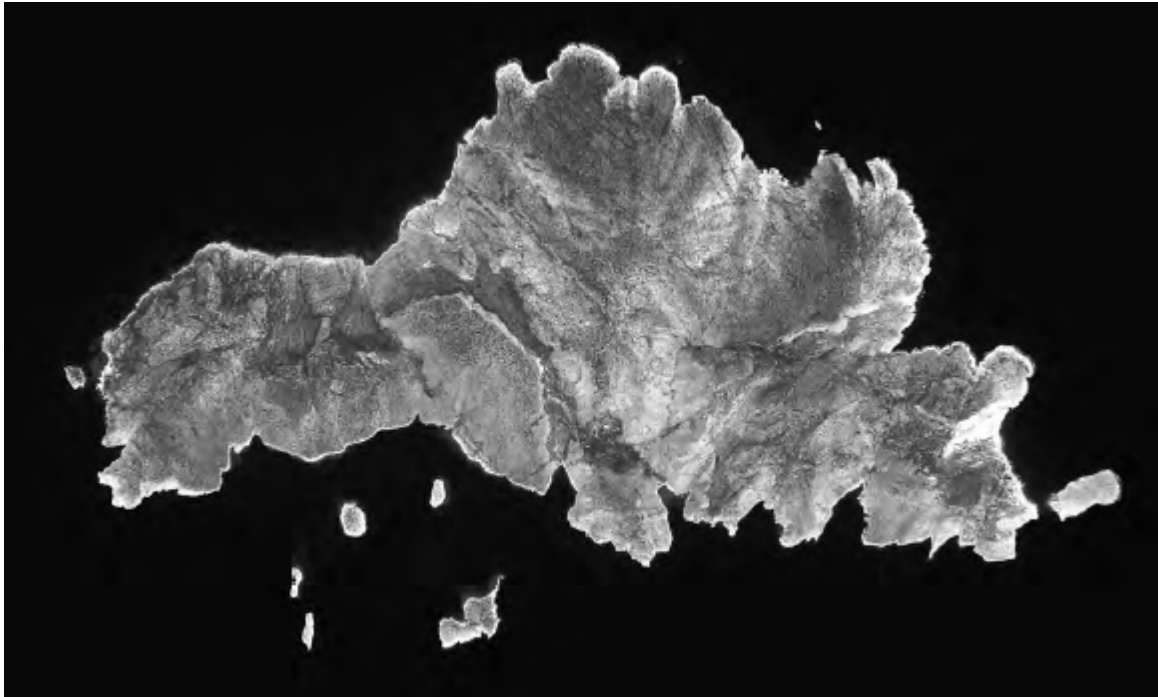


Assessment Three

Site Analysis

The Sanctuary at Keros and the Islet of Dhaskalio



Satellite Image of the Island of Keros

1450605

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HPAH7014 Spaces, Places and Objects in Ancient Mediterranean Religions

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Unless otherwise indicated, all images are courtesy of (Renfrew, C. *et al.*, 2013)

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Introduction

This paper examines the Early Cycladic II (ECII) sanctuary complex of Keros, with particular emphasis on the settlement on the islet of Dhaskalio and the ritualised ‘Special Deposits South’. It concludes a broader portfolio of work exploring Early Cycladic culture through its figurative traditions—including Gail Hoffman’s interpretation of mourning in *Painted Ladies* and a semiotic and new materialist analysis of the Harpist of Keros—by situating these objects within the wider geographical, environmental, and cultural contexts from which they emerged.

Located at the centre of the Cycladic archipelago, south of Naxos and between Ios and Amorgos, Keros is now recognised as one of the most significant ECII ritual landscapes (Renfrew, C. *et al.*, 2022). Excavations have focused on the fragmentary assemblages of the ‘Special Deposits North’ and ‘Special Deposits South’, together with the adjacent coastal zone of Kavos and the islet of Dhaskalio, forming what Renfrew has identified as the earliest known maritime sanctuary in the Aegean (Renfrew, C., Boyd and Ramsey, 2012). It is also one of the most recently excavated of the islands, with the exception of the 1984 excavation of the site at Skarkos on the island of Ios (Maniatis, Marthari and Polymeris, 2023)



Fig 1 Map of Keros in relation to Naxos and Amorgos

The Keros excavations have largely focused on two sites of fragmentary deposits, namely the ‘Special Deposits North’ and the ‘Special Deposits South’. Along with the islet of Dhaskalio and the adjacent coastal area of Kavos, the site has been identified as the world’s earliest maritime sanctuary (Renfrew, C., Boyd and Ramsey, 2012). This essay provides a site analysis of Kavos, focusing specifically on the the islet of Dhaskalio and the ritualised "Special Deposits South" and will primarily draw on the

work of Renfrew and others, to argue that the site functioned as a "centre of congregation" for a pan-Cycladic community (Renfrew, C. *et al.*, 2022).

