

“Ritual” Contexts Revisited. Case studies from the Minoan sites of Pseira, Mochlos and Gournia

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Ritual and cult have interested Aegean prehistoric research since its formation as a sub-field of archaeology in the late 19th century. However, established approaches to ritual are still hindered by theoretical and methodological shortcomings. Most old and traditional research focused on the identification of deities, who are impossible to pin down with certainty. Studies that have alternatively examined the social dimension of ritual usually restrict themselves to its instrumental role in the ideological legitimization of complex power phenomena, such as the Minoan palaces. Methodologically, both approaches concentrate on buildings and artifacts with no obvious daily function, ending up to attribute a ritual character to each and every enigmatic or uninterpretable archaeological find.

The present paper argues that the above research pitfalls may be avoided. Based on existing research about the significance of domestic cult in Bronze Age Crete, it examines indicative assemblages from the Minoan settlement sites of Pseira, Mochlos and Gournia. It focuses on ritual activities at the small scale and in relation to the basis of the Minoan social pyramid, so as to outline a holistic approach to the social dimension of ritual beyond the confines of elite social discourse, to highlight the importance of a contextual methodology and renew the conceptual definition of ritual and ritual equipment.



Fig. 1. The location of the island of Pseira in the Gulf of Mirabello (Google maps).

Introduction

The identification of ritual is frequently difficult in prehistoric contexts. However, when it comes to domestic environments, our methodology faces even more shortcomings. Often, when archaeologists examine data (architecture and portable finds) from a building which do not seem to have an obvious domestic function, they end up labeling them as religious.¹ As a result, Aegeanists have detected shrines and rituals of religious character in almost every archaeological context. The goal of this paper is to explain that there does not exist a clear, archaeologically, detectable divide between ritual and non-ritual actions.

Study Cases²

Pseira

Pseira is a small island located about two kilometers north of the coast of Crete (Fig.1), at the eastern end of the Mirabello Gulf, and reached the peak of its expansion during the Late Minoan IB period (1550-1450 B.C.E.) (hereafter LMIB). Its inhabitants were mostly merchants and fishermen, although a small part of the island had been used for agricultural activities.³

House AC is located almost in the middle of

the settlement. It is distinguished by the good state of preservation of its architecture and by its frescoes. Room AC1 is the largest room of the house and just before its final destruction, in LMIB (1450 B.C.E.), was joined with Room AC6. The walls of Room AC1 provide us with some of the best examples of pseudo-isodomic masonry within the site. Rooms AC1 and AC6 proved to be poor in finds, and those revealed were of uncertain context.⁴ The majority of the artifacts consisted of ordinary pottery, cups, jugs, basins, amphorae, storage vessels⁵ and a stone cup⁶ or bowl. Two clay, discoid loom-weights⁷, one stone loom-weight,⁸ an obsidian flake⁹ and a quartz crystal¹⁰ also came to light. Marine shells,¹¹ bones of sheep and goat have been revealed as well.

Room AC6 revealed fragments of wall decoration (frescoes). There is no certainty whether they had fallen from the upper floor of the house, or were found in situ. According to Maria Shaw, their restoration is completely hypothetical due to the fragmentary state of their preservation¹² (Fig. 2). If we accept the most commonly proposed restorations of these fragments,¹³ they depicted two women facing each other, but it is impossible to understand their relationship or the meaning of the scene.¹⁴ We cannot be certain whether this represented ritual action or daily life activity. However, due to these frescoes some



Fig. 2. Part of a seated woman depicted in Room's AC6 frescoes. Archaeological Museum of Heraklion (photograph by the author).

have proposed that this house constituted a shrine.¹⁵

The architectural vestiges of Space AC10, located to the SE corner of the house, are very scant. The excavators believe this was an exterior space which contained a bench and a slab-lined pit/cist located against the east wall. Large quantities of fragmented and intact cups were found inside the pit, along with jugs, cooking pots, a miniature tripod vessel, a hand tool,¹⁶ animal and fish bones¹⁷ and a fragment of an animal figurine.¹⁸ Furthermore, charcoal of pine and olive trees were found inside the pit.¹⁹ The remaining area of AC10 revealed plenty of cups, jugs, fish and animal bones and charcoal of oak. The pottery bore no signs of burning. Traditionally related to ritual, is the discovery of two triton shells. One was found in the adjacent Room AC4²⁰ and another one in Space AC10.²¹ We know that, quite often and after special processing, triton shells were sometimes used as rhytons in rituals for pouring libations.²²

