Detailed Report Eastern Boeotia Archaeological Project 2015

On July 12, 2015 the Eastern Boeotia Archaeological Project (EBAP) concluded the fourth full six-week season of excavation at the site of ancient Eleon in the village of Arma (Figs 1 and 2). In 2011 we had a preliminary season to test the viability of excavation. Full seasons were conducted in 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015. This project is a *synergasia* between the CIG and Ephorate of Antiquities of Boeotia, under the co-direction of Brendan Burke (University of Victoria), Bryan Burns (Wellesley College) and Alexandra Charami (the Ephorate of Antiquities of Boeotia). Drs. Olga Kyriazi and Nikos Kontogiannis are also key partners in our research project. We are very grateful for the research funding we received in 2015 from an Insight Grant from the Social Sciences Humanities Research Council of Canada (#435-2012-0185), the Loeb Classical Library fund, and the Institute for Aegean Prehistory. The Canadian Institute in Greece has as always been very supportive of our work and facilitated much. We also appreciate the dedicated efforts of the students and affiliated scholars who contribute so much to our research.

Our project, in summary, addresses two major periods at the site of Eleon, located on an elevated plateau overlooking the Theban plain, *en route* to Chalkis and the Euboean Gulf. First, a prehistoric phase spans the Mycenaean period (Late Bronze Age), ca. 1700-1050 BC, during which connections between Eleon and the palace center at Thebes varied in intensity. We have material of early Mycenaean date (LH I-II) and substantial levels dating to the Late Helladic IIIB and IIIC sub phases. The best preserved settlement remains come from a burnt destruction level of the LH IIIC Early period. The site seems to be abandoned by the Early Iron Age. The earliest recovered material of the post-Bronze Age is Late Geometric Euboean pottery of the 8th c. BCE. Some of the earliest known types of Boeotian Bird bowls have been found (7th c. BCE), but Eleon itself seems not to be reoccupied in any substantial way until the 6th c. BCE based on the date of the earliest miniature vessels and terracotta figurines which are found in abundance. Also dating to the Archaic period is the construction of the large polygonal wall which is the most impressive monument at the site. The rich deposit of votive material indicates activity throughout the Classical period, followed by another long period of inactivity at the site until the Ottoman period, from which material survives in surface levels and deeper pits only. These finds date consistently to the 15th and 16th centuries CE, which could indicate a relatively late date for the stone tower whose remains mark the western end of the site, beyond our permitted area of excavation.

Excavations in 2015 (Figure 1) concentrated on the Blue Stone Structure located in the center of our study area. Some minor cleaning and clarifying excavation was conducted in the Northwest and Southwest. Study of a deep test trench along the polygonal wall helped establish a construction date for the wall. Some baulk walls remaining from previous seasons had become unstable and under the direction of the Ephorate we excavated these for further clarification of the stratigraphy, to stabilize the excavated areas and to create a better site presentation for any visitors.

Figure 1. Aerial of Ancient Eleon facing west. Polygonal wall is lower left curving to center. Blue Stone Structure is center, to right of smaller tree.

Blue Stone Structure (SW and SE)

In the 2014 season we uncovered complex architectural remains across units SWA1d and SEA1c (Figure 2). Three joining walls form the west, south, and east sides of a rectangular form that we refer to as the Blue Stone Structure, based on the polished blue limestone used to cap each wall (Figure 3). Immediately west in SWA1c we had excavated two Middle Helladic graves and found them to be opened and emptied long ago; careful excavation recovered small amounts of pottery, dated MH though Ottoman, and fragments of animal bone. Within the perimeter walls of flat blue stones are two cobbled surfaces at different elevations that were only partially uncovered in 2014 (as they continued into the northern baulk). Ceramics of the Middle Helladic and Late Helladic I periods were found in association with the BSS, indicating a very early Mycenaean date. Fragments of human bone recovered in a test pit suggested in 2014 that this enclosure contained burials.

Figure 2. Plan of ancient Eleon excavations 2015.

