

THE SPHAKIA SURVEY ON THE INTERNET

NIXON (L.), PRICE (S.), MOODY (J.), RACKHAM (O.) *The Sphakia Survey Internet Edition*, URL https://portal.sds.ox.ac.uk/collections/The_Sphakia_Survey_Internet_Edition/6816405, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25446/oxford.c.6816405>.
doi:10.1017/S0009840X25000745

The use of digital tools has long been a key component of regional archaeological surveys in the Mediterranean, with new fieldwork methodologies developing alongside rapid advances in digital documentation, computational databases and statistical computing (see A.R. Knodell et al., 'Survey Archaeology in the Mediterranean World: Regional Traditions and Contributions to Long-Term History', *Journal of Archaeological Research* 31 [2023], 263–329, for a recent history of Mediterranean landscape archaeology and a statistically driven review of developments in the field since the 1950s). This review offers an excellent opportunity to explore the latest stage in the long life of the Sphakia Survey, a regional survey that pioneered the development of interdisciplinary workflows, the importance of non-traditional media in archaeological scholarship and the place of digital tools in Mediterranean Archaeology.

Located in the dynamic landscape of coastal south-west Crete, the Sphakia Survey was directed by Nixon (Oxford) and Moody (Texas) through the Canadian Institute in Greece, in close collaboration with Price (Oxford), Rackham (Oxford) and the Ephorate of Antiquities of Chania. After a pilot season in 1986, fieldwork took place between 1987 and 1992, with study seasons until 1998. The project intensively surveyed 26km² within a larger 470km² study area, identifying some 315 sites and substantially increasing our knowledge of human settlement dynamics in the region from the Final Neolithic period (c. 3300 BCE) to the nineteenth century. From its onset, the Sphakia Survey aimed to integrate the traditional subjects of archaeological surface surveys with detailed specialist study of archival documents, contemporary ethnographic evidence and a wide range of rich environmental data. While the final publication of the Sphakia Survey remains forthcoming (OUP), members of the project have produced some three dozen publications highlighting a broad range of scholarly interests like religious landscapes, diachronic agricultural practices, coarse ware ceramic analysis and survey methodology, many of which remain foundational and influential studies.

What ties these threads together is the most recent iteration of the Sphakia Survey Internet Edition (SSIE), a digital repository built to house a wide range of media related to the project. First published in 2000, the original SSIE offered a then-cutting-edge web front-end to access photographs, publications and discussions on the data collection methods, analytical techniques and results of the project, as well as associated media related to an online course (*Archaeology for Amateurs*). While the final publication of the project never came to fruition during the life of this website, the paper and digital publication were designed to complement one another, offering new directions for the place of digital media in scholarly dissemination.

Over time, like many digital humanities projects, regular development and routine maintenance of SSIE stalled, and the website became largely unusable (although functional snapshots are preserved via the Internet Archive). Therefore, Nixon worked alongside M. McKerracher of the Oxford University Sustainable Digital Scholarship Service to redevelop a more stable digital environment with long-term sustainability for the second edition of the SSIE, featuring contemporary open access licensing and DOI identifiers

to ensure correct citation. This second iteration of SSIE presents a straightforward interface divided into eight sections: a collection of project publications, five photographic archives (ceramic fabric analysis, objects, sites, regions and environmental zones), a repository for videos produced by the project and a description of the team behind it.

The publication section of SSIE offers the most immediate resource for scholars interested in the Sphakia Survey, regional survey methodology or the archaeology of Crete. In this section PDFs of 25 of the 34 publications from the survey are accessible, along with a document presenting a complete bibliography for the project and a brief description of the in-preparation final monograph. The available publications represent a mix of digital off-prints and scans of varying quality. While many of these publications are readily available from other sources, it is useful to have them collated and freely accessible. The landing page refers to these documents being open access, but no mention is made to the specific license under which they have been made accessible. Finally, while each PDF follows a standard nomenclature (year, author, title, source), sorting options are limited to variables like 'relevance' or non-functioning citation metrics. A more standard sorting strategy (e.g. by author, publication date or even file name) would be a welcome addition.

