

ON CAMPUS

UNC team excavates lost Greek city

By JANE STANCILL, Staff Writer

CHAPEL HILL - A team of archaeologists headed by a UNC-Chapel Hill researcher has unearthed a lost city on the Greek island of Crete -- a rare find that will lead to a better understanding of a "silent period" of Cretan history about the 6th century B.C.

The dig began in June under the direction of Donald C. Haggis, associate professor of classical archaeology, and will continue over the next several summers.

Only about 1 percent of the site has been uncovered so far, but already the discoveries are yielding clues to life during a relatively unknown period of early emergence of the Greek city-states.

"One of the reasons we're so excited is that we weren't sure what we would find," Haggis said last week. "We actually found what we said we would find, which is pretty rare in archaeology."

Among the artifacts: glass and gold beads, bronze pins and nails, iron tools, decorated pottery, animal bones, even olive pits and grape seeds.

Researchers were ecstatic when they found a piece of a bronze helmet crest decorated with lotus flowers. The helmet, worn by Greek aristocrats and military leaders of that era, is only the second of its type ever found.

The site, called Azoria, overlooks the Aegean Sea from a mountain on the northeast coast of Crete, a rugged, narrow island, 160 miles long, southeast of the Greek mainland. Azoria covers an estimated 150,000 square meters. It was first explored by American archaeologist Harriet Boyd, who dug a trench about 1900 and found a series of walls. But she never published illustrations or details about her findings.

A Greek city destroyed

Crete was the home of the ancient Minoan civilization, which reached its peak about 1500 B.C.

Haggis and researchers from Iowa State University and the Smithsonian Institution believe the Azoria site was occupied from 1200 B.C. until 500 B.C., when disaster struck. The city was heavily damaged by fire, reoccupied for a short time, then abandoned before an earthquake destroyed it.

During the excavation this summer, the team found boulders in rooms of houses. "It's really incredible evidence of an earthquake," Haggis said.

Few human remains have been found at Azoria, leading researchers to believe the city was abandoned when the earthquake struck. The city was never inhabited again, which is good news for the archaeologists.

"Most large, well-known Greek cities have been inhabited through the years, so they have these layers and layers of stuff on top of them," Haggis said. "What we have is a pristine 6th-century city."

The researchers knew they were on to an actual city when they discovered the remains of an "andreion," or dining hall. One of the hallmarks of early Greek society was the "syssitia," or communal meal for a town's elite residents. The meals were served in a dining complex that included large food storage containers. The syssitia became a

meeting place in the community, leading to early Greek political organizations.

By studying the remains of the andreion, Haggis is learning plenty about the way early Greek cities operated, and details about the way people lived.

"We found actual remains of plants and animal bones," Haggis said. "We can find out precisely what they were eating, how they were using the land and something about the structure of the economy."

During this period, known as Early Iron Age, village farming communities were becoming wealthier and more economically and politically sophisticated. The age eventually saw a rise in internationalism, with the beginnings of trade with the Near East and advances in agricultural technology.

"This is an important opportunity to study the early establishment of cities in Greece," Haggis said. "It's really a study of emerging complexity in early Greece."

Hard, dusty work

The dig, which has been in the planning for three years, lasted six weeks. A team of about 35 people participated in the excavation, including four scientists, a half-dozen graduate students, eight undergraduate assistants and about 16 Greek laborers. Each day, the group climbed into three pickup trucks and Haggis' 1972 Volkswagen van to get to the site.

The team uncovered about 1,300 square meters -- a small area, but no small task. The students and researchers sifted through some 64 tons of soil to recover tiny pieces of fish bones and shells.

The students say the experience was incredible.

"To be a part of a project where you know you're in the initial stages of a huge discovery of a portion of history no one else has done, it kind of makes you feel important," said Nichole Doub, a UNC-CH senior who has always wanted to be an archaeologist. "It was really exciting."

The excavations were conducted with permission from the Greek Ministry of Culture. The artifacts must remain in Greece.

Besides UNC-CH, the project is sponsored by the National Geographic Society, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Institute for Aegean Prehistory, the INSTAP Study Center for East Crete and the Azoria Project Fund.

The digging will go on for at least four more years, and Haggis hopes one day the site will be open to the public, like the famed Minoan Palace of Knossos on Crete.

"It's years of study," Haggis said. "We don't intend to dig it all. The rest will be left for future generations."

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