The identity of the BSS as an early Mycenaean funerary enclosure structure was confirmed in 2015 by the excavation of four cist graves concentrated within the southern portion. The relationship between the structure and individual burials in not entirely clear, but the tombs excavated so far seem to have been dug and built within the space established by the prior construction of the BSS. The four graves vary in their form and use. Our colleague, Professor Nick Herrmann, a specialist in Mycenaean burials, was able to be on site during the excavation of tomb contexts, and he will return in 2016 to assist with the broader investigation.

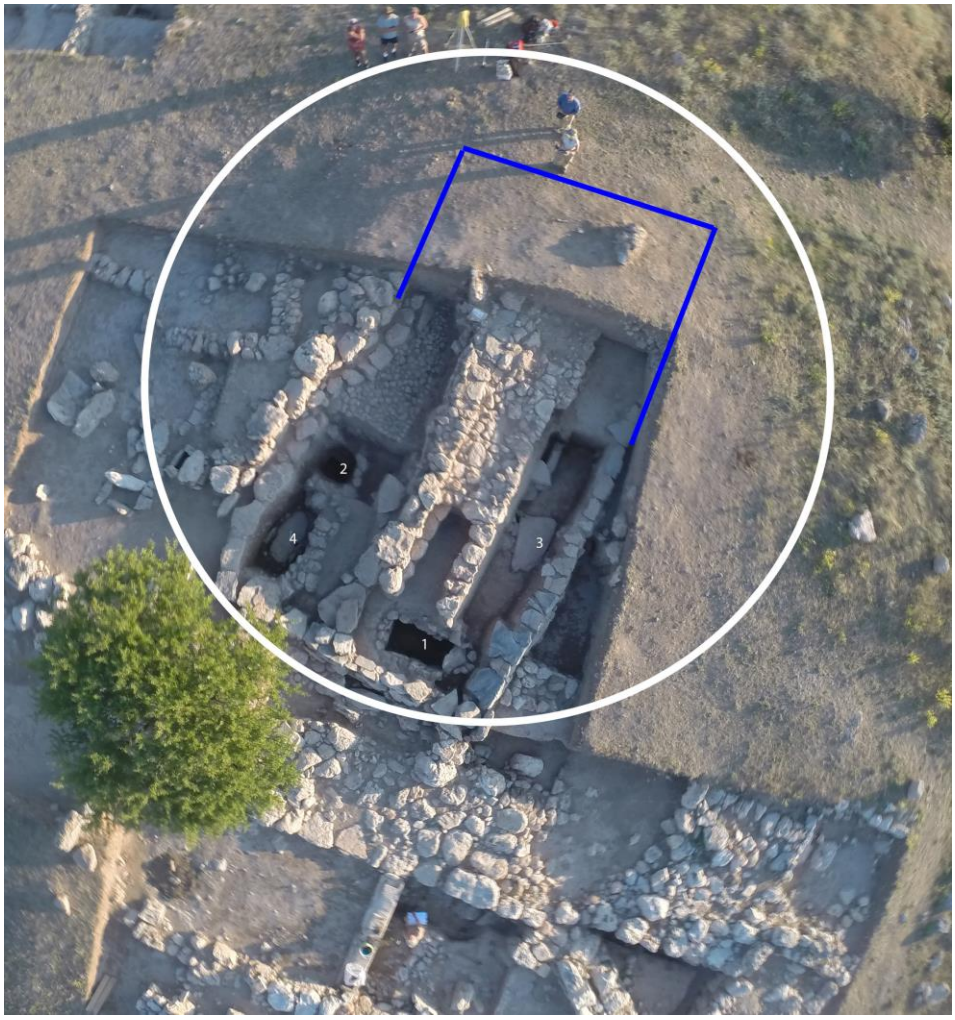

Figure 3. Blue Stone Structure showing estimated outline of tumulus (white), projected continuation (blue), and numbered burials excavated in 2015.

Tomb #1 (SEA1c; BSS tombs are numbered according to the sequence of excavation) is a large cist tomb (1.75 x 0.85 m) with built stone walls and capped by a red brecciated limestone that had broken in two. All human remains found in this tomb were in poor condition and very friable, but review of the osteological remains identified three people: a juvenile, an adult, and another adult of more advanced age, as indicated by degenerative joint disease. On the tomb floor in the northwest corner was a small kantharos with a burnished treatment typical of LH I, providing our best evidence to date burial depositions. The east wall of the tomb structure was displaced by the same disturbance that broke the cover stone.