Discussion for House AC

Wall decoration with elaborate frescoes is often observed during the neopalatial period in houses,²³ but rarely can we detect examples having such an elaborate output like those of House AC1. The choice of this iconographic motif, however, does not necessarily connect the women with divinities or with the epiphany of a goddess.²⁴ Furthermore, there are no other artifacts or architectural features which could lead us to the conclusion that rooms AC1 and AC6 were dedicated to ritual action. Fragments of plaster have also been collected within other settlements in the Mirabello Gulf but are too fragmentary to be restored and interpreted.²⁵ Moreover, the presence of loom weights, raw materials such as quartz, obsidian, and bones of animals suggest domestic activities and the possible production of household goods. Only the data related to Space AC10 could be indicative of the occurrence of ceremonial acts, especially due to the presence of the slab-lined pit, the triton shell and the figurine. The ritual use of triton shells depends on the way they have been processed, including the addition of possible decorations. Nevertheless, decorated triton shells found on Crete, are extremely rare.²⁶ These types of triton shells could be used either as decorative artifacts, or as ritual objects. By contrast, natural triton shells seem to have been used as scoops, some as pouring vessels, as containers,²⁷ as trumpets²⁸ or as simple funnels.²⁹ Unfortunately, the fragmentation of triton shells found in House AC prevents us from being able to discuss whether they had been processed or decorated. Keeping in mind the rest of the finds from the assemblage of Space AC10, we can support the interpretation that the shells were part of a feasting equipment and more specifically, that they may have been used as containers.³⁰ The pit could be identified as a "*bothros-βόθρος*", for discarding ritual objects after using them. The majority of the artifacts, the figurine included, were fragmented, perhaps due to ritual fragmentation.³¹ An analogous case comes from Viglia Gramvousas Kissamou,



Fig. 3. Digital reconstruction of the peninsula of Mochlos during Minoan times (Vavouranakis 2011).

where another “*bothros*” containing cups, jugs and an animal’s figurine came to light in a building of the MM settlement.³²

Mochlos

The island of Mochlos is a small, circular rock of limestone in the Gulf of Mirabello, just 150 meters from the coast of Crete (Fig. 3). During the neopalatial period, the island was connected to the mainland³³ and the settlement was well organized and wealthy. Its inhabitants were predominantly merchants, farmers and fishermen.

The House of the Lady with Ivory Pyxis is located to the NW section of the settlement and is thought to be the house of a priestess where rituals were taking place. Its masonry consists of slightly carved stones and rubble and it was a three-storey building.³⁴ On its eastern façade, two windows faced small, open areas (Fig. 4). A circular bin, made of rubble, is located right next to the northern window, which is the largest (Fig. 5). Some smaller bins were revealed a little bit to the north. A fire pit, which was located next to the window, to the left of the bin, contained carbonized figs, grapes and olives.³⁵ Some of the pulp of the olives was preserved, as well as one of their stem, which led the excavator to assume that an olive tree was growing on the spot of the finds, perhaps inside the bin, while the fire pit was in use.³⁶ In a second fire pit, located in front of the window, the

excavators found whole grains of emmer wheat and grass. According to their opinion, a fire was lit in order to preserve grains for ritual purposes.³⁷

Lavish artifacts came from the deposit that collapsed from the upper floor of the house,³⁸ such as an ivory pyxis³⁹ and a collection of pins.⁴⁰ Inside the pyxis, necklaces were revealed, one with 80 beads of Egyptian amethyst and others made of semi-precious stones, such as lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, silver from Lavrio, and carnelian from the Levant.⁴¹ Some of the beads were in the shape of a Minoan lily, an eight shield, and a bull’s head. On the ground floor other important possessions of the dweller were discovered, such as two large bronze bowls, a stone cosmetic palette and a carnelian seal depicting two lions.⁴²

The ivory pyxis is, indeed, unique. Despite the fact that it was severely damaged by fire, the scene represented has been restored. The upper surface of its lid, which was carved in low relief, depicts a woman sitting on a stepped altar or building and an olive tree coming out of it. Above the woman’s head we can clearly see another figure soaring, while three more people are trying to approach the seated figure. Between them, an object is floating in the air. This narrative scene is thought to represent the epiphany of a goddess.⁴³

Discussion for the House of the Lady with the Ivory Pyxis.

