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## Koutroulou Magoula in central Greece: from the Neolithic to the present

Yannis Hamilakis & Nina Kyparissi-Apostolika

with contributions from Tom Loughlin, Vasilis Tsamis, James Cole, Constantinos Papadopoulos & Nicolas Zorzin

### Introduction

The aim of this article is to introduce a new, inter-disciplinary and international, long-term research project, the Koutroulou Magoula Archaeology and Archaeological Ethnography Project, to outline its aims and report on some of its results.

Koutroulou Magoula is a tell site on the south-western edge of the Thessalian plain in central Greece, 2.5km south of the modern town of Neo Monastiri in Fthiotida (Figure 1). It is part of a rich archaeological landscape, in which dozens of Neolithic tells feature prominently. Systematic archaeological work on the site, directed by Kyparissi-Apostolika, started in 2001 and continued in the 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008 and 2009 seasons (Kyparissi-Apostolika 2006). This revealed an extensive, finds-rich occupation, dated primarily to the Middle Neolithic (5800–5300 BC, based on conventional chronology). The site's architectural features and material culture are remarkably elaborate and well preserved. Informally since 2009 and more formally since 2010, work on site has continued within the Koutroulou Magoula Archaeology and Archaeological Ethnography Project, directed by Kyparissi-Apostolika and Hamilakis.



Figure 1. Location map.  
*Click to enlarge.*

### Objectives

The main aims of the project are:

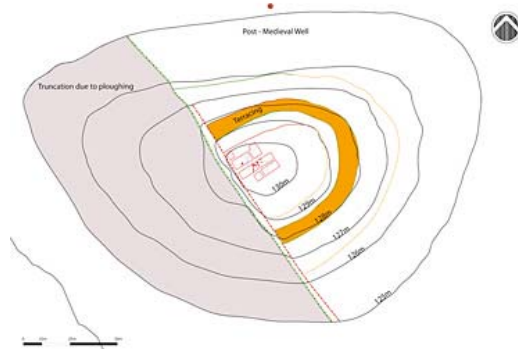
- To understand the material and social life of a Middle Neolithic community, through the recovery and detailed study of architecture, artefacts, animal and plant remains, soil, sediments and other biota
- To study the embodied and sensory ways through which this community produced material memory, place, time and temporality
- To situate this community in the broader social and physical landscape, and compare its mode of material engagement with other communities nearby
- To examine the role and meanings of the material archaeological past and of archaeological practices amongst the modern communities of the area, through an in-depth archaeological ethnography project.

Hence a range of investigations was initiated, including topographical and archaeological survey, geophysical prospection, stratigraphic excavation (using a combination of 'single context' and diary-based recording methods) and analyses (soil micromorphology and geo-archaeological work, organic residue analysis, archaeobotanical, zooarchaeological and osteoarchaeological study, in addition to more conventional methods) as well as archaeological ethnography and community-based initiatives.

### Preliminary results

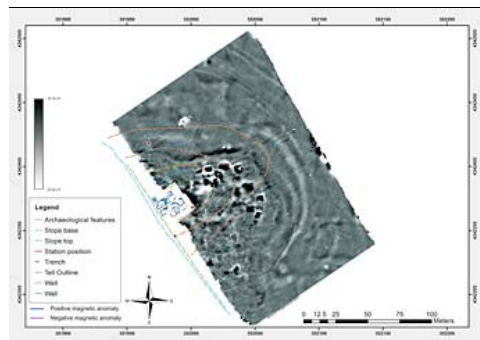
The tell of Koutroulou Magoula is 206m long and 182m wide, rising (at 130.7m asl) 6.6m above the surrounding fields. With an overall area of c. 3.7ha, it is much larger—almost twice as large—than most other tell sites in Greece, which "rarely exceed 2ha" (Kotsakis 1999: 67). Nearly half the mound (the western part) has been destroyed by agricultural activity. Because of this, a 1.7m high and 169m long step extends across the site. Surface examination revealed that occupation in the destroyed western part of the site was more extensive than in the eastern part. The topographical survey also revealed evidence for terracing and retaining walls on the north, east and south sides. More specifically, the mound was probably constructed in three levels of terracing and a retaining wall was likely to have been present at least on the north side (Figure 2).

Support for the existence of these topographical features was provided by the geophysical (magnetometer) survey conducted in



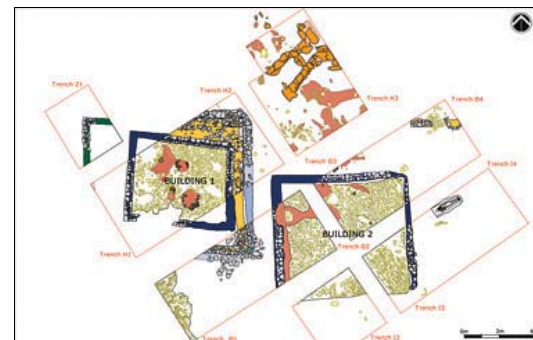
**Figure 2.** The topography of Koutroulou Magoula ( V. Tsamis).

