

POLITICAL ECONOMIES OF THE AEGEAN BRONZE AGE

Papers from the Langford Conference,
Florida State University, Tallahassee,
22–24 February 2007

Edited by

Daniel J. Pullen

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Preface

The contributions to this volume were originally delivered at the Spring 2007 Langford Conference entitled “Political Economies of the Aegean Bronze Age,” held at the Florida State University in Tallahassee 22–24 February 2007. Papers were circulated in advance, and a response prepared by James Wright. Subsequently the papers and the response were revised for publication (the contribution by Donald Haggis, “Stability and the State: A Diachronic Perspective on Pre-State Society in the Aegean” was not submitted for publication here). I would like to thank the authors for their timely responses and an anonymous reviewer for comments. Bill Parkinson, Dimitri Nakassis, and Michael Galaty also provided comments and editorial assistance.

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Abstract

This volume brings together an international group of researchers to address how Mycenaean and Minoan states controlled the economy. The contributions, originally delivered at the 2007 Langford Conference at the Florida State University, examine the political economies of state (and pre-state) entities within the Aegean Bronze Age, including the issues of:

- centralization and multiple scales of production, distribution, and consumption within a polity
- importance of extraregional trade
- craft specialization
- role of non-elite institutions
- temporal/diachronic variation within regions
- “Aegean” political economy as a monolithic process
- political economy before the emergence of the palaces

The contributors address these issues from an explicitly comparative perspective, both within Minoan or Mycenaean contexts and across Minoan and Mycenaean contexts. The conclusions reached in this volume shed new light on the essential differences between and among “Minoan” and “Mycenaean” states through their political economies.

4.

MAKING ELITES: POLITICAL ECONOMY AND ELITE CULTURE(S) IN MIDDLE MINOAN CRETE

Ilse Schoep

Introduction

Elite culture, or as Baines and Yoffee call it, “high culture” (Baines and Yoffee 1998, 2000) is an important aspect of political economy because it forms the material expression of a strategy aimed to maintain and legitimize social order and hierarchy. The development and maintenance of high culture is pervaded by ideologies of order and hierarchy and, within that order, by legitimacy that underpins order in social and political terms and by wealth, which sustains both order and legitimacy (Van Buren and Richards 2000, 4).

In this paper I will examine the question of elite culture on Crete in the MM I–II periods: how it was generated, what form it took and how it was consumed. On Crete, elites become more visible in the archaeological record from Early Minoan II onwards, when more and more stone vases and metal objects are deposited in the tombs (Branigan 1974, 106; Nakou 1995). However, from the early Middle Bronze Age onwards they become especially visible in settlement contexts through the construction of monumental residences, which now seem to be an important arena in which social power was played out. Although iconographic evidence is limited for the MM I–II periods there is plenty of evidence in the way of pottery, sealstones, metal objects and architecture that points towards the intentional production and manipulation of forms of material culture that embody elite culture. This process greatly intensifies in the Neopalatial period, when there is an explosion of elite culture in which iconography plays an obvious and integral role. Depictions on frescoes, stone vases, signet rings and sealstones seem to emphasize the role and place of elites in the cosmic order.

Models for the Production of Elite Culture

The Palace-Centered Model and Its Implications

On Crete, elite culture has always been closely connected with the Minoan palaces, which are traditionally regarded as the centralized seat of a religious, economic and

political authority and therefore as the dominant force in Minoan society, directing and enforcing change (Renfrew 1972; Cherry 1986). Thus, several innovations at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age such as the appearance of script, the fast-turning potter's wheel and palatial architecture are traditionally attributed to the emergence of the palaces in MM IB (Watrous 1987; Dickinson 1994; Cadogan 1980; Cherry 1986). Recent discoveries have made clear, however, that the so-called MM IB emergence of the palaces is in fact just a phase in the biography of these buildings (Schoep 2004, 2006), which at Malia (Pelon 1999), Knossos (Wilson 1994), and probably also Phaistos (Todaro, forthcoming) go back much further in time, respectively to EM IIB and EM III (North-West Terrace). Elsewhere, such as at Petras, the palace seems to have been constructed later, in MM IIA. Consequently, it is not the emergence of palaces *per se* that can be held responsible for the innovations that we see appearing at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age but developments that took place against a background of these pre-existing buildings (and institutions). Since these innovations occur at the same time as elites become more visible in the settlement, I have argued elsewhere that an alternative model, one which gives a more central role to competing elite groups, not simply a palatial elite, provides a more convincing explanation of the present data (Schoep 2006).

