

Processions: Studies of Bronze Age Ritual and  
Ceremony presented to Robert B. Koehl





# Processions

Studies of Bronze Age Ritual and  
Ceremony presented to Robert B. Koehl

Edited by  
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Cover: Roll-out of upper part of black steatite rhyton, the 'Harvester Vase,' Royal Villa of Ayia Triada. Heraklion Archaeological Museum AE 184. Photograph: Hellenic Ministry of Culture/Heraklion Archaeological Museum.

Detail of the Procession Fresco, Knossos. Courtesy of Heraklion Archaeological Museum. Copyright: Hellenic Ministry of Culture - Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources.

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Robert Koehl in his office at Hunter College, 2019.

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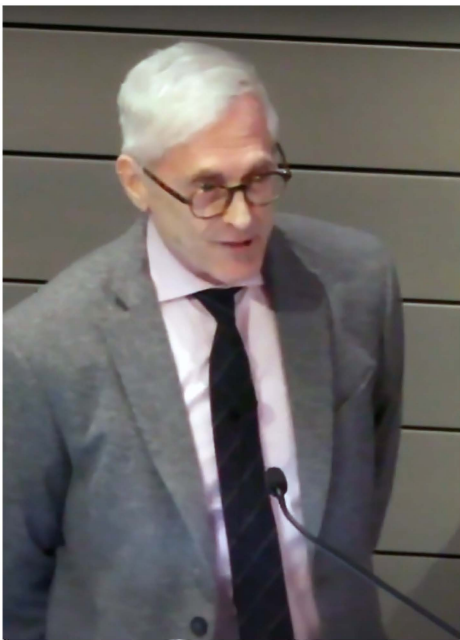
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## Robert B. Koehl: Publications

### Books

2021. *Koukounaries I. Mycenaean Pottery from Selected Contexts*. Oxford: Archaeopress.
2016. Editor. *Studies in Aegean Art and Culture. A New York Aegean Bronze Age Colloquium in Memory of Ellen N. Davis*. Philadelphia, PA: INSTAP Academic Press.
2013. Editor. *AMILLA: The Quest for Excellence. Studies Presented to Guenter Kopcke in Celebration of his 75<sup>th</sup> Birthday (Prehistory Monographs 43)*: Philadelphia, PA: INSTAP Academic Press.
2006. *Aegean Bronze Age Rhyta (Prehistory Monographs 19)*: Philadelphia, PA: INSTAP Academic Press.
1985. *Ancient Artifacts: Cyprus 2500–500 B.C. From the Collection of the Ringling Museum of Art, The State Museum of Florida, Florida State University Gallery, Tallahassee, October 4–27, 1985*. Tallahassee FL: Florida State University.
1985. *Sarepta III. The Imported Bronze and Iron Age Wares from Area II, X. The University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania Excavations at Sarafand, Lebanon. (Section des Études Archéologiques 2)*: Beirut: Publications de L'Université Libanaise.

### All other publications:

- A Cult Statue Rendered on a Mycenaean Vase from Cyprus, in A.L. D'Agata and P. Pavuk (eds), *The Lady of Pottery. Ceramic Studies presented to Penelope A. Mountjoy in acknowledgement of her outstanding scholarship*. SMEA NS Supplemento 3: 91–104.
2022. Minoan stick-fighting, in G. Vavouranakis and I. Voskos (eds) *Metioessa: Studies in Honor of Eleni Mantzourani*, (Aura Supplement 10), Athens: 263–269.
2020. Alalakh and the Aegean: Five centuries of shifting but enduring contacts, in K. A. Yener and T. Ingman (eds) *15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Alalakh Excavations, New Hatay Archaeology Museum, Antakya, Turkey*: 199–221. Leiden: Brill.
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2018. Chapter 4.1. From pot patterns to pictures: Thoughts on the evolution of Aegean wall painting, in A. Vlachopoulos (ed.) *ΧρωστήρεςΚ/Paintbrushes. Wall Painting and Vase Painting of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC in Dialogue*: 225–233. Athens: Ministry of Culture and University of Ioannina Press.
2018. Chapter 1. From the Near East to the Aegean, from Neolithic times to the end of the Bronze Age, in S. Ebbinghaus (ed.) *Animal-shaped Vessels from the Ancient World: Feasting with Gods, Heroes, and Kings*: 45–84. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
2018. Chapter 22. Back to the Future: Memory, nostalgia and identity in the 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. on Paros, in E. Simpson (ed.) *The Adventure of the Illustrious Scholar: Papers Presented to Oscar White Muscarella*: 423–443. Leiden: Brill.
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# Dance or Procession? A Ritual Scene on a Fruit-stand from Protopalatial Phaistos, Crete<sup>1</sup>