Tomb #2 (in SWA1b) was formed of clay slabs and contained the intact skeleton of a child. Dental development indicates age 2-3. This burial is similar in form and age of child to one excavated in 2012 in the NW.

Tomb #3 (in SEA1a) seems to have been disturbed in antiquity. A pit led down to a displaced capping stone of large dimensions (1.40 x .90 m, 0.26 m thick) apparently turned 90 degrees from its original position. All soil found within was sieved through a 0.5 cm screen (as were all other

tomb deposits), but we recovered only meager human remains, including two teeth, a wrist bone, and an anklebone. The ceramic material within the fill included two post-Mycenaean fragments: two small sherds of 6th-century BCE style giving a *terminus post quem* for the tomb disturbance.

Tomb #4 (SWA1d) was another stone built cist tomb, toppled with a large capstone of friable sandstone (0.25 m thick). The degraded bones found within were identifiable enough to recognize a skeleton in a contracted, dorsal position. This individual may have been female (based on scale of bones), the only possible grave good recovered with this burial were two joining fragments of a coarsely made terracotta spindle whorl. From the preliminary analysis of the skeletal material, the identification of an extra metatarsal bone indicates the inclusion of a second individual's remains within the closed tomb.

The Early Mycenaean date of all the graves is further confirmed by ceramics found in association with the construction of a series of cobble-stone platforms built at various levels above the individual graves. Clay packing above these paved levels formed a mound over the mass of the Blue Stone Structure, suggesting a large tumulus of at least 10 meters in diameter.

The excavation of the Blue Stone Structure is not complete. Our expectation was to complete the excavation of the BSS in 2015 but this did not happen. The monumental size of the complex and the close density of the multiple early Mycenaean burials in just the southern part caused our work to proceed slowly but yielded good results. The central part of the enclosure, the area capped by the tumulus, still contains an intact cobble surface which very likely cover more Mycenaean burials. Additionally, since the eastern side wall of the BSS still continues into the northern baulk, we have yet to locate and excavate the presumed fourth, northern wall of the BSS. Unfortunately, our geophysical survey did not include this area of the site, but the surface topography suggests the mounded structure continues at least five meters further, for total dimensions over 8 x 15 meters.

Our Greek colleagues in the Ephorate have followed our excavation daily and it was agreed that work for the year should cease after we fully excavated the four burials. Both the structural remains and funerary material deserve continued focused attention and expert work. It is greatly hoped by us and the Ephorate that permission for excavation, as planned in last year's application, will be granted by the CIG permits committee. Together with our Ephorate colleagues we have concerns about a funerary structure that is not fully excavated, since it could potentially lead to illegal exploration at the site. The plan proposed last year to the CIG included 2016 as a season of excavation and this was approved.

SE: Polygonal wall trenches

Other work in 2015 was topographic survey of the polygonal wall that is exposed on the south and east area of the excavation (Figure 4). Select cleaning revealed new evidence to facilitate the detailed study of the construction history, masonry, and modifications of the wall, undertaken by Professor Ben Marsh (Bucknell University). The wall is located to the southeast of our current excavation area. It is well constructed and has for the most part been visible since antiquity,

although erosion from above has obscured some parts of the wall face and wall robbing has also damaged it. Remains of bastions are located at the north (less well preserved) and the south, where courses of the south bastion stand over 5 meters in height. The construction seems to have been done in one well-thought out building program, beginning in the south. Visible today is 84 meters of wall that follows the arc of a circle, with a projected radius of 41 meters.

Figure 4. Polygonal wall from the east.