The traditional palace-centered view, where the palace is viewed as the driving force in Minoan society, has been influenced by several factors. First, the overarching control that is associated with these buildings reflects in the first place what we know of the later LM III palaces and their elaborate administrations, an image modeled on and inspired by the Near Eastern models and then projected indiscriminately back onto the Minoan palaces (Schoep 2002a, 2002b). A second influence was the desire to model Crete as rivaling the splendors of Near Eastern society (Papadopoulos 2005), which has encouraged a vision of the Minoan palace as the (magnificent) residence of a ruler, the home of an elaborate and far-reaching bureaucracy and even the center of a state. Third, because of the general lack of other independent cult buildings, the religious sector of society has been housed under the same roof as the political and the economic sectors, so intertwining them that it is commonly believed that these sectors were one and the same institution directed by a single authority (Schoep in preparation). This palace-centered view explains the existence of a Middle Bronze Age palatial elite controlling the production of elite culture and access to and control of international exchange networks (Cherry 1986). Confirmation of this model was seen in the discovery of high-quality and sometimes exotic objects in these buildings. This belief is reflected in the common use of the terms palatial and non-palatial or provincial to refer to respectively high- and low-quality goods. The view that high-quality objects must have been produced under palatial (or central) control is strongly embedded in Minoan studies. Typical would be Walberg's conclusions regarding Kamares Ware:

The Kamares Style is a sophisticated palatial style and could only have been produced in the social surroundings of the palaces. Their organization and economy could give the potters and painters opportunities of specializing and experimenting and relieved them of the need to devote themselves to dull mass production (Walberg 1976, 126).

A similar view underlies Weingarten's assessment of the EM III–MM IA Parading Lions/spiral Complex sealstones: "The date disputes the term 'palatial' but the seals certainly have the quality and homogenous feel of a workshop under central control" (Weingarten 2005, 763).

Towards a Non-Palatial Model

Setting aside the question of whether the palaces were residences of a palatial elite, as the traditional model holds, or largely ceremonial centers, as argued recently (Schoep 2002b; Driessen 2002), it is no longer tenable to identify a palatial elite as the main agent in Bronze Age society. There is clear evidence for production taking place not only outside the palaces but also outside palatial centers (Schoep 2006). Studies have shown that a considerable proportion of the MM II Kamares Ware consumed at Knossos was imported from the Mesara (Day and Wilson 1998). In MM IB fine, highly standardized tableware produced in the Pediadha was consumed in the palace of Knossos (Rethemniotakis and Christakis 2004) and the consumption of imported pottery seems to have been a long-standing tradition (Wilson and Day 1994). The tradition for high-quality pottery to be produced in non-palatial settlements (and workshops) can be traced back to the Early Bronze Age (Kiriati, Day and Wilson 2000; Day, Relaki and Todaro this volume). Independent, non-palatial production can also be identified for other artifacts. An important workshop producing white paste sealstones and scarabs (Pini 1990, 2000) between EM III–MM IA (Yule 1980, 209–210) or MM IA and MM IIA (Weingarten 2005, 761) has been located in the Mesara. Other workshops such as the EM III–MM IA parading lions/spiral complex group (Yule 1980, 208–209) do not seem to have been located in a known palatial center. There is also the example of the Atelier de Sceaux in Malia, closely connected with the elite complex of Quartier Mu and not the palace. Few workshops of stone vases have been excavated but one was found in Quartier Mu (Poursat 1996) and more recently an EM II workshop (EM II) was found at Mochlos (Soles 2005, 13). If indeed the latter produced the high-quality pieces known from the tombs then there is no reason to assume that high-quality products could only have been made in palatial workshops. In addition, Branigan has pointed out that the majority of metal and exotic objects are attested in non-palatial contexts, thereby questioning the role the palaces played in exchange and trade (Branigan 1989). Branigan (Branigan 1974, 127) also tentatively identified local metallurgy workshops in the Mesara (Platanos and Koumasa). The discovery of a metallurgy workshop at Chrysokamino (Betancourt 2005a, 2005b) showed that metallurgy was a complex process involving different stages none of which need have been under palatial control (Haggis 1999). The same may perhaps be suggested for the workshops producing the metal jewelry and status symbols found in EM II–III tombs.

The above suggests that high-quality luxury products can and were indeed produced in non-palatial contexts and workshops. Therefore, designations such as "high-quality" and "luxury goods" should not be considered as synonyms for "palatial production or palatial workshops." While there is no evidence for production within the EM III–MM II palaces, palatial settlements such as Malia and non-palatial settlements such as Poros-Katsambas, Archanes (Phourni), Ayia Triadha and Kommos were inhabited by elite

groups who seem to have played an important role in the consumption and exchange of elite material culture in the Middle Bronze Age (Schoep 2006).