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A well-known Middle Minoan (MM) II fruit-stand from the Palace at Phaistos provides important evidence for exclusive ritual performances at the palatial level. The pictorial scenes depicted on this vessel represent a unique collection of themes very rarely encountered in Minoan Protopalatial iconography; they comprise a component of a larger corpus of revolutionary religious and iconographic ‘propaganda’ for which the Palace of Phaistos was the driving force in MM II. This paper will discuss the scenes depicted on the fruit-stand and its context. Recent discoveries from the area of *Rampa Ellenistica*, west of Lower Court LXX, will add some more important parallels, reinforcing the significance of human iconography and processions in the southwest area of the palace.

## The Context

The fruit-stand was discovered by Doro Levi during the 1950’s in two pieces, one (F 65) from Room XXVIII-B and the other (F 786) from Room LIV (Levi 1976: 90, 204, pls. 160a, LXV-LXVI) in two different excavation years (Figure 1). Both parts were recovered in a large fill composed of pottery, architectural elements, and the lime *astraki* that sealed the rooms. Levi dated the vessel to *Fase Ib* (i.e., MM IIA) and interpreted the central figure as a ‘Lilies goddess.’ The interpretation and date of these filling operations have been debated for a long time and only recently has research clarified that: 1) the Southwest Quarter of the Palace, a unified complex since MM IB, underwent various architectural transformations down to the very end of MM IIB; 2) a possible earthquake during MM IIB (but not at the end of the period) had compromised the stability of the northern part of this quarter which was only partially rebuilt, the ruins of the first two floors being filled with a mixture of debris from collapsed walls and floors and *astraki*; 3) finally, at the very end of MM IIB, the entire quarter was destroyed and completely sealed off (La Rosa ed. 2001; Carinci 2011). This complex history has relevance for the date and interpretation of the fruit-stand. A thorough review of this area has produced

observations on the nature and function of some architectural features, as well as the reconstruction of their ceramic contexts (Carinci 2011). It is important to stress that the materials within all these rooms are connected to the time of the partial destruction of the building, i.e., MM IIB (although not at the very end), and this includes our fruit-stand too.

Already in MM IB the northern part of this quarter existed, consisting of Rooms IL, XXVII-XXVIII with an upper floor. At the east end of Rooms XXVII-XXVIII are a couple of small rooms (XXVIII A-B), best interpreted as a shrine. However, the dating of this recess to the oldest period of the building is questionable. At a time prior to the destruction of Rooms IL, XXVII-XXVIII, a wall was put up so as to prevent direct access from XXVIII to Shrine XXVIII A-B. In other words, in this final phase, the shrine could be reached only through Room LIV (Carinci 2011: 56, figs. 39, 95). At the very end of MM IIB, Rooms XXVIII A-B went out of use and the southern rooms (LVIII, LIX, LX, LXIII, LIV, LXV) were transformed by opening a wide passage in the orthostat façade on the west side towards the Lower West Court LXX (Carinci 2011: fig. 96). This architectural reconstruction makes sense with the findspots of the fruit-stand pieces, which were in fact retrieved *between* Rooms XXXVIII-B and LIV. If we are correct in identifying the original position of the fruit-stand as being in Room XXVIII-B, this would imply that the recess was closed, along with its contents, in MM IIB, but not at the very end. Interestingly, together with the fruit-stand a second one with an elaborate polychrome abstract decoration was recovered (Levi 1976: pl. 61d; Carinci 2011: fig. 88b); finally, in XXVIII-A a pedestalled lamp with a convex spouted bowl (made of coarse clay) on its top was found (Levi 1976: pl. 182h). The character of the few ceramic vessels, the fruit-stands and the lamp, suggests that Rooms XXVIII A-B functioned as small blind recess, likely used for ritual purposes or to house vessels used for special ceremonies. No drinking, pouring or storage vessels have been reported (Carinci 2011: 108-109, figs. 88-89).