On the basis of the current evidence, there is no doubt that the aforementioned objects and structures are unique. But do they indicate ritual acts? The fire pits mentioned, which were filled with fruits, cereals and olives are quite common in prehistoric settlements. Spyridon Marinatos,⁴⁴ amongst others,⁴⁵ argued the sacred character of such pits. It was noticed that in present-day Cypriot villages, people used to dig shallow pits inside their dwellings or in their yards, in order to store cereals, fruits and legumes. To seal off the stored material, they often used



Fig. 4. House of the Lady with the Ivory Pyxis. NE façade and open area (photograph by the author).

ashes, bran, sand, dry leaves or sea-weed. Furthermore, according to Marinatos, grass was used in these pits as fuel for lighting fire. This could explain why the excavator of the Lady's House said that grass had been found in the second pit. Consequently, the sacred function of the fire cannot be assumed.⁴⁶ The fire may have been used instead to heat food supplies which were placed in the pits, and burn the eggs of beetles which must have been accumulated, just as Marinatos describes in other cases. As a result, the small court to the NE of the House of the Lady with Ivory Pyxis was probably used for domestic activities⁴⁷ rather than ritual ones.

The pyxis is a luxurious object which contained the jewelry of a woman,⁴⁸ but nothing indicates that the latter was a priestess. Undoubtedly, the iconographic theme carved on its lid was often depicted during the LMIB period, especially on golden signet rings⁴⁹. It was either part of a mythological tradition, which was in trend during the LMIB period or even an expression of religious beliefs, because religious symbols are part of culture and as a result their repetition or presence does not necessarily imply conscious religious action. Furthermore, the beads of her necklaces included symbols such as the

bull or the eight shield, however, these are the usual symbols we come across everywhere on Minoan sites.⁵⁰ It is instead just as likely that this house was the residence of a woman who likely belonged to the elite⁵¹ of Minoan society.

Gournia

The town of Gournia is situated at the inlet of the Gulf of Mirabello, oriented north (Fig.7). During the neopalatial period, approximately, 400-1200 people lived there. Recent excavations proved that Gournia was



Fig. 5. Large bin next to the northern window (view from the SE, photograph by the author).



Fig. 6. Part of the town of Gournia showing the typical rubble masonry and part of a road. View from the North (photograph by the author).

a center of pottery production in the Gulf of Mirabello, but metalworking, sea trade and farming were also important activities for its inhabitants.⁵²

House Cm is located on the NE section of the town. The main investigator's notes, do not offer much information regarding its architectural style⁵³, but it likely consisted of the typical characteristics of domestic architecture found throughout Gournia⁵⁴ (Fig.6). Room C60 was the paved anteroom of the house and Rooms 57, 58, 59 were basement rooms.

Room 58 offered the largest quantity of portable finds in the house. All of the artifacts have recently been dated to the LMIB period.⁵⁵ Apart from sherds of pithoi and other storage vessels like amphorae, many other artifacts came to light, such as jugs, a kernos (the so-called Trick-cup) which must have been used as a brazier due to the holes which are present on its base and body⁵⁶ (Fig. 8), and at least 13 rhyta, most of them conical. The assemblage of rhyta also included a bull's head rhyton.⁵⁷ One of the amphorae had a very peculiar shape and was given the name "*Pilgrim*

*Bottle*⁵⁸" due to its resemblance to a human figure. The house has been connected to pottery production because of the discovery of the rhyta, thought to have been produced at the same workshop.⁵⁹

