

# SIR ARTHUR EVANS AT KOMMOS

## A Cretan Village Remembers its Past

MARIA C. SHAW

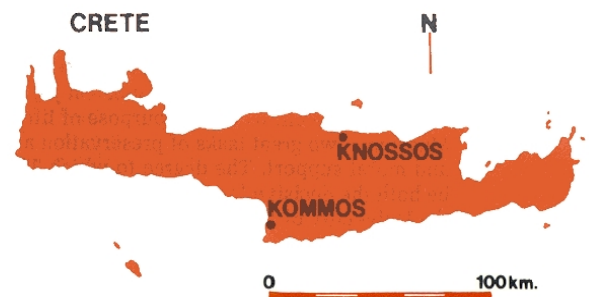
The four elderly gentlemen shown in Figs. 3, 7, 9, 10 have a few things in common. Their ages range from sixty-five to ninety years and they are all residents of the small town of Pitsidia, presently serving as the headquarters of the archaeological team excavating just a little to the northwest, at the Minoan-Classical site of Kommos on the south coast of Crete. From the readers' point of view, what is more important is that all four men, as well as a compatriot of theirs now living in Herakleion, were in the area when Sir Arthur Evans visited the ancient site half a century ago, in 1924. Little did they know at that time that this was an exceptionally distinguished visitor with a long, varied, and brilliant career, at first as a political correspondent in the Balkans, later as a numismatist, Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, honored member of learned societies, archaeologist, and, above all, a pioneer, incisive, and fundamental interpreter of the civilization of Minoan Crete. Nevertheless, in those days, when Greek villagers were not yet jaded by widespread tourism, the arrival of any stranger could be an exceptional incident in their otherwise uneventful lives, especially since the visitor, as rumor now has it, had brought with him tools to excavate. The event stamped itself deeply in their memories.

For Evans, Kommos, or, to use his own spelling, Komò, was the culmination of a series of exploratory expeditions undertaken by him in 1923 and 1924 in search of a great road he suspected crossed central Crete to link Knossos with Minoan harbors on the Libyan Sea. Already earlier, in the late 19th century, a young Italian archaeologist, A. Taramelli, had romantically linked the shores of Kommos with Homer's description of Menelaus' shipwreck off the south coast of Crete on the hero's return voyage from Troy after the Trojan war (*Odyssey*, III,

1. Portrait of Sir Arthur Evans made by F. Dodd in 1935. (I. Evans 1943, opp. p. 353)



2  
Map of Crete

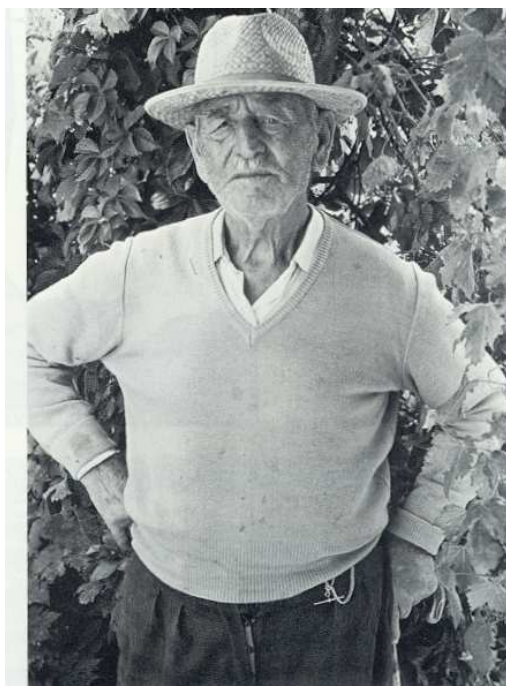


293-299). Evans' search was for physical evidence of a route by which imported objects arriving at the south coast of Crete from North Africa and, especially, Egypt would have found their way to northern Crete and, in particular, to Knossos, where he had already excavated an important Minoan palace. In these expeditions he had often been accompanied by three men: Duncan Mackenzie, his right-hand man throughout his excavations at Knossos; Manolis Akumianakis, his faithful and "lynx-eyed" excavation foreman; Piet de Jong, then architect of the British School of Archaeology at Athens, ready at hand to make lively sketches and drawings of crucial ancient remains they came upon on their journeys. There was also a young Cretan man, Myron Spithakis, who during the visit to Kommos acted as mule boy and general caretaker.