Marking the special role of this area, and as a shrine, is the triton shell carved in relief and then painted that was recovered in Room IL. Triton shells area also represented on two *cretulae* from *sottoscala* of Room LIII and LV (CMS II 5, nos. 305–306; discussion in Sanavia and Weingarten 2016).

<sup>1</sup> \* It is a pleasure to offer this article to Robert Koehl, a leading colleague in Aegean archaeology who continue to inspire us with the keenness of his mind. I am very grateful to the Italian Archaeological School of Athens for the permission to reproduce figures from the archive and Filippo Carinci for the kind permission of using the ceramic material from the recent excavations at Phaistos. Finally, for revising the English text, special thanks are owed to Don Evelyn.



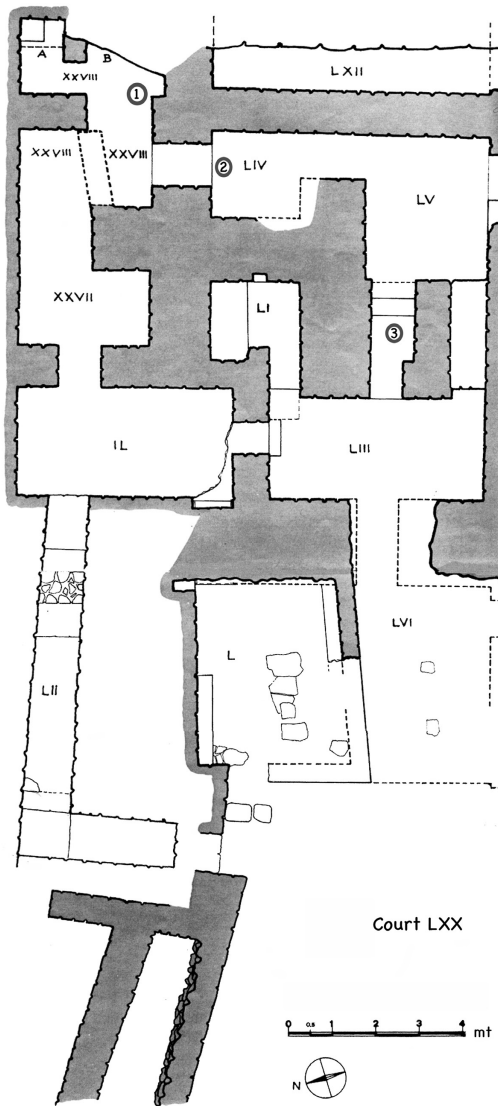


Figure 1. Southwest quarter of Phaistos Palace: first floor of northern part with indication of the vessels discussed in the text: (1–2): fruit-stand F 65+786; (3): bowl F 1278. (Elaboration after Levi 1976: pl. D. Courtesy of Italian Archaeological School of Athens).



Figure 2a–b. Photos of (a) the bowl and (b) the base of fruit-stand F 65 + 786 (Archivio SAIA C/1211b and C/1211: Courtesy of Italian Archaeological School of Athens).

### The Fruit-stand

The fruit-stand belongs to a well-known class documented at Phaistos during MM IB–IIB, characterized by a high pedestal and shallow bowl with flaring or everted and down-sloping rim (Levi 1976: pl. 61; Levi and Carinci 1981: pl. 10a, c. See also at Malia, Poursat and Knappett 2005: pl. 53, no. 1153). The disc-shaped base of our fruit-stand is, however, larger than usual, and the bowl also has a large horizontal flaring rim; some handles are likely now missing. The vessel bears an elaborate painted decoration in white and

red on dark-red paint; the reverse of the fruit-stand is left plain (Figures 2–3). Although fragmentary, the pictorial scene inside the bowl has been reconstructed as follows: A central female figure wears a long skirt filled with white dots, has long curly hair and holds flowers in up-raised hands. She is flanked by two similar



Figure 3a-b. Watercolors of fruit-stand F 65 + 786 (watercolor M. Oliva. Archivio SAIA B/12872 and B/12896: Courtesy of Italian Archaeological School of Athens).

female figures, but smaller and with one arm pointing downwards and the other raised over the head. The flowers have been interpreted either as lilies (Levi 1976; Marinatos 1993: 129) or as crocus flowers (Day 2011: 351). On the side of the rim of the bowl a row of figures bent over is reproduced, as if in procession (Figure 3a). They wear a long garment, again filled with white dots, and a flat cap. The disc-shaped base of the fruit-stand hosts a painted decoration too, of which survives two female figures dressed in the same manner of those from the inner surface of the bowl, but with both arms circularly bent from shoulders to hips (akimbo) (Figure 2b).

