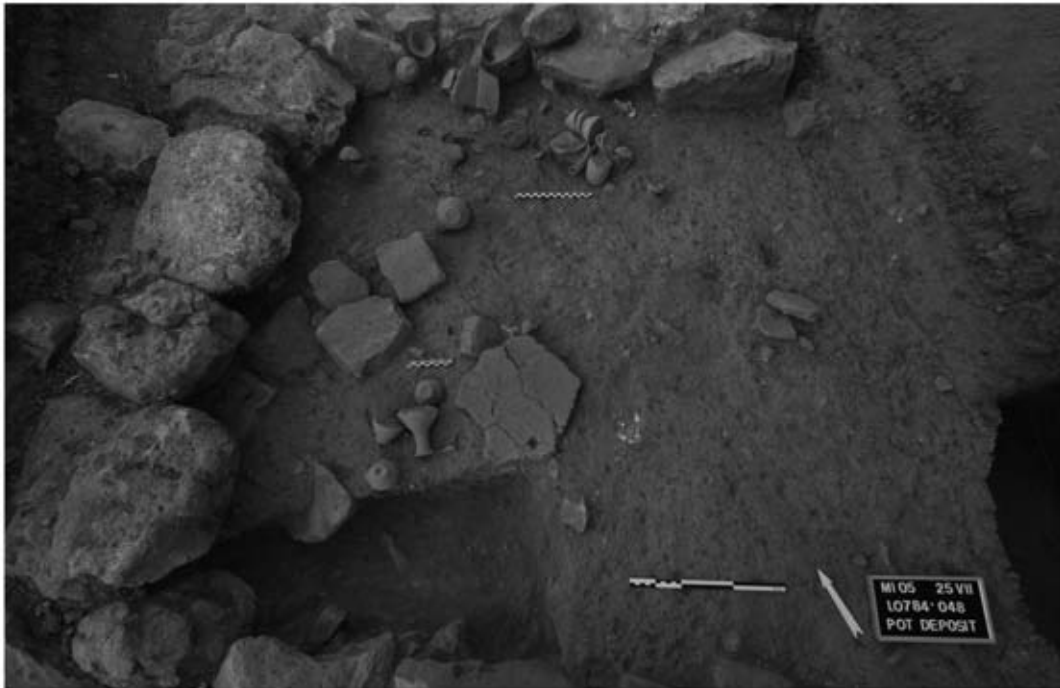


Fig. 7 Interior of Building C with groups of miniature vases as well as pithos fragment possibly reused as a tray. Photo taken from the south, during the 2005 excavation. The gap in the southwest corner represents an area of Building C excavated in 2004; here we found the cooking pot with piglet bones, the small tray, and two shallow bowls with horizontal handles (T. Dabney)



Fig. 8 Deposit of regular-sized handmade bowls and cooking pot fragment at the foot of the stepped stone structure below Building C, seen from the southeast (A. Panagiotou)



Fig. 9 Late Helladic III C Late cup LL786-030-011 from cist grave 5 (drawn and inked by T. Ross)