The outcome of these explorations is described in great detail in the second volume of Evans' *Palace of Minos* (London, 1928) and in shorter notices which appeared in the *London Times*, the *Morning Post* and other papers during the time of the exploration. This is naturally not the place to discuss aspects and implications of the discovery of Kommos. Suffice it to quote a few remarks from Evans' diary, kindly made available to us by the Ashmolean Museum, from which one can grasp some of the spirit of adventure and excitement of the occasion:

1924. Pitsidia. Camp in olive grove beyond "Pegadia" [the village Spring]. Sea . . . about 35 mins. away. Sandy. Ponente [west wind] blowing high sea, but cliffs to left effectual break against "Notios" [south wind]. To N. a knoll . . . forms the boundary of a valley now buried in sand but formerly evidently central quarter of a large Minoan town. Pottery and other remains extend on both sides of it and up the flanks of W. headland to S. . . . Running along N. flank of plateau towards this south headland very evident remains of a mound and supporting block and terrace blocks of old road which could be traced some way in Pitsidia direction. The end of the great South Road! and to great Minoan haven on the Libyan Sea!

Now there is a chance to see this same event from an untold and different point of view. It was the idea of J. W. Shaw, director of the present excavations at Kommos, begun in 1976, that, through a series of interviews with the old men from Pitsidia referred to above, a new insight might be gained about this early and exciting event in the history of the exploration of the island. These interviews, now recorded in tapes, did indeed turn out to be a source of interesting and varied information about the history of the silo in the last fifty years, but it is mainly how they reflect Evans' visit to Kommos which concerns us here. It is through what these men said, partly informative, often amusing and naive, sometimes confused, that a small but



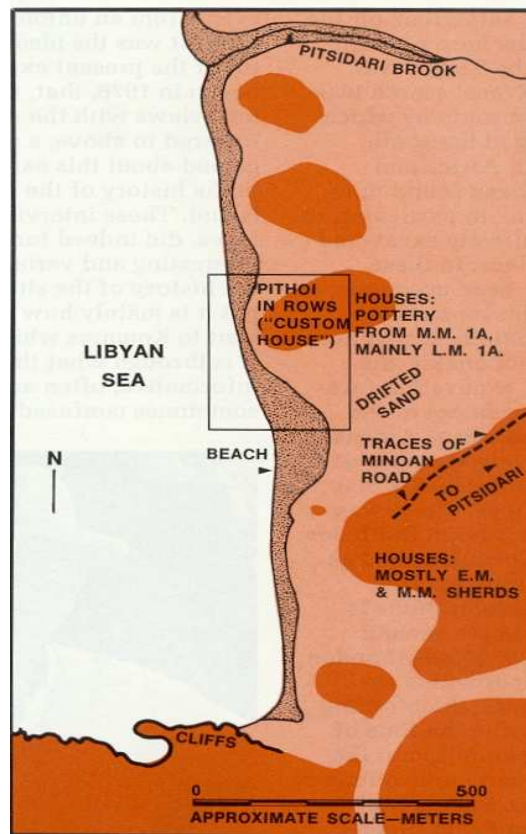
3. Kostis Fasoulakis (Photograph by R. K. Vincent, Jr.)

unknown facet of Evans' rich and relentless career as a Minoan archaeologist may be revealed.