Discussion of House Cm

This house revealed important information regarding the pottery production of the LMIA-LMIB period. Keeping in mind that 11 pottery kilns were found in the settlement,⁶⁰ it can be argued that House Cm was connected to pottery production or trade.⁶¹ The aforementioned conical rhyta should not be strictly related to ritual use because their presence and decorations were common during the LMIB period. In a house with large enough storage capacity for liquids such as olive oil or wine, the rhyta could be used as funnels, in order to transfer liquids from one vessel to another, or may have simply been products to be sold by the potter. It is interesting that the situation observed in House Cm, with rhyta having fallen from the upper floor, is also attested in the so-called House of the Rhyta at Pseira. Fallen rhyta into the ground and basement



Fig.7. Map showing the geographical relationship of the three sites.

rooms show that they were mainly used on the upper floors of houses, perhaps, as auxiliary vessels in order to take oil or wine from the pithoi of the basement rooms and transfer them into smaller containers on the upper floors. Recently, it was argued that, because the rhyta of Room C58 were found with their conical edges lodged in the ground, they were therefore used for libations directly into the earth.⁶² However, the excavator is clear that this context was actually created by the collapse of the building.⁶³ Furthermore, although there were other rare and unique types of pottery, such as the “Pilgrim Bottle”, the bull’s head rhyton, or the “Kernos”, which might have been interpreted as ritual objects, these only indicate that the house contained a variety of pottery shapes, of varying qualities. It is most probable that House Cm was the residence of a pottery merchant⁶⁴ or of a wealthy inhabitant due to the house’s

large storage capacity and amount of pottery.

Conclusions

Many definitions of the concept of ritual have been formulated by researchers,⁶⁵ however the material remains of an action must be carefully reconstituted by following the context in which these remains are entangled in order to confirm their use for a symbolic action (ritual) or for practical, daily activities. Moreover, domestic rituals should not be understood as strictly related to religion but rather to the multitude’s inward worries and to its agony to be protected through the use of symbols. As was illustrated by the above examples, ritual can sometimes be used by archaeologists studying domestic contexts as an attempt to redefine and constrict the identity of the multitude. Sporadic and fragmented finds could be interpreted as popular rituals of secular character, such as the feasting in Space AC10, where triton shells were used as containers or as trumpets, while the animal’s figurines could have had an apotropaic purpose. The above-mentioned finds could also be related to the protection of wealth and prosperity, as in the case of the lady with the ivory pyxis, whose jewelry depicted apotropaic symbols such as the bull’s head, the lily and the eight shield. Such symbols could have been used as charms. Accordingly, the bull’s head rhyton and the



Fig. 8. House Cm, Room 58, The “Trick-cup” (Hawes et.al. 1908, 40).

Trick-cup from House Cm could also have been used in libations during a feasting, which could be of secular character as well. Yet, the Trick-cup could also have been employed as a strainer. Finally, frescoes were often present during the neopalatial period and were indicative of the high status of a residence and its dweller. Consequently, the simple occurrence of wall decorations cannot be used as an argument for the ritual function of an architectural space. Lastly, domestic rituals consist of repeated actions, having rules which are not always rigid⁶⁶ and leaving behind commonly found material objects. These actions reinforce social relationships and protect the community and its cultural identity.

Endnotes:

- 1 Many scholars have discussed ways to detect rituals. See for instance: Hodder 2012, 9-10 and 27; Hodder 2014, 15-19; Renfrew 1985, 3; Wright 1995, 341-3; Nicolaidou 2016, 97-107; Sikla 2011, 219-220; Whitehouse 1996, 12-13; Kyriakidis 2007b, 15. We must also keep in mind that rituals are not always related to religion but can be secular as well.
- 2 The following sites were chosen as examples of settlements, which were distant from the central palatial institutions but at the same time dynamic and developing. They seem to construct their own cultural and communal identity, accepting the least possible influence from the palaces.
- 3 Betancourt-Davaras 1988, 209; Betancourt 1998b, 49-52; Betancourt-Banou 1991, 107-109.
- 4 The excavators faced serious difficulties trying to define the room's stratigraphy. It is certain that part of the soil deposit which was removed included material transported there from another location, probably by Seager during his excavations on the island in 1906 and 1907 (Betancourt 1998a, 33).
- 5 Banou 1998, 16.
- 6 Betancourt 1998a, 33-34, pl.17, n. 137.
- 7 Betancourt 1998a, 34.
- 8 Betancourt-Dierckx 1998, 31, n. 133, pl. 17, 19.
- 9 Dierckx 1998, 27, pl. 14, n. 117.
- 10 Dierckx 1998, 27, pl. 15, n.124.
- 11 Reese 1998, 35-36.
- 12 Shaw 1998a, 72-75.
- 13 Shaw 1998a, 55-76; Shaw 1998b, 167-169; Shaw 2009, Shaw and Betancourt 2009, 113-118.
- 14 The two women depicted are restored either seated or standing. Another restoration shows only one of them as a seated figure and the second one as standing.
- 15 Hood 1977, 165; Hood 1978, 56.
- 16 Banou 1998, 22-23, Dierckx, 1998, 27, n. 128.
- 17 Rose 1998, 36 and 38.
- 18 Betancourt 1998a, 34, n. 140.
- 19 Schoch 1998, 39-40.
- 20 Reese 1998, 36.
- 21 Rose 1998, 38.
- 22 Triton shells have been detected in other cases of benched rooms as well, such as Room 12 of House AB at Pseira and Room 2 of the Northwest Building at Gournia, where two deposits of triton shells came to light (Reese 1995, 42; Watrous et al. 2015, 411). However, these shells are probably connected to artisanal activities.
- 23 Decorating the walls of a residence is a sign of wealth and high status. This is probably why many rooms in minoan villas bear elaborate frescoes. The neopalatial villa of NirouChani has wall decoration inside its storage rooms (Sakellarakis 2011, 57-58, 59-61).
- 24 Immerwahr 1990, 62 and 184.
- 25 However, new light has recently been shed regarding frescoes from domestic assemblages, offering us more information concerning this aspect of Minoan art (Chapin 2018, 14-16, fig. 1, 2 and 3).
- 26 The majority of these examples were found at Phaistos and belong to the Middle Minoan Period (Savania-

Veingarten 2016, 337-339). Some later examples come from Gournia, such as a triton shell made of copper from House Cg, Room 30 (Hawes 1908, 48, n. 16, pl. XI 16), a clay triton shell from House Eb, Room 13 (Hawes 1908, 48, n. 17, pl. XI, 17-18) and one more clay triton shell from the Hill House, Room 10 (Hawes 1908, 48, n. 18, pl. XI, 18).

27 Reese 1990, 11.

28 They could have been used for notifying the inhabitants of the settlement when a ship was approaching the island.

29 This is why they are quite frequently found amongst cooking pots, cups and lopads, i.e. in the Northwest Building of Gournia (Watrous et al. 2015, 411). Furthermore, triton shells have been unearthed in contexts consisting of hand tools and raw materials, namely in possible workshops i.e. in a deposit that fell into Room BV1 of the Plateia Building at Pseira (Reese 1998, 141). Moreover, Åstrom (1990, 5-6) relates a triton shell found in Hala Sultan Tekke, Cyprus, to the religious function of the room in which it was found. However, the context implies domestic and craft activities. The shell had been carefully worked so that it could be blown as a trumpet.

30 Reese (1990, 11) observes, that most shells are not modified at all, and were probably used as containers for foods and/or other items. This kind of triton shells are mostly found on domestic environments.

31 The fragmentation of archaeological remains can be caused by a series of post-depositional factors, however intentional or semi-intentional fragmentation can also be caused by actants in order to create new, collective identities (Vavouranakis-Bourbou 2015, 172-196). This would be important in settlements isolated from the hinterland of Crete such as Pseira.

32 Σκόρδου 2012, 527, fig. 4. Another similar context comes from Palaikastro (Crete), where a triton shell of LMI date was found inside a cist. It was interpreted as a votive deposit (MacGillivray and Sackett 1984, 129, pl. IIg).

33 Leatham and Hood 1958/1959, 273-275.

34 Soles 2016, 249-252.

35 Soles 2016, 251-252.

36 Soles 2016, 251-252.

37 Soles 2016, 252.

38 Soles and Davaras 2010, 1.

39 Soles 2016, 249, pl. LXXXI-LXXXII.

40 Soles 2016, 249, pl. LXXXb.

41 All these precious materials were imported to Crete and to Mochlos.

42 Soles 2016, 251.

43 Dimopoúλου and Rethemiotákis 2004, 19-24.

44 Marinatos 1968, 83-84.

45 Papadákis 2018, 39-58.

46 The excavator claims that the priestess appeared in the window wearing all the jewelry (*regalia*), while her adorants were burning the offerings brought to her inside the pits. The burning of the offerings was conducted in order to succeed their ritual preservation (Soles 2016, 251-252).