A similar scene of a goddess (the so called ‘snake goddess’) flanked by two other figures holding flowers is represented inside bowl F 1278 from *Sottoscala* of Rooms LIII and LV, in the same sector of the building (Levi 1976: 96, pls. 160 b-c, LXVIIa; Levi and Carinci 1988: pl. 76b). A third important pictorial representation is painted on a small *amphoriskos* from Room LXVIII, again from the same quarter, featuring a male figure standing beside a large flower (crocus?) as tall as the figure’s waist (Levi 1976: 116, pl. LXVII; Levi and Carinci 1988: 47, pl. 23c).

### Discussion

It is beyond doubt that the scenes reflect a special ceremony conducted by participants who likely belonged to the palatial elite. Their interpretation, however, is hampered by two problems: first, the paucity of similar iconographies, and in general of human naturalistic representations in Protopalatial art; and second, the extremely stylized character of the painted scenes. Even one of the most prolific corpuses of pictorial themes in Protopalatial iconography, i.e., the *Archivio delle Cretule* at Phaistos, despite the innovations and stylistic heterogeneity of the seal images, almost lacks human figures (except for CMS II 2, nos. 324–326) as well as any indication for frieze-like compositions (Levi 1957–58; and recent analysis in Blakolmer 2020). Also, any attempt to compare the naturalistic motifs of the Protopalatial with the Neopalatial is doomed to failure, as the two are hugely different in character and number: the latter is much more realistic. It is therefore certain that the vessels with these painted ritual scenes from the Palace of Phaistos represent a unique body of material produced for a restricted palatial elite, for specific purposes and foreshadowing several themes of Neopalatial iconography.

Despite the caveats raised above, the figures in the fruit-stands are clearly depicted so as to declare their different functions and meanings. The figures from the bowl and disc-shaped foot are most likely female, naked above the waist and wearing a petaloid skirt, filled with white dots. Although this theme reminds