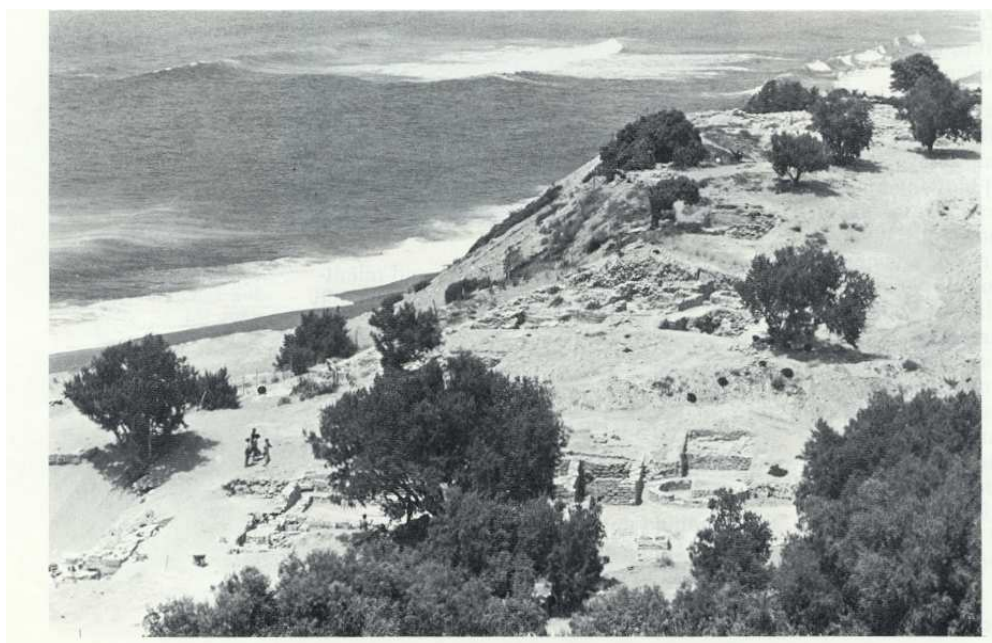
We start with Kostis Fasoulakis, an eighty-three year-old man, who was twenty-eight years old when Evans came to Kommos. He had grown up in Pitsidia and, like many other villagers, both he and his father, earlier, had owned land at the seashore site of Kommos, which had remained uninhabited since ancient times. As a young man Kostis went there fre-

quently to cultivate his plot, but even earlier he had come there as a youngster with other boys to graze his family's goats and sheep. The boys had their favorite spot at the very bottom of the hill, where large hewn stones were sticking out of the sand, a touch of mystery in the otherwise idyllic countryside. The name of this spot, as he came to know it from his older contemporaries, was, rather appropriately, "Pelekia," meaning "Hewn Stones." The ruins were normally covered by a deep blanket of sand, but every now and then strong winds would blow away some of the sand and unveil the wall blocks. The older men knew that a hidden city lay underneath; we now know, through excavation, that there is a Greek sanctuary overlying earlier, Minoan, remains.