[Click to enlarge.](#)



**Figure 3.** The results of the magnetometer survey carried out in January 2012; the black rounded or semi-circular spots at the centre may represent buildings, the black linear feature on the north and east may have to do with a terracing wall, and the white, curvilinear features on the north, east and south may represent surrounding ditches (J. Cole).

[Click to enlarge.](#)



**Figure 4.** Site plan; the location of the trenches and the architectural and others features unearthed to date (V. Tsamis).

[Click to enlarge.](#)

To date, excavation has revealed cultural layers at least 2.48m deep. Two rectangular buildings have been uncovered entirely, and several others partially (Figure 4). Building 1 preserves two or possibly three previous building phases, while the traces of an additional, more recent Middle Neolithic phase were removed by the excavators in 2001 due to its fragmentary and partly destroyed state. Successive buildings were rebuilt on the same spot, often respecting previous orientations (Figure 5). Walls have stone foundations with mudbricks for the upper structure, but in some cases, such as in the earlier phases of Building 1, stone walls were preserved to a height of over one metre, raising the possibility of walls entirely built of stone. Different phases used stones of different colour and texture (white, soft limestone *versus* grey, angular and harder limestone), which would have had a distinctive aesthetic and sensorial impact if left exposed. Mud floors are laid out over paved underfloor deposits constructed of small, flat or semi-rounded stones. Building 2 (7.2 x 6.4m) sits on the highest point of the tell; it was almost empty of finds and had its southern wall completely removed, possibly deliberately destroyed during the Neolithic. Spaces between buildings contained hearths and other structures, and were extremely rich in finds, including food remains and feasting paraphernalia. A paved courtyard was uncovered south of Building 1.



**Figure 5.** Building 1, stone foundations of successive building phases.

[Click to enlarge.](#)

Amongst the finds, over 200 clay figurines have been recorded to date, one of the highest densities on any Neolithic site in the Balkans at least. They are extremely elaborate, often preserving incised and painted decoration. No single type dominates, the gender is not always denoted, and in several cases intentionally hybrid forms have been created, especially human-bird hybrids, making the distinction between 'anthropomorphic' and 'zoomorphic' problematic (Figures 6–8). Figurines are found in all kinds of context, although in some cases there appears to be an association with structural features such as walls and postholes. Four 'house models' have also been recovered. Scattered, disarticulated human bones were often found mixed with 'domestic' finds inside and outside buildings.



**Figure 6.** Middle Neolithic clay figurine *in situ*, on the top of the stone foundations of a wall.  
*Click to enlarge.*



**Figure 7.** Middle Neolithic clay figurines.  
*Click to enlarge.*

The 2011 excavation season confirmed that the site was used after the Neolithic: a corridor-like feature in trench H3 appears to belong to later prehistoric or historic periods, and an inhumation (Figure 4) containing a complete skeleton of a young woman in extended position was AMS-dated to cal AD 1040–1220 ( $2\sigma$ ), a find that complements earlier finds such as a twelfth-century AD coin and medieval pottery.



**Figure 8.** Middle Neolithic clay figurine.  
*Click to enlarge.*



**Figure 9.** The theatrical performance staged on site at the end of the 2011 season (A. Kundi).  
*Click to enlarge.*

The project gives equal consideration to archaeological ethnography and community archaeology. Archaeological ethnography was part of the project from the start, not an afterthought. Since 2009 archaeological ethnographers and social anthropologists have been exploring local perceptions of the site and of archaeological activity as well as the broader contemporary conceptions of materiality and time. In addition to open community meetings and public and school visits, we ended the 2011 excavation season with a site-specific theatrical performance, scripted during the season and inspired by its archaeological and ethnographic findings (Figure 9). The performance, entitled *To Geuma* (The Meal), ended appropriately with a large feast: a local dish was shared next to the trenches with hundreds of participants from the surrounding villages, accompanied by music and dance (Hamilakis & Theou in press).

## Conclusion

While much Neolithic research in the Balkans and the Near East has concentrated on questions of 'origins' either of agriculture or of centralised authority and often follows a cultural evolutionist framework and a discourse of 'competition', the rich and elaborate site of Koutroulou Magoula offers the opportunity to enlarge the Neolithic research agenda through detailed examination of Neolithic materiality, temporality and social life. The site remained important in subsequent periods, and its position in the lives of contemporary local communities is being explored. Our work re-configures the site as a multi-temporal, open, shared space and an arena of present day social negotiations and encounters.

## Acknowledgements

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students from the University of Southampton (and occasionally from other institutions) have also contributed their hard labour. Finally, we are grateful to the people of Neo Monastiri and Vardali who have embraced this project with such warmth and enthusiasm, and have provided every necessary support.

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