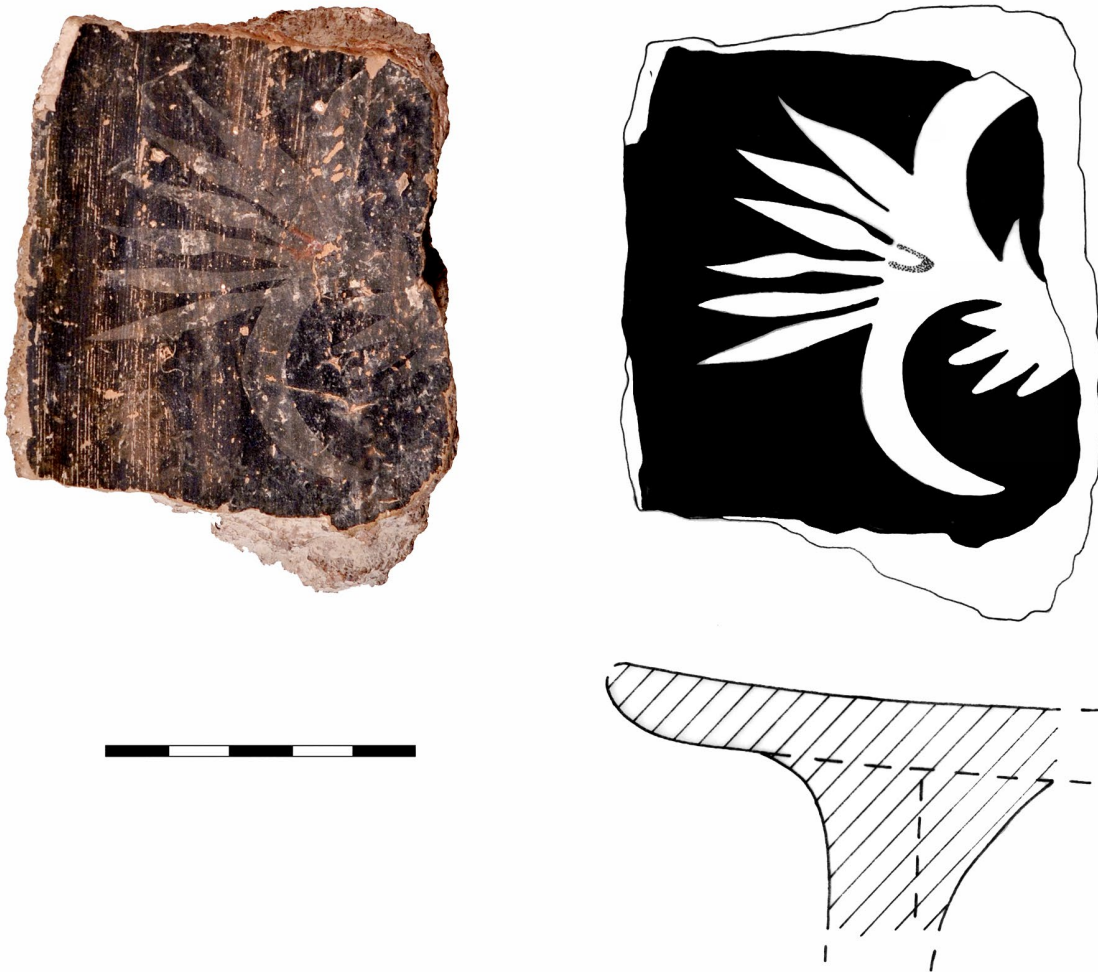


Figure 4. Photo and drawing of offering table F 8228 from Phaistos (drawing G. Merlatti; photo F. Carinci).

us of a well-known Kamares ceramic motif, it is likely that the painter here wanted to represent a special type of garment, perhaps an animal-hide skirt (hence its curving line). Such images usually refer to the skin of goat or sheep (e.g., CMS II 6, nos. 9–11, from Ayia Triada; CMS II 7, nos. 12–15, from Zakros) and they are quite common in the Neopalatial period (Blakolmer 2018: 35), as well as being visible on one long side of the sarcophagus from Ayia Triada (Paribeni 1908, pl. I), where this type of garment is worn by both male and female figures. If this hypothesis is correct, we can here identify in the Protopalatial period the first appearance of this remarkable dress which is usually attributed to special dignitaries of the palatial elite (see Blakolmer 2018: 35). On the other hand, the row of figures painted on the side of the rim of the bowl cannot be identified as either male or female: they wear a long garment concealing their entire body. Different, though, from those just mentioned is the representation of their heads: those from the bowl and the foot have long and

curly hair, and those bending over are depicted with a peaked hat or beret-like cap. This beret is peculiar to male figures in Neopalatial representations, such as on seals depicting ‘special processions’ (Blakolmer 2018), the men participating in a ritual on the ‘Harvester Vase’ from Ayia Triada (Savignoni 1903), and the terracotta figurine from Phaistos (Pernier 1935: pl. XV). The apparel is again connected to a ‘distinct group of dignitaries’ (Blakolmer 2018: 32).

Although the exact meaning of these scenes remains unclear, it is certain that the three groups observed some hierarchical distinction or had different functions within the same ceremony. The way in which the composition of the scene is adapted to the shape of the fruit-stand is remarkably effective: the figured groups are in harmony with the specific parts of the vessel they adorn and, in the case of the frieze on the rim, the linear movement of the attendants is enhanced by the circularity of the field they are part of. The central



Figure 5. Seal-stone from Knossos (CMS II 8, no. 285. Courtesy of the Heidelberg Corpus of Minoan and Mycenaean Seals).

figures depicted on the bowl may represent a dancing or adoration scene, but what the figures on the narrow frieze are doing is more problematic. Levi (1976: 90) interpreted the bent position of the body and the arms as a gesture of adoration; however, the scene could be related to the principal one on the bowl by interpreting these figures as bending to gather flowers (Schiering 1999: 749). We could therefore see all the figure groups as interrelated with each other: the group on the base of the vessel are not obviously active and possibly are attending the performance, leaving the procession frieze on the rim (be they worshippers or flowers gatherers) as more closely related to the main scene painted inside the bowl.