The wall sits on stable soil, occasionally resting on bedrock with rubble fill. A *euthynteria* course of large, roughly cut stones is exposed from erosion under the south bastion and was exposed through excavation in a test trench. Above the *euthynteria* is a stepped leveling course which rises 4.7 meters from north to south, coinciding with the ascending topography of the mound. These steps in the leveling course are located approximately every 15 meters, and the typical rise measures 0.9 meters in height. Above the leveling course are vertically placed orthostates or panels which are cut in varying polygons, fitting tightly next to one another. Evidence for a course of coping stones atop the polygonal blocks has been identified. We imagine the complete wall to be 3.3 meters from leveling course to coping stone (Figure 5). The source of the stone used in the wall construction is local, and Dr. Marsh reports that it is unlikely to have been quarried, since no quarry channels have been found on the blocks or in the exposed bedrock around the site. Rather, it is thought that the stone used for the wall construction came from exposed boulders of the local limestone which were cut into panels and then shaped and put into place.

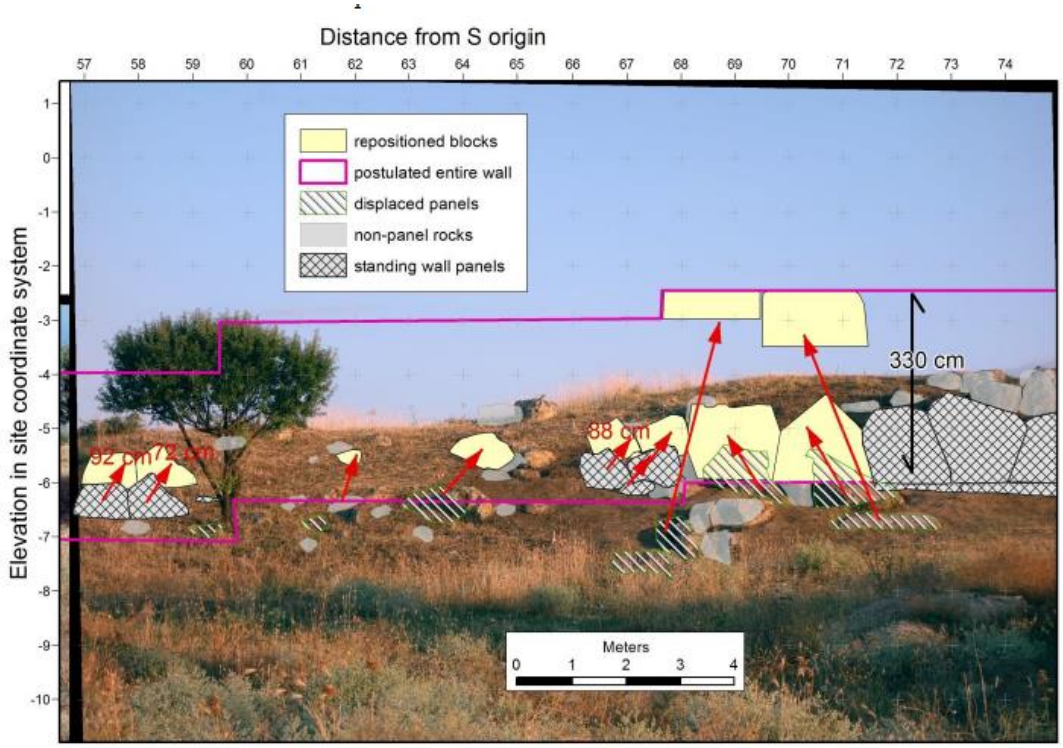

Figure 5. Estimated height of original wall.

A test excavation in the Southeast was opened in 2014 was completed in 2015 to find evidence for a more exact date of construction toward the end of the Archaic period. Excavating two meters' depth along the face of the wall was challenging and revealed foundations far deeper than expected. A lot of the material from the fill was Mycenaean ceramics which likely eroded in from above, but some dateable material was found that we can associate with the wall construction. The latest material in the foundation trench along the wall is late 6th century BCE and provides proof that the wall at ancient Eleon has been standing for at least 2500 years.

Our work in 2015 clarified some major questions about the site of ancient Eleon. For 2016 our priority is on analyzing material thus far excavated and to complete the excavation of the Blue Stone Structure. The four excavated early Mycenaean tombs conclusively demonstrate that this is a burial monument, and its form is unusual within the Mycenaean world. We, and our Greek colleagues, are concerned that this funerary structure is excavated as soon as possible. The form and early date of the construction project is unique in the Greek world and of great relevance to the emergence of Mycenaean elites and centers of power, such as the palace of Thebes.