Elite Culture and Peer Polity Interaction

The application of Renfrew's Early State Module to Crete assumes the reduplication of similar or identical spatial patterns in different geographical regions and evenly-spaced, autonomous central places whose territories comprise an area of *ca.* 1500 km², with a mean distance of 40 km between the central places of neighboring modules (Renfrew 1986; Cherry 1986). Social complexity is seen to develop as a result of interaction between autonomous, equal-sized polities, with similar developments taking place at more or less the same time. This interaction is also known as peer polity interaction (PPI: Renfrew 1986; Cherry 1986) and similarities in elite culture over the island was considered to be the result of peer polity interaction, whereby palatial elites were exchanging goods and practices (Cherry 1986).

The peer polity interaction model, however, assumes that the development of complexity held equal pace across the island and that Cretan polities enjoyed equal or symmetrical power relations. In the last two decades it has become increasingly clear that neither of these assumptions actually hold. The notion of a single horizon of emergence for the Cretan palaces is rendered unsustainable by the divergent biographies of the various excavated palaces. While some palaces were indeed first constructed in MM IB (Phaistos), others are older (Malia and Knossos) or younger (Petras). At Malia a large building with central court already existed in EM IIB and at Knossos the EM III North-West Platform forms part of a monumental predecessor to the MM IA palace. In Petras, a small court building was constructed in MM IIA, after a reorganization of the buildings on the hill on which it was built (Tsipopoulou 1999). That different regions followed different trajectories is also suggested by the survey data (Driessen 2001).

The variation in the size of these palaces seems to mirror variation in the size of their surrounding settlements and the density of occupation in the surrounding regions. The picture of peer polities clearly needs to be nuanced. Besides the older palaces in large urban centers such as Malia and Knossos, there were smaller more recent palaces at Phaistos, Petras and perhaps Monastiraki, which were perhaps shaping themselves on the example of the former. The expenditure of energy in the construction of impressive walls at Monastiraki, Petras and Myrtos-Pyrgos is perhaps a sign of small, more recent and consequently vulnerable polities.

Rather than a few large peer polities, as implied in the well-known map drawn by Cherry (Cherry 1986, 21 Fig. 2.2), the above discussion suggests the existence of a patchwork of large, medium and small polities. In each of these, differing ecological and historical factors influenced the development of spatial and social structures and their internal dynamics. The spatial configuration of the Knossos region is very different to that of Malia because it is characterized by the existence of several large centers: Knossos, Poros-Katsambas, Archanes and probably also Tylissos. The development of these centers and their internal dynamics may have been defined by historical and ecological factors. Knossos may have become so important because of its long history (Day and Wilson 2002), but more importantly because of its central position within the

Heraklion basin and its proximity to Poros-Katsambas, an important harbor since the EBA (Dimopoulou 1997; Dimopoulou-Rethemniotaki 2004). The proximity of Archanes to Iouktas and to Poros may account for its importance (access to Poros via Kairatos?). Spatial configurations in the Malia region were different, because Malia was a coastal site that may have had several harbors in the MBA. The Malia survey did not find any evidence for sites comparable in size to Malia, most sites being small villages and hamlets. The only possible exception is Sissi, which was located at the crossroads of several roads. Like Malia, Petras was the largest site in its surrounding region (Tsipopoulou 1998, 1999). It seems inevitable that these different spatial configurations would give rise to different power dynamics.

In other regions (Pediadha, the extreme North-East and South-East of Crete, West Crete, Lasithi plain), there is no evidence so far that palaces existed in the Middle Bronze Age. The regions or sites without palaces are in the palatial model usually subordinated to the nearest palatial center, but alternatively they might have followed alternative socio-political trajectories which may have been structured in a different way. As far as we can tell at present, the MBA palaces (*i.e.* monumental buildings with courts that formed the focus of a center) seem to be a feature of central and central-east Crete. Their distribution in the early Middle Bronze Age may be connected to north-south and east-west communication networks.

Judging from settlement patterns and settlement density, there can be no doubt that considerable differences existed in scale, organizational principles, complexity and interregional contacts between the various Middle Bronze Age polities. This would have resulted in a marked asymmetry in power relations between different polities, a situation mediated by the forging of alliances. This power imbalance is important because of its influence over how local elites differentially accessed non-local resources and thus the production and consumption of elite culture on the one hand and the dynamics between different elite groups on the other.

Identifying Elite Culture on Crete: Towards a Methodology

How does one identify elite culture? According to Baines and Yoffee (Baines and Yoffee 2000), high culture is the translation into the material realm of an elite ideology aimed at affirming the necessity of a ruling group to the maintenance of the cosmos. This happens through the production and consumption of aesthetic items under the control of, and for the benefit of the inner elite. In addition, high culture sets a high value on the exclusive and expensive (Baines and Yoffee 2000). It is important to note that Baines and Yoffee make a distinction between an inner elite and a sub-elite, implying the possibility of hierarchical differences within and between elite groups.