This analysis utilizes the theoretical frameworks of the assemblage and new materiality, along with the related concept of immanence to consider whether the island setting, along with the relatively inhospitable nature of the landscape served as a liminal threshold, separating the mundane world of the individual islands from a shared, sacred maritime space (Renfrew, C., Boyd and Ramsey, 2012).

Furthermore, through the lens of new materiality, the intentional fragmentation of marble figurines and vessels is examined not merely as an act of destruction, but as an act which may have concluded the life cycle of the object and also created lasting physical links between distant communities and the sanctuary (Renfrew 2011).

Ultimately, this analysis aims to interrogate the site in a way that goes beyond the physical space and demonstrate how the material world along with the material and ritual culture of the ECII islanders converged at Keros for over 500 years, particularly in regard to the phase classified by Renfrew as Dhaskalio A and B – the Keros-Syros culture (Renfrew, C., 2013c, p. 6)

History of the excavations

The first known find on the island was in 1873 when a large marble head was found, apparently in a grave. This was followed in 1884 by Ludwig Ross, who discovered the intact Harpist of Keros and the Flute Player. Ross noted Dhaskalio in his writings, but it is generally accepted he did not visit it. Renfrew notes that the actual sites of discovery are unknown and therefore not associated with the Kavos Special Deposits. These figures differ from the figurines found in the Special Deposits North and South in that they are 3D and not deliberately broken and were arguably intended for repeated use in burial rituals.

Formal archaeological involvement began in 1963 after reports of systematic looting in the area now identified as the Special Deposits North. This led to a rescue excavation in 1964 at both Kavos and Dhaskalio, followed by a more comprehensive recovery effort in 1968. The 1987 campaign combined a comprehensive surface survey with targeted excavations, confirming the scale of looting but also that the

artifacts had been the subject of intentional breakage prior to deposition and that this breakage had occurred at other sites. This laid the foundation for the Cambridge Keros Project (2006–2008), the first systematic excavation of the Keros–Dhaskalio complex. Operating on the hypothesis that Dhaskalio served as a significant ECII settlement, the project also explored an untouched area 150m south of the original looted site. Designated the Special Deposits South, it provided evidence confirming that the depositions were the result of complex ritual practices. Renfrew notes that a cairn of stones was placed over the deposit at the end of its life, possibly indicating a closure ritual. Aeolianite shelves about 1m high held the fragments before they were buried over time.