Each of the photo archives in SSIE follows a similar format, with a landing page presenting basic information, followed by the photographs themselves. Photographs related to 'Environmental Zones' (73 images) and 'Regions' (99 images) have been further organised into categories used by the members of the Sphakia Survey during their fieldwork, allowing users to quickly navigate through photographs of, for example, the Samaria Gorge (located in 'Regions') vs photographs of major and minor gorges in Sphakia more generally (found in 'Environmental Zone D'). While this organisational strategy facilitates access to photographs in these categories, the archives of objects (182 images, including an important collection of local coarse ware fabrics), sites (the most robust collection at 846 images) and photographs of the Sphakia Survey team (75 images, including photographs of the local community, agricultural production and traditional craftspeople) are left uncategorised, and navigation is complicated by the aforementioned limited sorting strategy. Without more information on the long-term strategy for SSIE, it is not immediately clear if future development aims to offer more streamlined data access, tying these entries to existing digital initiatives such as site gazetteers, accepted LOD strategies or other documentation and archiving standards in use for media repositories in Archaeology and Digital Humanities.¹ That said, continued open access to these high resolution photographs is an invaluable resource, offering an excellent imagery related to the archaeology and ecology of Crete as well as an important data point for the development of this region over some three decades.

An important addition to this version of SSIE is a two-part, 50-minute video focused on the methods and results of the Sphakia Survey, originally intended for a general audience or university teaching. Created by members of the project between 1992 and 1995, this video was instrumental in integrating multimedia documentation into the collection and in dissemination of archaeological data. The video prompted a series of important reviews by survey archaeologists and prehistorians who explored the place of film recording in

¹One solution would be for the adoption of FAIR standards for the organisation and presentation of data from the Sphakia Survey, following growing trends towards open and comparable survey datasets that have become central components of Mediterranean field survey (T.C.A. de Haas and M. van Leusen, 'FAIR survey: Improving documentation and archiving practices in archaeological field survey through CIDOC CRM', *FOLD&R Archaeological Survey* 12: <http://www.fastionline.org/docs/FOLDER-sur-2020-12.pdf> [2020]; Knodell et al. 2023).

archaeological scholarship, as well as reflective scholarship by members of the Sphakia Survey.² Today, the video transports viewers to a fascinating moment in the development of Mediterranean landscape archaeology, offering the chance to experience a (curated) version of key moments in the history of the field as told by pioneering scholars.

Resources like this video are the most effective aspects of SSIE in its current state, offering a glimpse into the experiences, decisions and discoveries of a formative project that has influenced so much interesting and important landscape, ethnographic, and ecological fieldwork in Greece while pioneering advances in digital scholarship in the field of Mediterranean archaeology. In the quarter-century since SSIE was first released, its novel digital strategy has left an indelible mark on other survey projects, normalising the co-development of interdisciplinary fieldwork strategies with robust digital assets like public-facing websites, open access datasets and novel forms of engagement for local stakeholders, students and the interested public.³

As such, contemporary perspectives on the purpose of websites related to archaeological fieldwork have grown beyond the three intended functions of SSIE's ambitious first edition: complementing the final publication, offering data for use in teaching and providing a space of engagement with a general audience.⁴ While there are no published plans for future development of SSIE, the innovative tradition of the Sphakia Survey makes one hope that SSIE will one day serve as a comprehensive data repository for the project, accompanying and complementing the final publication. Such a companion tool – allowing access to data from the survey and subsequent stages of analysis – would be an excellent resource, continuing the tradition of developments in digital scholarship that the project helped to initiate nearly twenty years ago.

University of Copenhagen

EVAN LEVINE 
evl@teol.ku.dk

²For reviews of the Sphakia Survey video, see J. Bennet, *BMCR* 1996.04.12, Y. Hamilakis, *Visual Anthropology* 9 (1997), 193–4, and C. Mee, *Antiquity* 72 (1998), 725. See L. Nixon, 'Seeing Voices and Changing Relationships: Film, Archaeological Reporting, and the Landscape of People in Sphakia', *American Journal of Archaeology* 105 (2001), 77–97, for reflections on the production of the video and its reception by scholars and the local community of Sphakia.

³Currently, the most complete list of relevant projects can be found at <https://www.fieldwalker.org/>.

⁴L. Nixon and S. Price, 'Paper, Video, Internet: New Technologies for Research and Teaching in Archaeology: The Sphakia Survey', *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* 17 (2004), 1–22, at 10–11.