The application of Baines and Yoffee's definition of elite culture to Crete is not without its problems. The aesthetic qualities of an object are notoriously hard to gauge objectively. A good example of this problem is the traditional interpretation of high-quality fine pottery as an elite product, an issue well documented for the Attic red and black figure pottery (Vickers and Gill 1994), but equally relevant for the Cretan Kamares Ware. Was Kamares pottery really an elite product or was it something more

widely accessible? It is well known that elite culture is practiced by those who hold real social power (“inner elite”) but that it may also be imitated by aspiring elites and the “sub-elite” (Baines and Yoffee 2000, 16). Archaeologically, it is not always easy to distinguish between these different agencies since it is not always obvious to determine when access to innovative products, practices and knowledge becomes more widely spread. This is at least partly caused by the dearth of excavated production contexts on Crete and the uncertainty surrounding the organization of craft production. As the data stacks up against the palatial production model, so our ignorance of how elite culture was produced becomes all the more frustrating.

Another aspect that must be taken into account is the regional differences that may occur in elite culture. This is a direct result of the differences in scale and complexity between different regions and of non-peer polities (see below), something that becomes very clear when comparing the remains of elite culture in different areas (see above).

Quartier Mu and the Identification of Elite Material Culture

One way of addressing the question of what constitutes elite culture in MM I–II Crete is to start from a known elite context in order to gain a picture of what elite culture looked like and how it was produced, exchanged and consumed. The excavations of Quartier Mu at Malia provided an excellent example elite practice (Poursat 2002; Poursat and Knappett 2005; Schoep 2002a, Schoep 2006). By carefully assessing the production, exchange and consumption of material culture in this building complex, we can get an idea of the material correlates of elite culture.

The excavation of Quartier Mu revealed that the resident elite had interests in a range of activities:

- attached craft production
- storage of agricultural goods (agricultural exploitation plain)
- storage of finished goods (stone vases, metal objects, metal objects)
- acquisition of imported commodities (Mesara and Mirabello storage vases)
- access to Egyptian iconography: cat in nilotic landscape, sphinx, falcon lid
- innovative technologies: appliqué pottery
- architectural embellishment of main building with innovative architectural techniques (ashlar) and new architectural modules such as Minoan Hall and lustral basin
- sealing and writing
- feasting.

Buildings A, B and D testify to the storage and consumption of goods, not only of agricultural products but also of valuables. Valuable finished items stored in particular locations (also called *réserves-trésors* by Poursat and Knappett 2005, 172) especially in Buildings B (IV4, V5/V6) and D (VII2–4). They include a metal dagger and metal bowl, figurines, numerous stone vases, metal tools, raw materials. In addition, the number of magazines and storage rooms clearly point towards agricultural exploitation and land ownership in the Malia plain. This micro-economy was managed in part or in whole through the use of sealing and writing. The Mu elite also took an active part in

production, as suggested by the satellite position of the workshops around Buildings A and B, their dependence on the latter in terms of raw materials, and their specialization (Poursat 1996). The craftsmen would thus have been attached specialists, concentrating on the production of particular goods for a market dictated and perhaps controlled by the elite of Quartier Mu.

Production

Quartier Mu forms the only well documented example of attached craft production in the Middle Minoan II period. This production involved a particular type of sealstone (prismatic three-sided sealstones) in the Atelier de Sceaux, appliqué pottery in the Atelier de Potier, metal tools in the Atelier de Fondateur and stone vases, especially kernoi and libation tables, in the Atelier de Potier and the Atelier Sud (Poursat 1996). There is, however, no evidence that the Mu dagger with the gold inlaid handle was actually produced in the Atelier de Fondateur although the presence of bellows, crucibles, and tuyères suggests that metalworking was taking place in or around Quartier Mu. The Atelier de Fondateur seems to have been specialized in the production of utilitarian objects such as axes and chisels, examples of which were also found in buildings A and B (Poursat 1996, 70, 152). Thus the well-known high-quality metal objects from Malia in the Heraklion Museum, such as the Chrysolakkos gold bee pendant, the Mu dagger with the gold inlaid handle and the swords from the palace (in particular the one with the so-called acrobat) were most likely produced elsewhere, perhaps in the same Maliote workshop. The “egyptianizing” character of these high-value luxury products links them to the terracotta appliques found in Building D of Quartier Mu (Poursat 2000b, 29–30). These consist of a terracotta sphinx with Cretan hairstyle (Poursat 1973–4), a falcon lid, a jug and two cups with appliques of a cat in a nilotic landscape, and a bridge-spouted jar with an appliqué of a pregnant female (Poursat and Knappett 2005). It cannot be excluded, however, that these terracotta appliques to which we attribute a high symbolic value, were actually imitations in a cheap material of more valuable metal vessels and objects. It is not certain where these appliqué vases were produced but moulds of shells and marine elements were found in the Atelier de Potier, and it cannot be excluded that the egyptianizing appliques had also been produced in this atelier. It seems then that although the Mu workshops may have been responsible for some of the high-value items stored in the main buildings, their main line of production was items that were valuable but not elite culture *per se*, such as bronze tools (Poursat 1996, 70, 152), stone vases and sealstones.