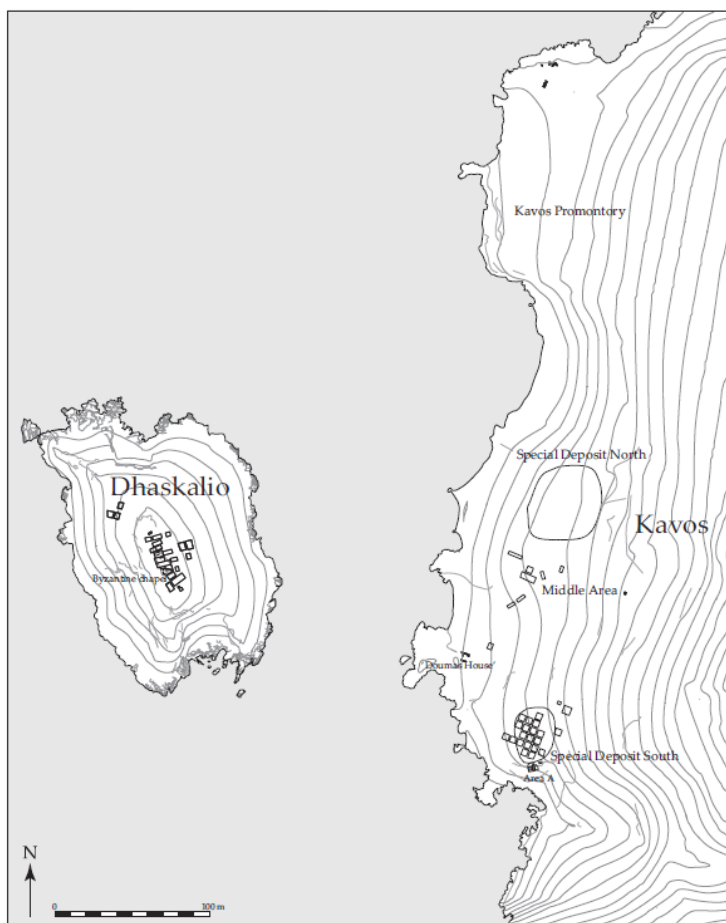


Fig 2 Topographical plan of Dhaskalio and Kavos, showing the location of excavation trenches.

The excavation uncovered a large number of artefacts, including 498 Folded Arm Figures, 3183 conical-necked jar sherds, 3452 pieces of obsidian, bowl rims, sauceboats, lamp sherds and stone disks—totally unlike a settlement assemblage. No human remains were found, although a few burial sites were located in rock shelters immediately below the deposits. Fabrics in the ceramics suggested the artefacts were broken elsewhere in the Cyclades.

Renfrew et al. argue that people engaged with the site

over several centuries, bringing broken pieces for ceremonial deposition, making Keros the first maritime sanctuary as well as a centre of congregation.

Dhaskalio itself was excavated in 2007, from which Renfrew developed a three-phase chronology (A: 2750–2500 BC; B: 2500–2400 BC; C: 2400–2250 BC). Discoveries included terrace walls designed as foundations for buildings, constructed from imported Naxos marble. The number of buildings suggests significant portions of Dhaskalio were inhabited, though evidence for domestic activity was limited. Most buildings were constructed in Phases A and B, with only a few occupied in Phase C. Concentric terraces and a stairway leading to the summit were discovered, possibly leading to a long hall with storage areas and large jars. Further excavations indicated Dhaskalio may have been the largest of a network of settlements, with evidence for metalworking and obsidian blade production. An estimated 7000 tonnes of marble was imported, and high winds on the plateau facilitated metallurgical processes, confirming Dhaskalio as a centre of manufacture as well as a sanctuary (Renfrew, C., 2013c).

Topography of Keros and Dhaskalio

In their conference paper for the 10th International Congress of the Hellenic Geographical Society, Vandarakis, Liosis and Pavlopoulos (2014) give the following topographical observations. Keros is an island of approximately 15 km². It is the largest island in the group called the Small Cyclades that also comprises the islands of Donousa Schoinousa, Folegandros and Ano - Kato Koufonisi. Even given its small landmass, the ground is complex with many different types of landform, due to the geological activity that has modelled the island's structure. Much of the island is composed of steep slopes, particularly to the south where the slopes make this part of the island inaccessible. There are areas of alluvial deposit¹ but these are in the southern parts where most of the high cliffs are also located, and it is not possible to create pools of water here due to the steepness of the land. However, pooling of water and sediment, known as *alluvial fans*, were found to be possible in the less steep northern side of the island. Vandarakis et.al. note that it is here where most known habitations evolved. They also note that there are flatter areas at the top of the slopes, known as *planation surfaces* and that the slopes themselves are of

¹ Alluvial deposits are materials such as sand, silt, clay, and gravel that have been transported and deposited by flowing water. Nocita ()

medium to steep forms. The site of excavation of the Special Deposits, North and South, are to the West-Northwest of the island in an area known as *Kavos Dhaskaliou* (Renfrew, C., 2016). Renfrew also notes that while the slopes are marble, it is not of good quality such as the 'faultless, white marble [...] from the quarries of Paros and Naxos'. According to his findings, the only farmable land lies between Gerani and Dhaskalio, and this area also shows archaeological evidence of human settlement. The island is also largely devoid of trees, but it is likely that wooded areas did exist in ECII but that they were utilized for metal production during the lifetime of the sanctuary. After the last people left in the 1970's, the only inhabitants are goats, partridges, wild rabbits and pigeons. (Renfrew, C., 2013c, p. 7). Dixon (2013) also points out that the Special Deposits sit within a natural amphitheatre created by faulting. Additionally, his geological survey of the region notes that high-quality white marble largely forms the make-up of the neighbouring islands of Naxos, Paros, and Ios.