The concentration of ceremonial and figured vessels in the Southwest Quarter of Phaistos Palace has often drawn attention, since the pioneering work of G. Gesell (1985: 124–127), who identified a special sanctuary in this area of the palace. Recent reconsiderations of the ceramic/contexts (Carinci and La Rosa 2001; Carinci 2011; Sanavia 2014a) have confirmed Gesell's interpretation and suggested that the Southwest Complex was both an integral part of the architectural program of the palace and, at the same time, focused on different types of activities, directly connected with lower Court LXX. In this it would have been more inclusive than the Northwest Quarter, which was linked to the Central Court (Militello 2012: 254–255). This picture finds support also from the archival documents coming from this quarter. Their distribution and typology (see, for instance, the Linear A tablet PH 6 from Room XXVIII that lacks numerals [Godart and Olivier 1976: 292–293] and therefore cannot be considered an

administrative document *tout court*) speak in favour of 'external than internal movements of goods or information' (Militello 2012: 254).

Returning to the ceramic evidence, the identification of unpublished vessels from the lower Court LXX (Sanavia 2014a), again with naturalistic painted scenes, has strengthened the importance of religious activities carried out on the ground floor of these rooms and likely to have taken place on the lower court as well. The role played by water in ritual ceremonies has been considered responsible for the occurrence of marine iconographies on special types of vessels.

We can add now two more pieces of evidence to the same effect, both found in the 2016 excavation campaign at Phaistos, west of *Rampa Ellenistica*, an area particularly disturbed and confused by the intense occupations occurring there since the FN period and which during MM IIB were directly connected with the Lower Court LXX.

The first (Figure 4) is a fragment of an offering table from which only a small part has survived, with a scene in white and red paint on dark ground: it shows a stylized hand holding a flower (probably a crocus).<sup>2</sup> It is likely that this vessel was produced by the artisan who created the fruit-stand and the bowl with the 'Snake goddess.' Unfortunately, the scene cannot be reconstructed, but it hints again at the importance in this area of crocus flowers in special circumstances. An important iconographic parallel is the LM I sealing from Knossos (Figure 5).

The second piece (Figure 6) is a fragmentary hemispherical/rounded cup decorated with two registers of impressed decoration: the upper one has a row of female figures in procession, the lower one a series of hatched-drop elements (see also Sanavia 2017: 89–90, fig. 23a–b).<sup>3</sup> The upper register is quite important for our analysis. The figures are facing right, wearing a long, pleated robe, cinched in at the waist by a girdle ending with a tassel; the heads have an emphasized nose and pointed haircut or hat, and the arms are positioned in front of the chest in a typical worshipping gesture. The vessel is realized in the so-called Impressed Fine Ware using metal stamps. Recent studies on this ware (Sanavia 2014b; 2017) demonstrate the unique role played by Phaistos in this peculiar ceramic production, mostly stamped on drinking and fine pouring vessels and with possible Near Eastern or Anatolian connections.

<sup>2</sup> F 8228: Area West of *Rampa Ellenistica*, US 31d South. Dim. max. 4 x 9. Th. 1.4/2.1. Red brown clay, coarse, (HUE 5 YR 5/4 reddish-brown).

<sup>3</sup> F 8232: Area West of *Rampa Ellenistica*, US 58. Ht. 3,8. Nine fragments belonging to the central part of the cup; the rim, likely everted, is missing. Length 5.2. Th. 0.2. Stamp of the female figure: Ht. 1.7 x 0.7. Pink clay, fine (HUE 7,5 YR 7/4 pink).