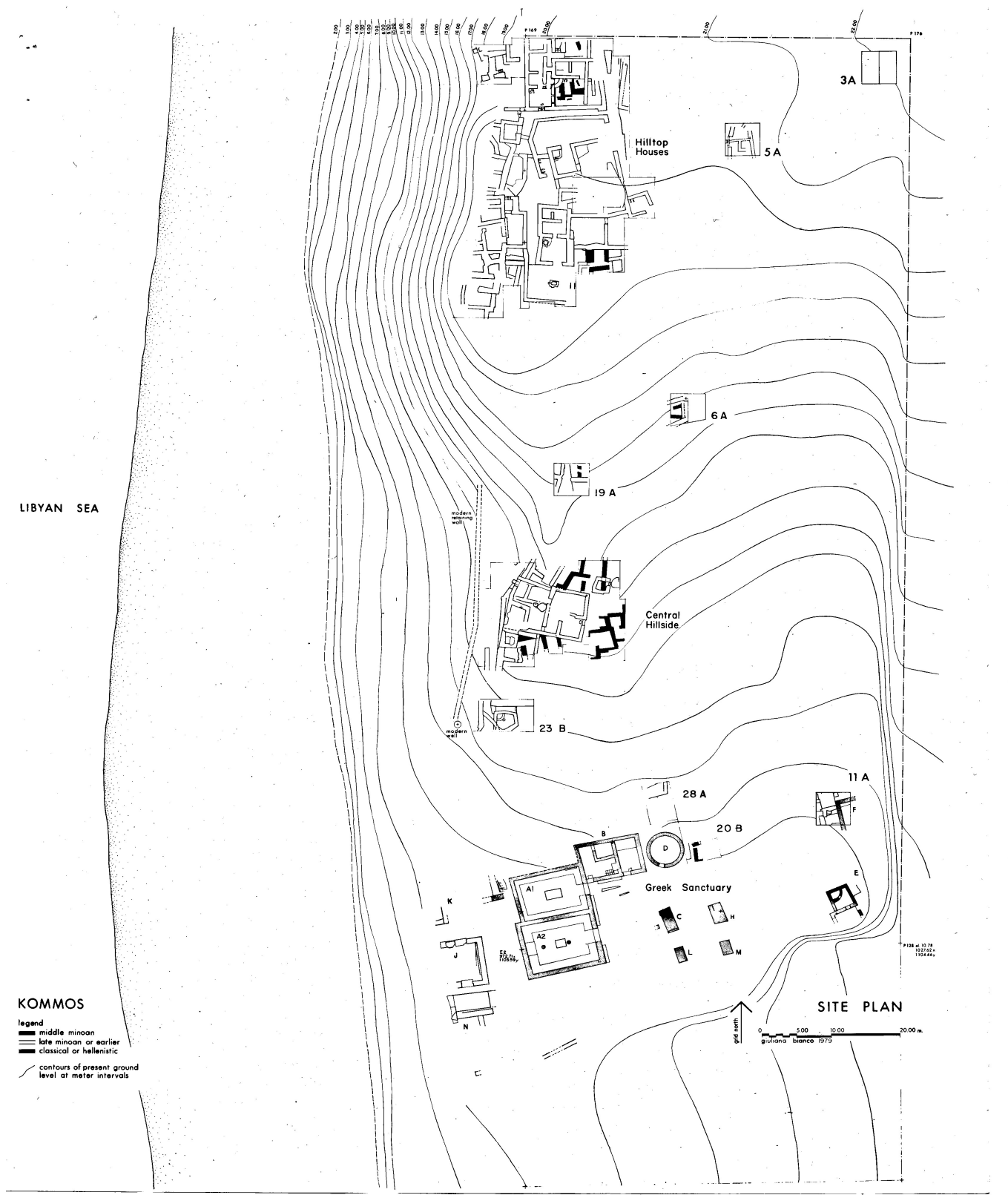
The visible blocks proved too much of a temptation as a source of ready building material. Villagers nowadays report that numerous blocks were "quarried" on two occasions. Apparently, some blocks were removed around 1921 to build a bridge on the Platys river, just outside the sea-resort town of Hagia Galini (ancient Soulia), further northwest along the coast. More stones had been removed earlier for use in one of the many building expansions of the rich Monastery of Preveli, some distance northwest of Kommos along the



4. Plan of Kommos: area within square corresponds to that of recent excavations, Fig. 6. (After Piet de Jong, Evans 1928, Fig. 42)



5. Telephoto view of Kommos from the south. (Photograph by K. Vincent, Jr.)



6. Plan of recent excavations at Kommos, 1976-79, made by G. Bianco

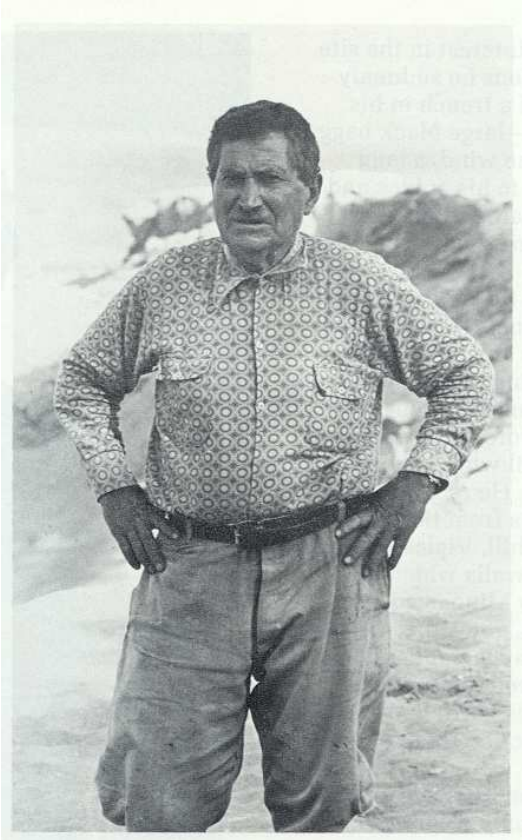
Cretan shore. It is impossible now to link this event with any of the phases of the monastery's long history from the 17th century on. Our expeditions to both locations have failed to reveal any definite ancient blocks, in the first case because the old bridge was washed away by a flood and replaced by a new one in cement, in the other because most of the walls of the monastery had been heavily plastered.