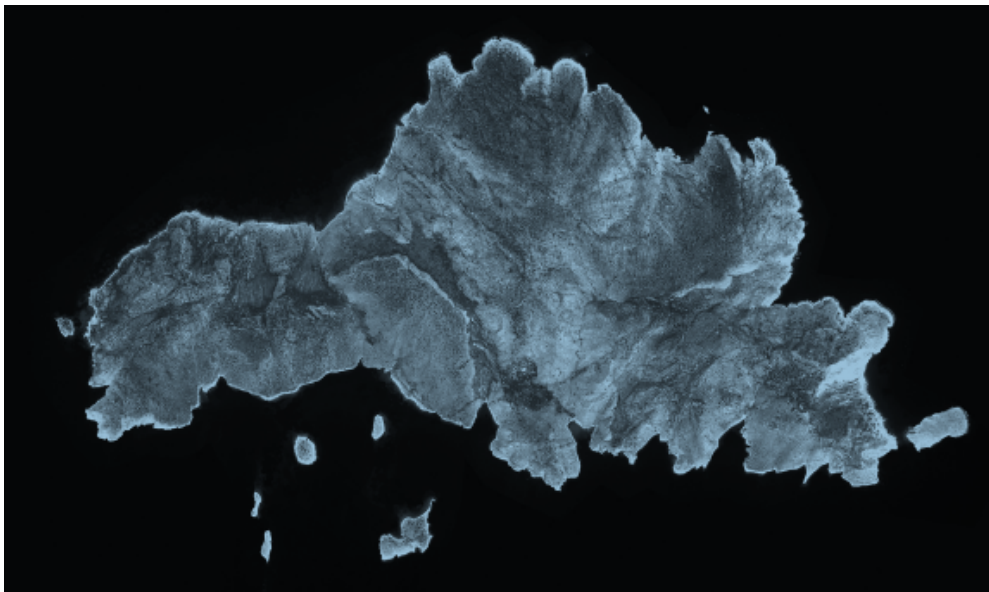


Fig 3 Satellite image of Keros with Dhaskalio to the west

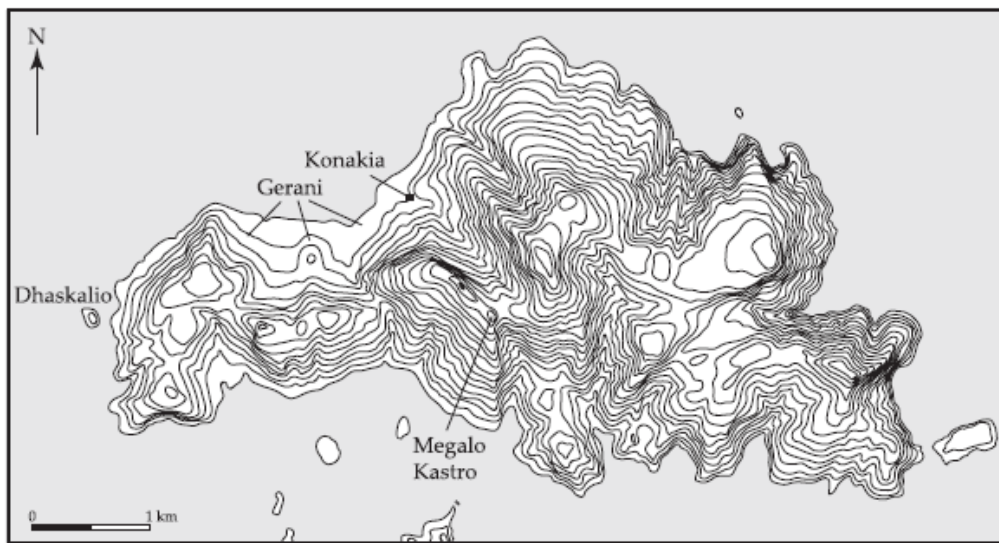


Fig 4 diagram of Keros and Dhaskalio with contour lines to illustrate steepness of the slopes

