



EBAP 2016

ANCIENT ELEON

Emily Candell | AIA Report

Thanks to the Archaeological Institute of America and Jane Waldbaum, I was able to join the Eastern Boeotia Archaeological Project for their 2016 season in Greece. Under Dr. Brendan Burke of the University of Victoria and Dr. Bryans Burns of Wellesley College, the project is studying remnants of three time periods on site—the Mycenaean Period, the late Archaic/early Classical period, and the Frankish period—, concentrating on the post-palatial Mycenaean settlement found here (ca. 1100 BC) and how it interacted with nearby cities, particularly the main power center of Thebes. The main focus for the last two years has been a 17th century BC Mycenaean funerary complex, dubbed the Blue Stone Structure (BSS) for the polished blue limestone around the perimeter of the structure.

In 2015, 4 cist tombs were excavated within the BSS, one of which seems to have been disturbed in antiquity. There were cobble platforms built atop the tombs, on top of which was clay-packing, suggesting a tumulus of approximately ten meters in diameter. Two secondary walls in the middle of the BSS seem to have been support for the tumulus. After consulting our Greek colleagues, the two supporting walls were removed this season in preparation for excavating below a portion of the cobblestone.

However, to a student such as myself, the basics of excavation were to be taught before such work began. Typically, we left Dilesi on the coast at 6 am to beat the heat and reach the site at Arma by 6:30 am, where we worked till 1 pm. Adjacent to Tanagra, a site well-known for its larnakes excavated in the 1960s, Arma's, or ancient Eleon's, most prominent archaeological feature is the Archaic polygonal wall located south of the acropolis. It was this wall that greeted the team early every morning to remind us of just how impressive the past could be. After lunch and an afternoon break, we washed and analyzed pottery back in Dilesi from 5-7 pm. While I enjoyed the field work, pottery washing became a great opportunity to learn about ceramics and the specific periods of the site.



The Archaic polygonal wall

On site, the main objective of the 2016 season was to identify the perimeter of the Blue Stone Structure, and 2016's new trenches, NWA1d and NEA1c, were opened with the expectation that we would find and follow the structure's outline as well as other possible tombs. Within the first weeks of the season, the other students and I learned how to

excavate from surface level with these new trenches and the careful procedure of looking for soil changes or other notable differences such as a concentration of pottery or tile. Our trench supervisors, Joe and Uwe, carefully explained each level as we came across them. In NEA1c, closer to the surface, we found a huge medieval floor made of tiles and clay; later we found a pebble and plaster/limestone layer. We learned to properly clean, photograph, and document each locus before continuing to excavate, as well as properly bagging the finds associated with the area and level. Eventually, we came across the continuation of the cobble platform in NEA1c and the west wall of the BSS in NWA1d. However, both the east wall and the corner of the structure seemed to continue northeast, and NEA1a and NEA1d were opened. NEA1d was densely packed with rocks, suggesting tumulus packing and supporting the theory of the tumulus extending around the BSS. However, not only did it take brainpower to reach this conclusion, but days of removing rocks from the rock garden, as we lovingly called it. We found it necessary to rotate in and out of the trench as the physical exertion was tremendous compared to NEA1c's and later NEA1a's locating of surfaces and cleaning. We were rewarded for the effort.



The process of digging the rock garden, the camaraderie developed through shared struggle, and the fruit of our labor—a cobble platform.

Nearly a meter through the rocks, we found the polished blue stones capping the BSS's outer wall. However, the wall continued north into the baulk; so, with very little time left, we opened 2.5 m x 5 m trench, NEA1b. The process went quickly as we had excavated NEA1d and knew where each locus change happened and what to expect, and finally we found what appeared to be the corner of the structure, making it about 8 x 18 meters. Similar to the clay tumulus-packing found around the south of the BSS, yellow clay "cakes", as our architect Giuliana Bianco called them, appeared north of the structure as well.



Nearly two meters in depth. At the bottom of the pit, we reached our objective: the corner of the Blue Stone Structure

While the majority of the manpower was being used to excavate the rock pit, a smaller group worked in SEA1c where the two tumulus-supporting walls had been removed. They painstakingly uncovered a massive capstone, fractured in several places, and a huge orthostate over a meter in height, apparently concealed in one of the supporting walls, just west of the capstone. After being cleaned, the capstone was carefully removed to reveal a deep shaft tomb with stone slab walls, similar to the previous year's tombs, but much larger. One of last year's graves that was assumed to be disturbed in antiquity appeared to be not a tomb at all, but rather an eastern entrance to this much larger shaft tomb. Unsurprisingly, our 7-8 hour days became 12-13 hours as the end of the season drew near. Whereas earlier in the season I became adept with the pickax, handpick, triangle and trowel, now we learned to plot bones within the tomb, give identification numbers to each, and correctly package the human remains from 3000 years ago. The co-mingled shaft tomb housed several different individuals piled in the southern corner along with fully intact pots, a bronze dagger, what is suspected to be an ivory sword pommel, and few pottery sherds. The northern area of the tomb had three articulated skeletons near the east entrance.

Not only is the sheer size of the burial structure amazing, the way in which it was revered and monumentalized by later generations is unique. The miniature kylix vessels (with no obvious function except votive) and the female figurines found by the hundreds in proximity with the structure suggest that a cult following developed in Eleon.

Most frequently, friends and family ask me what my favorite aspect of the dig was. I have been unable to separate the sweaty work from the intense card game tournaments during afternoon break, or the speculating about the function of a wall on site from the discussion on archaeological theories with the masters' students over a cup of Greek coffee. From pottery washing to survey photography, I enjoyed and learned as much as possible about on-site archaeology and excavation.

Throughout the season, Brendan stressed the importance of the process and its influence on our understanding of the past; and although there is an incredible distance in time and space between the Early Mycenaeans and us, appreciation of their culture and practices brings them into close perspective. Thank you again for the opportunity to “scratch the surface” of excavation.



Alex removing the ivory from the tomb



One of the matte-painted vertical ring handled banded vessels from the tomb



Me charting bones as Nick excavates



Austen and Jess giving ID numbers and wrapping bones fragments