The fact that the workshops of Quartier Mu were not exclusively aimed at the production of luxury goods for elite consumption raises the possibility that the bulk of elite-administered production was targeted at persons of lesser status, such as retinue and dependent workers. Quartier Mu was by no means the only producer in Malia, although (so far) no secure workshops have been identified. Potters’ wheels have been found in Epsilon, Theta, Building Beta and the area of Chrysolakkos (Evely 1988; Poursat 1996, 153); a mould for a double-axe comes from a proto-palatial level in House Epsilon (Deshayes and Dessenne 1959, 113). Quartier Theta near the beach also seems to make sense as a production context. The architecture is ordinary and so is

the largely undecorated pottery found in the rooms. A tuyère, crucibles, bone tools, a tournette with stand, bronze needles, lamps, a possible hearth and oven point towards the possibility that this was a family workshop, as suggested by the excavator (Van Effenterre and van Effenterre 1976, 95–96). Another likely workshop context, located by the Malia survey, is associated with a large complex with cut limestone blocks, column bases, wall plaster and a Cretan Hieroglyphic bar (Müller 1991, 743; Müller and Olivier 1991, 65). The presence of tools, loomweights and murex fragments perhaps suggests textile production. The storage in large quantities of finished goods such as stone kernoï and libation tables in Quartier Gamma (Demargne and Gallet de Santerre 1953) may also suggest a specialized rather than a domestic function. Quartier Gamma, furthermore, yielded evidence for the production of wine or oil (Demargne and Gallet de Santerre 1953), and the excavators also mention moulds (Béquignon 1931, 513).

Consumption

The items consumed in Quartier Mu provide corroboration for this picture of multiple levels and agencies of production in Malia. Although some objects were obviously produced in the workshops (three-sided prismatic sealstones, bronze tools, stone vases), the majority however was not (cf. Poursat 1996, 152). Thus not all the sealstones found in Buildings A and B seem to have been produced in the Atelier de Sceaux and while some were probably from an older Maliote workshop others may have been imported (Poursat 1981, 162–163; Detournay, Poursat and Vandenabeele 1980, 189–190). Two faience sealstones may also have been the product of another local Malia workshop, one that was following fashions at Knossos and Phaistos (Poursat 1981, 163). The inscribed sealstones used to impress clay documents are usually of different shapes, materials and repertoire than those attested in the Atelier de Sceaux (Detournay, Poursat and Vandenabeele 1980, 206–209; Olivier and Godart 1996, 186–190). Judging from the material used in the Atelier de Sceaux (mainly local soft stone) and the rarity of inscriptions, the sealstones produced here appear to have been inferior to the four-sided inscribed prisms and *Petschafte* (stalk signets) that were used to impress the sealings in Quartier Mu (Godart and Olivier 1978; Poursat 2000a. See Krzyszkowska 2005, 12–15 for seal shapes). One impression on a nodule from Mu was made by a metal ring with Cretan Hieroglyphic inscription (Godart and Olivier 1978, 82), drawing attention to an archaeologically not very visible class of elite sealing device. Metal signet rings existed in the MM I–II period (Krzyszkowska 2005, 83), but are seldom preserved and the same applies to the gold prismatic sealstone with Cretan Hieroglyphic inscriptions (see Olivier and Godart 1996, 284 for an example from Malia).

With the possible exception of the egyptianizing appliqué pottery, there is also no evidence to suggest that the pottery (tableware and other) consumed in Quartier Mu was actually produced in the Atelier de Potier (Poursat 1997, 303). In fact, it has been argued that the pottery from Quartier Mu displays different modes of production, which should probably be associated with different workshops (Knappett 1997, 309, 1999, 630–631). There is no evidence to suggest that the trichrome pottery (*interalia* the style *écossais*) was produced in the Quartier Mu workshop and although the Quartier Mu elite had access to it, so did other people. Houses Delta beta and Zeta gamma

were probably moderate houses but it is interesting to note that they were consuming similar pottery as Quartier Mu (style écossais, straight-sided cups with festoons; Deshayes and Dessenne 1959). The MM II building below Quartier Nu also yielded fragments of trichrome pottery (Schoep and Knappett 2003). In fact, it seems that in the category of local pottery similar types and similar decorations are attested in most locations. Even the egyptianizing pottery was not limited to consumption in Quartier Mu since a vase with scalloped rim and an appliqué panther was found in the palace (Chapouthier and Demargne 1962). Interaction with regions beyond Malia is shown by the importation of Mirabello and Mesara storage vases and their contents (Poursat and Knappett 2005; Schoep and Knappett 2003) and was not exclusive to Quartier Mu either (Schoep and Knappett 2003).