Dhaskalio itself is also uninhabited and located some 90m offshore from Kavos Dhaskalio. Little more than 200m in length, it is a steep pyramid shaped islet that has been identified as the site of an ECII settlement. Its landform is largely scrub vegetation which is too difficult to grow crops. Dixon and Kinnaird (2013, pp. 29–31) note that, in general, exposed bedrock is comprised of fractured marble and marble breccia, although there are areas, as well as in parts of Kavos, that are composed of crystalline marble. There is also evidence of folded banded marble in various areas on Dhaskalio. However, this marble was not mined for construction and while the reason for this is ultimately unknown, it is probably due to its intersection with granite, making it an unsatisfactory building material. They conclude that most of the marble found on Dhaskalio is imported from Naxos. The islet's plateau which was exposed to high-velocity winds, facilitated the high temperatures essential for metallurgical processes and the abundance of excavated artifacts confirms that Dhaskalio functioned as a sophisticated centre for metal production (Current World Archaeology, 2018).

Today the island can be seen to be a separate entity to Keros itself, however in ECII, sea levels were much lower; Dhaskalio was at this time connected to the main island via a causeway which allowed for walkable access to the site of the Special Deposits.

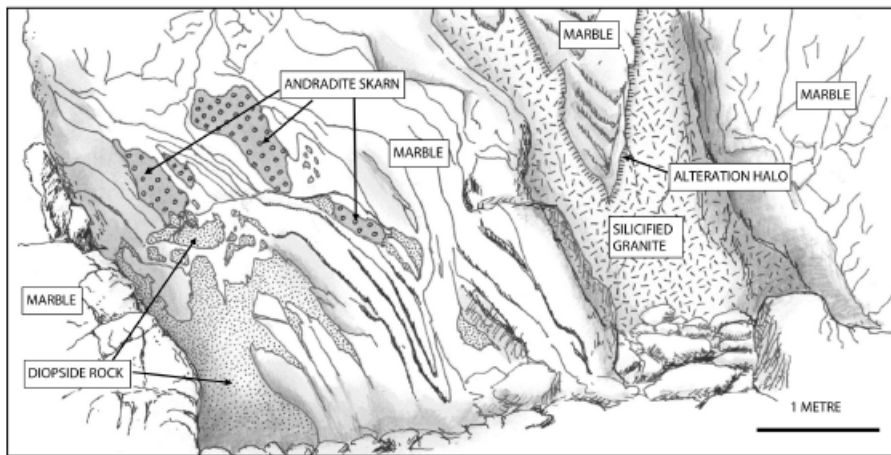


Fig. 5 Sketch of various marble deposits at a sea cave at southeast Dhaskalio.

The topography of Keros is crucial, as is the sea crossing, for discussing how natural environments can evoke experiences associated with the sublime, which in philosophical literature includes feelings of smallness, vulnerability and heightened self-awareness in the face of an environment outside of human control. This experience, as defined by Burke, is a mixture of awe-inspiring terror and profound wonder. To quote Burke,

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible or is conversant about terrible objects in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling (Burke and Phillips, 1990, p. 36).

It is easy to imagine a mariner's longboat leaving Naxos laden with white marble blocks, broken vases and fragmentary figurines, almost immediately being exposed to northerly prevailing winds which turned the currents into circular maritime corridors around the island. In addition, they would have quickly been exposed to the open sea with its wide horizons and the Etesian cross winds which meant that even in summer, travel was never safe or guaranteed. Navigation would have also been a challenge as visual reference points were limited (Broodbank, 2000). This makes perceptions of orientation and scale less reliable. Taking this as an embodied experience, it can be seen to be a 'sublime event' where the vastness of the sea and

danger of loss of life all contribute to a sense of vulnerability but also wonder and anticipation. The approach to Keros itself strengthens this effect. Although it is only some 10km, and a day's paddling distance from Naxos, it's relative isolation, steep precipices and treacherous reefs including deep seabeds which would have allowed the winds to hit the cliffs directly, potentially driving the boats onto the rocks. Vandarakis et.al (2014) note that the northwest of the island, around Kavos, slopes of between 5-35 degrees are recorded and that this area was also subject to landslides. They also suggest that the effect of the Etesian winds act to create unpredictable results such as rock falls which act to change the very contours of the island itself. Such environmental instability would have heightened the sensory and emotional impact on mariners. In addition, there is a juxtaposition between the natural rawness of Keros, and the man altered Dhaskalio with its white marble terraces reflecting sunlight back out to sea. These terraces contrasted strongly with the duller colour of the earth as well as the sky, forcing the eye to perceive them with a greater sense of 'seeing'. In addition, the scale of the marble was extensive, requiring great skill, labour and intention to modify the landscape of the islet.