47 Small courts in a house or in larger open areas

within settlements were practical for activities such as cooking or grinding cereals. An example is the Public Court of Pseira (Betancourt 1999, 142; Dierckx 1999, 155). Also, a small court used for everyday activities has been identified outside the entrance of Xeste 3 on the island of Thera (Μαρινάτου 2014, 113). Moreover, this kind of activity in open areas has been notified since the FN-EMI periods in other settlements of eastern Crete (Papadatos 2012, 70-71).

48 We know that women used to wear jewels similar to the ones depicted on the frescoes of Thera and other sites of the Bronze Age Aegean (Morgan 1988, fig. 180; Doumas 1992, 136, fig. 100; Doumas 138-145, fig. 101-108; Kontorli-Papadopoulou 1996, 129, pl. XIII, XIX, XXVII, and pl. 6-9).

49 Dimopoúλου and Rethemiotákis 2004; Soles 2016, 249-251.

50 These symbols are commonly found in domestic, palatial and funerary contexts in Minoan Crete. As a result, it is very difficult to distinguish ritual actions in non-funerary contexts. However, the occurrence of symbols almost everywhere could be explained through their possible use as amulets and charms.

51 The exotic raw materials are characteristic elements of the financial power and/or trade networks that were developed by the Minoans.

52 Watrous et al. 2000, 471-8.

53 Fotou 1993, 71.

54 Hawes et al. 1908, 21, 39. The excavator notes that upper and partition walls were made of large sun-dried bricks. The outer walls were constructed of rubble. The usual masonry in Gournia is rubble, while ashlar masonry is only attested in the palatial building and in the buildings to its south (Hawes et al. 1908, 21).

55 Watrous and Heimroth 2011, 200; Betancourt 1985, 137.

56 The Kernos or “*Trick cup*” is a composite vessel, comprised of two jugs and one conical cup. The cups could never be filled due to the holes which are visible in the bottom and sides of the vessels. Therefore, its use as a brazier or “firebox” of special design and shape is more likely.

57 It was found in Room C58, however it is not described in the published catalogues. There is only a sketch of it in color Plate I (Hawes et al. 1908, 39, pl. I).

58 Pilgrim flasks from Hala Sultan Tekke in Cyprus were probably used as containers of perfumed oil (Åstrom 1990, 6).

59 Watrous and Heimroth 2011, 204-206, footnote 18.

60 Watrous 2015, 12-13.

61 Houses Aa and Fb were the residences of potters as well, as indicated by the presence of potter’s wheels (Fotou 1993, 86; Watrous 2015, 12-13; Watrous et al. 2015, 422-423).

62 Papadaki (2018, 43) makes this statement and cites Hood (1997, 113), who had earlier claimed that: «... *the hoard of rhytons found standing with their bottoms upwards on the floor in room C58 in House Cm.*». That indicates that Papadaki was mistaken because the conical edge of the rhytons was looking upwards and not

towards the floor.

63 "... *The value of vases 25-41 is greatly enhanced by their having been found together... In rapid succession vase after vase was recovered from within and around the pithoi, where they had fallen in the collapse of the house. This one small room added seventeen to our whole number of decorated vases (see Plate F and Plate VII, Nos 25-41)*" (Hawes et al. 1908, 39). As a result, Hood and Papadaki are both mistaken.

64 At least 70 vessels came to light from this house (Hawes et al. 1908, 39).

65 Staal 1979, 3-9; Renfrew 1985, 3-26; Turner 1986, 75; Barrett 1991, 5-6; Bell 1997, 128-9; Kyriakidis 2007a, 294; Verhoeven 2011, 116-121.

66 This is postulated because the possible daily ritual actions of the multitude cannot follow the strict rules of an authority (priests, kings, intendants), either due to the lack of means which are necessary or due to plain ignorance of the rules.

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