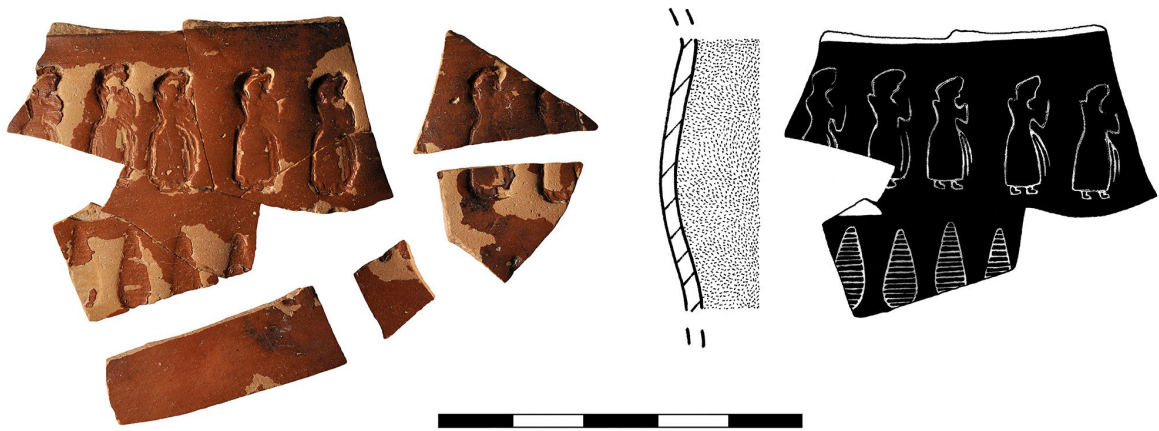


Figure 6. Photo and drawing of cup F 8232 from Phaistos. (Drawing G. Merlatti; photo A. Sanavia).

Good analogies for the female figurine are known in Protopalatial glyptic from Knossos (CMS II 8, no. 39, from the Hieroglyphic Deposit) and from the house tombs cemetery at Petras Kephala (Krzyszkowska 2012: 152–153, fig. 7) (Figure 7), as well as from the terracotta figurines from the Petsophas peak sanctuary (Rutkowski 1991: pl. XXVV:1-3). One face of the prismatic jasper seal at Petras, likely a hieroglyphic sign itself, shows a woman in front of a spear in a well-known gesture (similar is the three-sided prism CMS VI no. 92a), common too on Neopalatial seals and sealings. Finally, of special interest for our analysis are the figurines from the MM II clay model found at Ayia Triada, which show the same elaborate robe and gesture and who are arranged in a circle in an adoration gesture (La Rosa 1995: 542, fig. 7) (Figure 8).

MMII glyptic offers very few comparisons for procession scenes, being more often focused on double (CMS II 2, no. 160) or single standing figures (CMS II 2, nos. 152–153). The few representations of figures in procession (e.g., CMS II 2, nos. 2, 198, 245, 308; CMS III, nos. 158, 170, 239) are very schematic, far from the naturalistic scenes of Neopalatial iconography and the Protopalatial vessels from Phaistos (see also Anastasiadou 2011: pl. 10, Motif 3). A good exception, however, is represented by one sealing from Knossos (Figure 9) that shows a very similar procession of female figures.

The arrangement of the figures and the type of robe (see also Jones 2012) point to the importance of these people in prominent rituals. It is also clear even from this rapid presentation of the material that in this restricted area of Phaistos Palace we may visualize different types of participants, wearing different robes according to their function, and engaged in celebrating rituals. Although our comprehension of all these types



Figure 7. Seal-stone from House Tomb 2 of Petras. (Courtesy of Petras excavation archive).

of garments remains significantly vague, there is no doubt that they represent palatial functionaries and that a specific purpose lies behind the choice.

Two broad aspects attract our attention: the persistent presence of procession scenes and the importance of crocus flowers. Both aspects clearly link the Southwest Quarter with Lower Court LXX which logically must be seen as the focal point where these ceremonies were played out. This court appears to have been the arrival point of a road coming from the south and controlling the entrance of the palace from the south. The area is indeed associated to other special and religious



Figure 8. Clay model HTR 2157-2159 from Ayia Triada. (Courtesy of Italian Archaeological School of Athens).

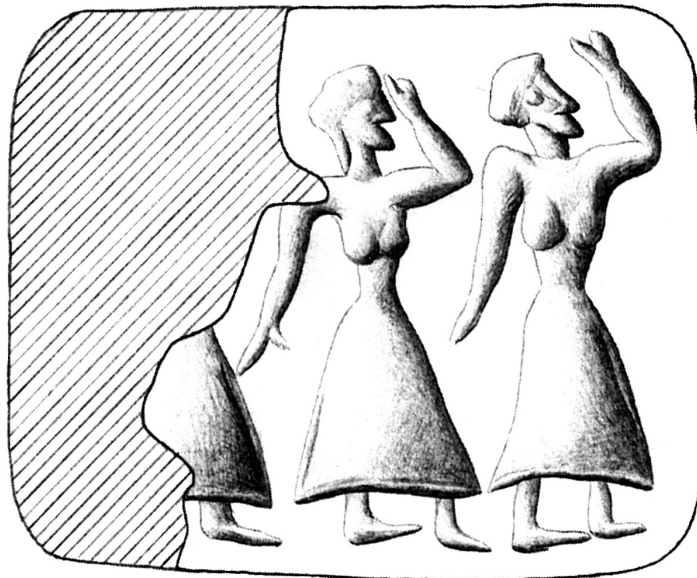


Figure 9. Seal-stone from Knossos. (CMS II 8, no. 266. Courtesy of the Heidelberg Corpus of Minoan and Mycenaean Seals).

compounds, such as the so called *Grotta M*, a natural recess likely used for special offerings and drinking ceremonies.