Set against the concept of the sublime where the human experience is one predicated on notions of insignificance yet also an elevated self-consciousness, the new materiality approach places the traveller on the same immanent plane as all other actors in the scene. In this respect, neither the sea or the wind is passive, nor are they attributes in the culture over nature dichotomy. In the same way, neither the white marble nor the land it is built upon are inert. All have agency and both actively participate in the formation of the terraces to create relationships of what Deleuze describes as an assemblage. Writing before the work of DeLanda and Barad (see in Tuin and Dolphijn, 2012) Deleuze defines the assemblage as '[...] a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, [...]. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987)'. This is only possible because all act within a single plane of immanence where matter, energy and thought all exist on the same level as

flows of energy, some of which take solid form like marble (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013). However, to consider the site as an isolated example of an assemblage is reductive and it can be argued that it forms part of a collection of multi-island actors.

Seen through this lens, the ritual identity of Keros is inseparable from the wider assemblage of conditions that enabled its formation. The island's very existence as a ritual site depended on tectonic histories that rendered it unsuitable for permanent settlement (Vandarakis, Liosis and Pavlopoulos, 2014), on maritime currents and winds that only allowed a seasonal approach, and on the availability of materials and expertise—Naxian marble, skilled sculptors, Melian obsidian (Carter and Milic, 2013), and metal-bearing islands such as Seriphos and Siphnos (Renfrew, C., 2013a). These elements, together with the diverse visitors who converged on Keros from across the Cyclades, constitute a rhizomatic network through which the sanctuary's ritual character was continually produced. Keros thus emerges not as an isolated cult place but as a node within a far-reaching assemblage whose actors collectively shaped its ritual identity.

In addition, the Keros and the seas around it can be located within the framework of the liminal which, as Turner argues, is the threshold between one state and another (Turner, 1969). At its most simple liminality can be expressed as a sequence of separation, transition, and incorporation (van Gennep, 1960). However, in the context of the embodied experience of the islanders' sensory shifts and material agency were all sources of the liminal experience. Movement through the water with rhythms of oars or the sound of wind on sails may have acted as a preliminary experience and quite literally a 'rite of passage' as would movement over the causeway from Dhaskalio to the site of the deposits, changing from one geological state to another. The transition across the causeway likely functioned as a sensory bridge, where the physical act of walking was elevated into a choreographed ritual. This procession may have been underscored by a deliberate "soundscape," perhaps featuring rhythmic drumming or the melodic strains of a lyre and flute, represented by the recovered, intact

musician marble figurines. These sounds may have served to synchronize the movements of the group, which may have separated this experience from the normal rhythms of everyday life of the islet.

Furthermore, the timing of arrivals to the island may have utilized the symbolic power of twilight. By crossing the threshold at dawn or dusk, visitors moved through a temporal liminality that mirrored the geographical one; just as the causeway sat between land and sea, twilight sits between light and dark. In this "grey space," the gleaming white marble of the Dhaskalio terraces would either slowly emerge from the gloom or fade into a ghostly silhouette, heightening the mystery of the sanctuary and ensuring that the visitors' perception of the site was never static, but always in a state of becoming. However, little is really known about the islanders' movements and so notions about the movements through liminal space is highly conjectural and must be treated with caution.

Deposition analysis

This paper will now turn to the depositions recovered from both Dhaskalio and the Special Deposits South. Due to limitations of the word count, this analysis will only consider the figurines, however, it is recognised that many other artefacts have been catalogued, including pottery and metal objects which merit further exploration, possibly in future papers.