Kostis went to meet Evans at the site, perhaps partly out of curiosity, but more likely because he was concerned about the fate of his land in case there would be an excavation. He remembers vividly Evans talking about the ancient remains, about their being "deep inside the earth" and the amount of money it would take to excavate them. When Kostis innocently wondered "but can't your company dig them up?" Evans expressed another concern, that in fact he might be trespassing the territorial rights of "Mr. Albert." Evans was naturally referring to his close friend Federico Halbherr, the Italian epigraphist, explorer, and archaeologist involved then in the Italian excavations at Phaestos and Hagia Triadha, some eight kilometers northeast of Kommos. Evans also remarked that Kommos must have served as the harbor of Gortyn, a city in south-central Crete which had a long history from prehistoric into modern times, and which in Roman times became the capital of the North African and Cretan Province. Kostis added further that the British archaeologist did not stay long, "just for two or three days and then he left." To the interviewer's question of how he could remember so much of an incident which took place some fifty years ago, Kostis gives the simple but engaging answer that "well, I remember it because, when you are young with nothing much to do, such things make an impression on you."

George Fasoulakis is Kostis' first cousin and is now seventy-nine years old. At the time of Evans' visit he was working at Kommos as a Field Watchman and he had also been hired by his uncle Kostis Fasoulakis, alias "Chalkias" ("The Smith"), to help him till the land and tend the vineyards planted on the top of the hill where the latter owned a plot. As a Field Watchman he accompanied Evans to the hill and he still remembers some of the archaeologist's remarks as he looked down towards the south, following

with his eyes the faint traces of Minoan walls. Evans once again referred to the presence here of a Minoan town. He then pointed to a small submerged reef, some four hundred meters off shore, and expressed his belief that in Minoan times this reef would have been linked with Nesos, the southern headland which now separates Kommos from the popular sea-resort town of Matala to the south, the two headlands acting as natural barriers against west and south winds and providing ancient mariners with a real haven. In the *Palace of Minos* Evans discusses his theory of a land subsidence along the south coast of Crete, which he estimated at some five meters. It was partially on this premise that he visualized the well protected character of Kommos as a harbor. George claims he still remembers Evans' exclaiming that this was "Egypt's biggest port; Egypt used to get its provisions here . . ." He also remarks on the archaeologist's appearance as "not tall, rather heavy . . . very handsome and very courteous. He also spoke Greek."

It was after Evans had left that George made an exciting discovery, which, in the light of what he had recently heard, must have acquired a special meaning for him. This was a large storage jar, a pithos, provided with "70 'ears' " (a rather graphic term for "handles" in the local dialect). George had found the pithos some twenty meters away from what the local people nicknamed "The Smith's Tree," an old cedar tree which his uncle, the smith, had cleverly trimmed and turned into a shady, functional shelter. With further trimming this tree is used even today by the present watchman of the archaeological site. The location specified by George seems to correspond to the area in Evans' plan where he notes rows of pithoi in a building which the local owner of the land, probably the smith, had apparently nicknamed "Teloneion" or "Customs House." Although one should not build theories of sea trade on the basis of pithos storerooms, which are, after all, common in Minoan house and palace alike, villager and archaeologist seem to have been on the right track, for, although only houses have been found on the top and on the south slope of the Kommos hill, at the bottom to the south and right along the shore was recently discovered a Minoan building of impressive proportions, built of huge blocks,



7. George Fasoulakis. (Photograph by R. K. Vincent. Jr.)



8. Large Minoan building (J) along the shore. Leaning against the doorjamb is the director of the present excavation, Joseph W. Shaw. (Photograph by L. F. Nixon)

which definitely implies a seat of power, most likely deriving its strength from commercial activity.