An assessment of the finished goods produced in the Mu workshops and the goods consumed in Buildings A and B leads to some important conclusions concerning the involvement of this elite group. The attached workshops were in the first place aimed at the production of utilitarian objects, stone vases and sealstones of average quality rather than the more obvious elite culture objects consumed in the main buildings. With the possible exception of the appliqué vases, the fine labor-intensive and highly standardized tableware consumed in Mu was acquired from a local workshop(s). There were presumably several local workshops (see discussion in Poursat and Knappett 2005, 140–152) that were organized according to different modes of production (centralized and administered) supplying the whole settlement. Poursat and Knappett (2005, 152) characterized the tableware from Quartier Mu as being the result of “semi-administered mode” of production because the difference between centralized and administered is one of labor input (decoration) rather than of technological difference in production. There is no reason to assume that the local Maliote workshops outside Quartier Mu were controlled by the Quartier Mu elite, since the same fine tableware was also consumed in other contexts at Malia. The involvement of the Quartier Mu elite in the production of the sealstones of higher quality (hard stones and inscribed) and of metal objects (Mu dagger, Chrysolakkos bee pendant, swords from the palace) remains unclear, as there is no compelling evidence to suggest that these were produced in the Mu workshops. It is obvious that the Mu elite was not the only consumer of these items in Malia and there is little reason to assume direct control on their part. That leaves unanswered the question of whether the production of elite culture items was administered, partly administered or independent. How did the system work? Was it based on supply and demand? Were pieces commissioned? What mechanisms lie behind the distribution or restriction of specific items?

Assessing the Level of Elite Material Culture of Quartier Mu in the Context of the Settlement: Sub-elite versus Inner Elite Culture

Quartier Mu may well be an elite context but to gauge the social implications of its material culture, it must be assessed within the wider context of its surrounding settlement and the region. While it is easy to assume that the elite of Quartier Mu enjoyed high status, it is harder to determine their relative position in the social

hierarchy. In addition to the large elite complexes (Quartier Mu, Crypte Hypostyle, Magasins Dessenne), there are also moderately large (Delta beta) and smaller houses (Mu workshops, Zeta gamma) but most were reoccupied, resulting in a considerable loss of contextual data and a not entirely representative picture. Comparison of inter-site differences should, in theory at least, allow us to gauge differences in scale and to distinguish between the inner and the sub-elite.

We may assume that extensive settlements, such as Poros-Katsambas, Malia and Knossos, were characterized by the existence of several competing elite groups which did not all hold the same degree of social power. It is likely that a certain hierarchy existed and that aspiring elites (or “sub-elite”) were copying the material culture of the inner elite (after terms coined by Baines and Yoffee 2000, 16). A possible way to distinguish between real and aspiring elites is by introducing hypothetical levels in elite culture production and consumption:

- Monumental architecture with innovations *versus* traditional architecture
- Active writing (tablets) *versus* passive use of writing (sealstones)
- Metal vases *versus* imitations of metal vases
- Imported objects/materials *versus* local objects/materials
- Production of value-added objects (e.g. “egyptianizing” pottery, red shiny serpentine stone vases).

It must be noted immediately that some of the hypothetical highest levels of elite culture, such as imports from Egypt or the Near East and metal tableware, are underrepresented in Quartier Mu. Metal tableware is rare and limited to one bronze bowl (IV5), several hinges, rivets, *etc.* (IV 4 and V 5), and three cauldrons, which were hidden beneath the floor of VI 1 (Atelier C) (Poursat 1992, 37). A tantalizing hint of what metal tableware may have looked like is provided by the silver kantharos from a MM I burial at Gournia: Tomb I (Davis 1979) and bronze bowls from tombs VI and VII at Mochlos (respectively of EM II–EM III and EM III–MM I date). Kamares pottery, although usually closely associated with elite consumption and elite culture (e.g. Cherry 1986; Day and Wilson 1998), may in fact just have been what it was initially meant to be: an imitation in a cheap material of metal tableware. The real elite tableware may have been in metal (as represented in the Tôd Treasure or Aigina Treasure). The large quantities of Kamares Ware from the palaces of Knossos and Phaistos may in itself be informative in this regard: it was high-quality tableware aimed at entertaining large crowds of people rather than a small select elite group. Van de Moortel (Van de Moortel 2002) has suggested that the fact that Kamares was relatively widespread seems to suggest that it was not a product of the wealthiest elites and that it may have been mass-produced by independent specialists. I would like to suggest here that Kamares Ware was in fact a product of the Cretan sub-elite rather than the inner elite. The same may hold true of other high-quality fine tablewares produced in other regions: the Maliote polychrome and trichrome styles (Poursat and Knappett 2005), the East Cretan Floral Alternating Style (Floyd 1997) and Spatter Ware at Petras (Haggis 2006).