It is hard to say whether the procession figures impressed on the cup describe a specific ceremony like that one on the fruit-stand. Even if they were purely decorative, something that seems typical of this ware

at Phaistos (Sanavia 2017), this would not rule out procession rituals at Phaistos in this period. The two vessels reveal two different procession performances, to judge from the varying position of the bodies and the arms.

The crocus played a distinct role in the Minoan iconographic repertoire being frequently depicted

from the Protopalatial period down until the end of Neopalatial times (discussion in Day 2011, with bibliography). Its appearance in different media (pottery, seals, frescoes, stone vessels) indicates its special function in Minoan life. Several scholars have offered different explanations: as a dye associated to robes of divinities (Evans 1921: 281), as medicine, skin colouring, sacred plant, or even as colorant for food and drink (Day 2011: 364–373). As already noticed by Evans, the Saffron Gatherer fresco at Knossos links this plant to the religious realm, and the Saffron Goddess fresco from Xeste 3 at Akrotiri (Thera), usually interpreted as a representation of a goddess receiving offerings of saffron, surely supports this interpretation.

The representation of crocus flowers on the fruit-stand from Phaistos and the likely associated vessels (the bowl from *Sottoscala* of Rooms LIII and LV and the offering table from the area of Court LXX) with similar representations bring us to the multiple ‘meanings’ of crocus flowers and saffron spice. The fruit-stand could be intended for collecting the saffron or for holding a liquid mixed with saffron in the bowl. But saffron could also have been burned. Although it has been demonstrated that it does not contain any psychotropic compounds, its distinctive aroma when burned could have been used to enhance ritual events (Day 2011: 370). Evans had already suggested that the plant somehow enhanced communication with divinities (Evans 1930: 142) and this association is confirmed through the two scenes painted on the MM IIB fruit-stand and bowl from Phaistos.

The concentration of vessels with painted scenes particularly devoted to anthropomorphic representations in the Southwest Quarter of the Palace of Phaistos is not an accident, but rather is part of an iconographic revolution realized by the palatial elites of Phaistos at the end of MM II. This revolution goes hand in hand with the monumental transformation of the palatial building started in MM IIA. The accelerating acquisition of power required and assisted the emergence of specialized crafts (see the so-called Kamares Ware and some special productions, such as the Impressed Fine Ware with clear skeuomorphic resonances) and of administrative regulators, and was expressed through special drinking etiquette, and the proliferation of religious symbols substantiating the palatial power.

This process starts in MM IIA with the creation of the northwest façade and the theatrical staircase, followed in MM IIB by an increase in the monumental embellishment of the Palace to accommodate religious practices (Militello 2012; see also Caloi 2018): i.e., the construction of the *Kouloures* and the raised walkways towards the great Propylaeum, now expanded and connected to the lower Southwest Quarter. At the same

time, the Palace started adopting new iconographies with clear foreign origins from Egypt and Anatolia. This well-studied phenomenon has shown how the adoption of foreign images (lions, griffins, sphinxes, genii) and artefacts (triton shells, kantharoi) gradually became incorporated in Minoan life (Sanavia and Weingarten 2016; Simandiraki-Grimshaw 2017). The sealings from *Archivio delle Cretule* of Room 25, as already mentioned, form a special corpus illustrating the adaptation of these new iconographies. The process also implies an artistic burgeoning and the realization of numerous technological innovations, in which processes Phaistos played a leading role on Crete. Amongst such are the specialized production of impressed ware and the creation of painted iconographies on ritual vessels. All this points to an important transformation of the Cretan palatial authorities at the very end of MM IIB, perhaps related to a new concept of kingship, and likely anticipating the MM III period. This process in the south was however abruptly truncated by a great earthquake in MM IIB. From MM IIIA onward, the path followed by the Palace of Phaistos would be considerably different.

### Abbreviations

CMS I–XIII = *Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel*.  
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