The pithos must have turned into a matter of contention for the two men, for soon after its discovery George was fired by his uncle; the vase, probably already cracked, was left to fall apart, its fragments eventually scattered and lost.

This old man with the keen, sharp mind still maintains a lively interest in the site. In his periodic inspections he suddenly turns up on the edge of a trench in his picturesque local garb—large black baggy trousers billowing in the wind, a long striped apron reaching to his ankles and a black fringed kerchief around his forehead—quietly but intently following what is going on.

Iakovos Kadianakis, the oldest man of the group, now over ninety years old, has an astounding memory and an enviably lucid mind with a teasing twist. Upon being questioned he repeats most of the information we covered before, but he also brings up another detail which makes one wonder at his memory. He recalls how Evans came to Kommos from the south and while on the southern hill, Vigles (see plan, Fig. 3), he noted some walls which he believed to be an Early Minoan square ossuary. Evans, in fact, notes this discovery both in his diary and in his publications. The structure he referred to has been relocated by us, but it is partially destroyed because of the construction there of a Nazi bunker during the war.

George Sphakakis, an extremely pleasant and helpful man, was only eleven years old when Evans came. His comments are necessarily brief, but he adds the vivid detail that the tent the archaeologist set up next to their spring was yellow, or as he puts it “the color of egg yolk!” Of interest is his view why the site is called Kommos. “Kommos” he said “is a sort of a sea plant, growing on the sea bed. When the sea is rough it is uprooted and thrown out on the beach. At limes there may be 50 or 60 tons washed up here.”

Now it is important to note that the name Kommos is applied by the local people to a sandy cove just south of the hill with the Bronze Age remains (ca. 1800-1200 B.C.) and south of the Greek buildings (8th century B.C.-



9. Iakovos Kadianakis. (Photograph by R.K. Vincent, Jr.)

2nd century A.D.) at Pelekia at the bottom of the slope. Following Evans' usage we now also use the name Kommos in a generic sense to include the entire site. Adhering, however, to the theory of an etymological connection of the name with seaweed we have changed the spelling from Evans' 'Komò' to 'Kommòs.' The latter also conforms with the local pronunciation.

The last person to be interviewed was Myron Spithakis, now about seventy-nine years old, who had accompanied Evans in his exploratory campaign starting at Knossos, where Myron had also worked as a digger and at odd jobs. Hopes ran high that this man might have something substantial and illuminating to convey. Unfortunately, years had weighed more heavily on him than on his contemporaries and his memory has been failing. We must also remember that the visit to Kommos was not an isolated event for him, but part of a series of

similar occasions in his long association with Evans. Paradoxically enough, however, Myron's garbled account beautifully conveys information about another archaeologist, Duncan Mackenzie, whose contribution to those early days of discovery we tend sometimes to forget: such as his love of enjoyment, his warmth and accessibility to the local people with whom he had closely worked. Myron remembers with nostalgia a series of local music-and-dance parties in which the latter had often been the generous patron. Despite their fogginess, his descriptions accurately reflect Dame Joan Evans' lucid and sympathetic assessment of Mackenzie's character in her book *Time and Chance* (London, 1943), a family biography, in which she describes him as one

with an inner understanding of the native workmen and a fellow feeling with them that was a real asset in the course of our spade-work. To them, though a master, he was a true comrade.

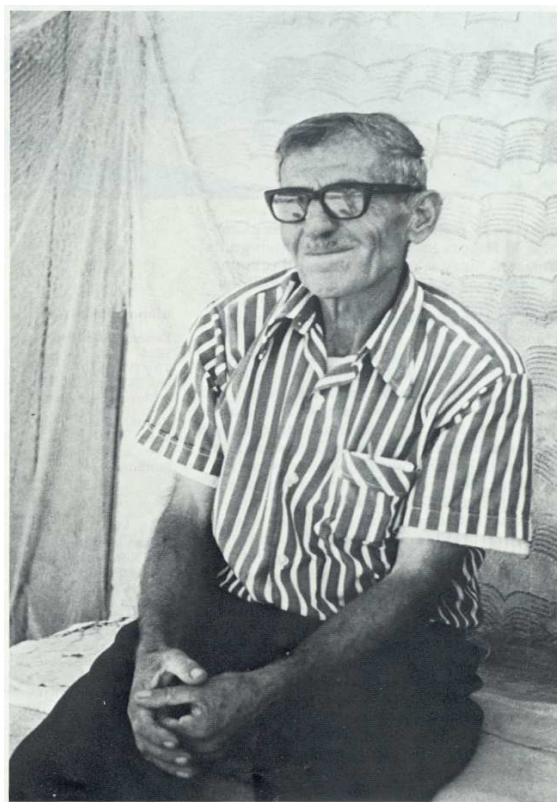
By contrast, Arthur Evans' heart lay elsewhere in those days. To quote his sister, once again from the same book, it lay in the civilization