The absence of eastern imports at Quartier Mu (Poursat 2000b, 29) must also be placed in context. Eastern imports are rare in MM II contexts on Crete in general, which may question the role Crete played in the directionality of these contacts.¹ However, metals

and semi-precious stones were clearly making their way to Crete and the eastern influence on Cretan iconography also points towards contacts. The Mu Sphinx, the Chrysolakkos bees, the egyptianizing appliqué vases and the sword with the acrobat betray exposure to Egyptian iconography (Poursat 1973–4; Immerwahr 1985; Poursat 2000b) and the same way well be the case for the panther mace head from the palace. Such egyptianizing iconography not restricted to Quartier Mu and the Malia palace. Bridge-spouted jars with a pregnant female were also found at Poros and Phaistos (Carinci 2000, 34–25), a sealstone depicting a sphinx was found at Archanes (Krzyszowska 2005, 91, no. 146) and Taweret formed the subject of a gold signet ring at Phaistos (Weingarten 2000; Krzyszowska 2005, 106, nos. 181–183). The influence of Egyptian iconography must be seen within the wider framework of a number of borrowed technologies involving script, architectural innovations (ashlar masonry, sunken basins, reception rooms), faience technology, *etc.* Manipulation of long-distance contacts with the East and exotic knowledge seems to have been a deliberate strategy in EM III–MM II for the expression of an elite ideology. Rather than arising from economic necessity, the importation of raw materials, finished goods and new technologies, beliefs and practices from Egypt and/or the Levant was fuelled by a constantly evolving elite ideology (Schoep 2006).

The large number of stone vases in Quartier Mu must be placed in a wider context. Large quantities were also found in Quartier Gamma (Demargne and Gallet de Santerre 1953), the cemetery and the Magasins Dessenne (Van Effenterre 1980). In Quartier Mu, concentrations of stone vases were found in Building B (IV4 and V6), where they seem to have been stored and in Building A where they had fallen from the upper floor into III 11 and III 8 (see Poursat and Knappett 2005, 262–265). More work is needed to clarify the typological distribution of the different types but judging by their distribution they may be an attribute of the sub-elite rather than the inner-elite in Middle Minoan II. It is worth emphasizing that in the case of Quartier Mu, a technique involving the heating of serpentinite, which causes the vases to take on a shiny red color, may have been experimented with. This technique is unattested anywhere else (Detournay, Poursat and Vandenabeele 1980, 65, fig. 1).

Administration including active writing (as opposed to impressing a sealstone) was taking place in Quartier Mu but also in the complex discovered by the survey at Koutsouras (Müller and Olivier 1991). Inscribed sealstones are also relatively rare and, apart from Quartier Mu (see Detournay, Poursat and Vandenabeele 1980), have been found in Quartier Epsilon and Gamma, at Chrysolakkos, and as surface finds (Olivier and Godart 1996, 41–45). As active writing (*i.e.*, administration) appears to have been restricted in distribution, it is tempting to associate it with inner-elite culture. However, the fact that the craftsmen producing the inscribed high-quality sealstones and the Chamaizi juglets appear to have been literate could again suggest that the technology of writing was available to a number of people. The existence of inscribed metal rings and inscribed seals of different qualities (soft local and hard exotic stones) suggests the existence of different levels in the availability of script.

A last aspect that needs to be considered is the highly innovative architecture of Building A in Quartier Mu (Schoep 2004), which incorporates a number of new architectural techniques such as ashlar masonry and architectural modules such as the Minoan Hall and the lustral basin for which at present no evidence exists in the Malia

palace. The magazines with plaster platforms also seem to be a new architectural feature of this period (Van Effenterre 1980; Poursat 1992), but these are more widely represented in several other high-profile complexes in the settlement (Crypte Hypostyle, Magasins Dessenne). Architecturally speaking, façades that consist of roughly worked limestone blocks on a slightly projecting plinth are attested in Delta (beta) and Zeta (gamma). With the exception of the Crypte Hypostyle and perhaps the partly excavated Magasins Dessenne, none of the excavated architectural complexes display the architectural innovations that are attested in Quartier Mu.

This investment in the architectural elaboration of Building A of Quartier Mu suggests the intentional creation of a ceremonial venue away from the palace, aimed not at the community at large but at a select public (Schoep 2004). That Building A was used as an arena for staging ceremonies and practices is not only suggested by the combination of an innovative architectural spaces but also by the concentration of fine tableware in this sector of Building A (Poursat and Knappett 2005, 199). The largest concentration of cups was found in I 13, the polythyron (15 carinated cups, one hemispherical cup, 55 straight-sided cups and goblets, two ladles and pouring vessels). This seems to confirm that this space was used for ceremonies involving a limited number of people, perhaps about 70 if the number of cups is anything to go by. The room with benches III 4 yielded 49 cups and goblets and is clearly connected with the food preparation activities in nearby III 7. Also in I 3 evidence for the consumption of food and drinks was found, whereas food preparation took place in I 11, which communicated directly with I 12, the “sanctuary” (Poursat and Knappett 2005, 200).