Figurines were found on both the Special Deposits South and on Dhaskalio itself, as well as the earlier finds and excavations which recovered other fragmentary pieces at the Special Deposits North and the musicians apparently found in one of the few tombs on Keros. These findings represent a range of material agency, ranging from highly abstracted schematic forms with little detail illustrating human form to the more naturalistic, performative musician figures. Whilst the sites of the Special Deposits contained the deliberately broken FAFs, the 12 figurines on Dhaskalio, along with the musicians were found not to have been purposefully destroyed. In addition, 11 of the 12 are from Phase C and are created from a fine-grained marble, (possibly also sculpted and brought from other islands), which is different from the figures found in the Deposit sites. They are therefore known as the 'Dhaskalio sub variety, specifically a sub-class of the Apeiranthos group. Other features that distinguish

these figures from the ones in the Special Deposits South are as follows: They are small (approximately 50 – 100 mm high) and are thicker and rounder than the ones deposited at the Kavos site; the head is a narrow protrusion which is thicker than the body and which narrows to the front to produce the nose. Finally, these figures appear to be exclusively from Dhaskalio (Renfrew, C., 2013b).



Fig 6 Head fragments from Dhaskalio



Fig 7 Body fragments from Dhaskalio

While the 'Special Deposits' are defined by intentional destruction, these intact figures represent a different form of ritual engagement, perhaps intended for repeated performative use. However, their presence at the site during its abandonment suggests they were not exempt from the island's changing purpose. In this sense, they mirror the wider site's transition, undergoing a material transformation as they were reclaimed by the earth of Dhaskalio.

Unlike the intact Dhaskalio figures and the more dynamic musicians, the FAFs at the site were deliberately broken before deposition, as evidenced by the lack of joining intersections within the excavation trenches. This act of fragmentation implies the objects possessed a different biography at different stages of life, perhaps serving as ritual agents in coming-of-age ceremonies before being 'deactivated', possibly as a rite of passing or on the death of a loved one. The assumption that these fragments signify a 'passing on'—or a definitive termination of agency—requires rigorous scrutiny, as does the concept of 'deactivation'. Rather than reaching the conclusion of a linear life cycle, these objects have arguably transmuted from a domestic or ritual relationship with a human owner into a new, immanent material relationship with the soil of Keros. All the FAFs are female, and no male pieces were found in the deposit. Therefore, questions about the function of gender in ECII need to be asked. Do the FAFs represent mourning as posited by Hoffman (2002)? This argument is

predicated on a problematic historical parallel with much later Greek funerary traditions. Given this substantial chronological gap, the assertion that the deposits represent a funerary ritual is largely conjectural and fails to account for the unique maritime sanctuary context of Keros.



Fig 8 Figurine fragments from the site of the Special Deposits South



*Fig 9 Intact folded arm figure
Metropolitan Museum of Art New York*

While mourning is an act of active expression, the FAFs remain inherently passive in form, although it is almost certain that the application of paint (Hoffman, 2002) would have made these figures more 'alive'. The FAFs stand in opposition to the musician figures, whose three-dimensional, performative posture suggests a dynamic role within the ritual assemblage. It could be suggested that these figures represent real-world actors who facilitated the 'liminal threshold' of the sea crossing, perhaps providing a musical accompaniment to the mariners' departure from other Cycladic islands. This is a plausible theory; however, our understanding of the daily existence and ritual life the ECII culture is currently limited. Given the incomplete nature of the archaeological record, this interpretation can only add to the potentiality of biography

until further evidence can confirm the link between this material culture and specific cultural practices.



Fig 10 Harpist of Keros found at unknown tomb location

The evidence from Keros and Dhaskalio demonstrates that this was not an isolated ritual site but a deliberately constructed maritime sanctuary. The inhospitable topography of Keros, the dramatic approach by sea, and the gleaming marble terraces of Dhaskalio collectively produced an embodied experience that was both sublime and liminal, situating visitors at the threshold between everyday life and a shared sacred sphere.

Through the frameworks of assemblage and new materiality, the site can be understood as a rhizomatic network of human and non-human actors: winds, currents, marble, obsidian, sculptors, mariners, and ritual participants all contributed to the sanctuary's formation. The intentional fragmentation and deposition of figurines and vessels—objects whose biographies extended across multiple islands—informed relationships that transcended local identities. The contrasting treatment of figurines at Dhaskalio and in the Special Deposits South further underscores the complexity of ritual practice at the site. Intact, performative figures suggest repeated use and embodied engagement, while the highly fragmentary FAFs reflect a different mode of ritual action, one that may have emphasised dispersal and transformation. Taken together, the archaeological, geological, and

theoretical evidence positions Keros as a unique ritual landscape in the Early Bronze Age Aegean—one in which monumentality, material agency, and maritime mobility converged to produce a centre of congregation that shaped Cycladic identity for over five centuries.

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