set in a beautiful Mediterranean country, aristocratic: and humane in feeling; creating an art brilliant in colour and unusual in form, that drew inspiration from the flowers and birds and creatures he loved. It provided him with enigmas to solve and oracles to interpret, and opened a new world for eye and mind to dwell in: a world which served to isolate him from a present in which he had found no real place.

This has been largely an article of quotations. We cannot even claim in the case of the men interviewed that theirs are accurate recollections of what was originally said, although several of their remarks mesh incredibly well with facts we can now gather from Evans' publications or from developments in the present excavation. Their real value, however, lies in the fact that they recreate part of the atmosphere of the discovery of those days

and of the great expectations which are only now beginning to be realized at Kommos.

In some ways the excavation has surpassed these expectations. The plan and photograph of the site provided here (Figs. 4 and 5) give a clear impression of the present state of recovery after four seasons of digging. The telephoto view shows the Kommos hill with Minoan house walls visible among the scanty tamarisk and cedar trees. Echoing Evans' description, a beautifully preserved storeroom full of pithoi and other smaller vases was just found in a Middle Minoan III (ca. 1600 B.C.) house on the slope. Further south there is a complex of buildings, part of a Greek sanctuary dating in construction mainly to the 4th century B.C. and overlying two earlier temples, one of the 10th and one of the 8th century B.C. (Fig. 11.) These earlier structures have just been discovered in the latest (fifth) season of excavations, 1980. The upper buildings recovered so far (Fig. 4) flank a large courtyard bedecked with four altars (C, H, L, M) on the



10. George Sphakakis. (Photograph by R. K. Vincent, Jr.)





**11.** View from the east of the northern half of two superposed temples (dated to the 10th-8th centuries B.C.) discovered in a sounding under the slab floor of the latest (4th century B.C. to Roman) temple. In the foreground, left of the column base, is part of a pier, probably once placed centrally at the entrance (from the east) of the 8th century B.C. temple

north and west sides; a round structure (D); a two-room building (B); two contiguous large rectangular rooms with interior benches along the walls (A—1, 2), one of which is a temple with a venerated old Cretan plan known from earlier examples at Dreros and Prinias. To which god(s) this sanctuary was dedicated still remains a tantalizing mystery, but, as inscriptions are just beginning to be found, there is still hope that this question may be answered some day.

Crowning this past season's discoveries is a large Minoan building just west of the temple and the benched room, set along the shore (J). Two large rooms have so far been discovered with monumental entrances and huge monolithic thresholds. There is clear evidence that the building had two main building phases and that it went out of use around 1200 B.C. The magnitude of its construction is such that, ironically enough, when the first blocks appeared nobody doubted it must belong to the adjacent Greek sanctuary and that it was perhaps sponsored by some rich 4th century or Hellenistic donor! As excavation proceeded in

its interior, to our great amazement, the first scanty Minoan sherds were gradually replaced by larger quantities and finally by complete Minoan pots as the reached the floor. Whether Evans' term "Customs House" can be attached to this building it is too soon to tell, but that it had a public function of importance and perhaps one connected with maritime and commercial activities is a fair hypothesis.

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1928

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1943

*Time and Chance*. London**Acknowledgments**

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**Maria C. Shaw**, received her Ph.D. in Aegean Archaeology at Bryn Mawr College and is presently Associate Professor in Aegean and Classical Archaeology at Scarborough College, University of Toronto. Her excavational experience includes work at Corinth and Mycenae and her years of participation at Kommos. Her main interest and publications are in Aegean wallpainting.