To conclude, it may be noted that none of the other residences in Malia reveal quite the same range of activities as Quartier Mu. However, one hesitates to conclude that the elite of Quartier Mu represents the only member of an inner elite because of the incomplete excavated sample from Malia and the loss of data caused by later reoccupation in other possible elite residences. One of the most important inferences to be made is that at least part of the material culture (high-quality sealstones, fine tableware) consumed in Quartier Mu was produced and consumed in other locations in the settlement. The same also applies to the high-quality goods such as the bronze dagger with gold handle, which seems to form part of a group of egyptianizing objects. There is no evidence pointing towards any control by the Quartier Mu elite of the production of this type of high-value and symbolic product that can without a doubt be ascribed to inner-elite culture. In fact apart from the egyptianizing appliqué pottery, there is no evidence that what we would call elite culture was actually produced in the Mu workshops, which seem in the first place to have aimed at the production of utilitarian rather than symbolic goods. Even in this case, it is not entirely certain that these terracotta appliqué vases were not imitations of metal egyptianizing tableware. It is clear then that the importance of Quartier Mu did not lie so much in the extraordinary character of the goods it produced and consumed. High-quality, unique and value-laden objects were relatively rare although the accumulation of goods points towards a great degree of wealth. In addition, practices that have left few or no traces such as the ceremonies that went on inside Building A with its polythyron, lustral basin and sanctuary must have played an important role in setting the Quartier Mu elite apart from other elite groups in Malia (see also Schoep 2004).

This analysis has made an attempt towards defining elite culture and its levels. I have suggested that elite culture can be broken down into an inner elite culture and a sub-elite culture. The wide distribution of fine tableware, stone vases and uninscribed sealstones in Malia would suggest that these should be considered characteristic of sub-elite culture rather than inner elite culture. Real elite culture may in Malia be defined as written administration, valuable and highly symbolic metal objects that were worn on the body such as daggers, pendants and signet rings, metal tableware, high quality inscribed sealstones and metal sealing devices and innovative architectural spaces and the exclusive practices that can be associated with them.

Assessing Elite Culture Elsewhere on Crete

Quartier Mu gives us an idea of what elite and sub-elite culture looked like in the MM II period at Malia. However, when moving to other regions, we have to take into account the likelihood that material culture and its deployment may have been very different. There is not only the issue of the size and scale of the socio-political units but also of the differential availability of resources and access to interregional networks, which are factors that determine the material forms of elite culture. One serious problem is our restricted and partial knowledge of what is going on at other settlements, a result of piecemeal excavations. Good examples of this are Knossos and Poros-Katsambas. A MM IIA rectangular building beneath the South-West House at Knossos yielded evidence for administration and craft activities as suggested by pieces of unworked steatite, an unfinished sealstone and the unusual frequency of sawn cattle, sheep and goat horn-cores (Macdonald and Knappett 2007, 142). This structure was destroyed by fire and a more monumental building of cut stones was constructed in MM IIB (French 1992–93, 68). Important as it is, the social significance of this context is not easily assessed. Considering the size of Knossos (and Poros) and on analogy with Malia it may be assumed that multiple elite groups existed. The settlement of Poros expanded considerably in MM IB and large buildings with painted plaster, Kamares pottery of excellent quality, imported pottery from the Mesara, numerous sealstones, large rock-cut tombs and plenty of evidence for cult (sheep-bell figurines) was found (Dimopoulou-Rethemniotaki 2004). The pattern revealed at Monastiraki is also interesting. Besides the building on the top of the Charakas hill, sizeable houses have been excavated to the east. One of these is particularly interesting because of the large number of sealings (659) that have been found. The house consists of more than 80 rooms and besides storage rooms it also seems to have been used for workshop activities (Kanta and Tzigounaki 2000). Another house to the south of the building on the top of the Charakas hill yielded the well-known house-model and 137 sealings.

On the basis of a cursory overview of elite material culture in different geographical regions of Crete some interesting deductions can nevertheless be made. The most important one is that the scale and complexity of a center (size of main settlement, number of large complexes, social hierarchy, competition, *etc.*) and its access to interregional networks have an influence on the originality and complexity of elite culture. In the smaller centers there seems to be a tendency to emulate aspects of elite

culture of larger polities either through import or local production. This is the case for the elite at Myrtos Pyrgos and Monastiraki, who are looking towards Malia and Phaistos respectively. There is no reason to assume the existence of multiple elite groups at Myrtos but that at least one existed is suggested by the remains of the building(s?) on top of the hill and the rectangular house tomb (Cadogan 1978). Work by Knappett has greatly clarified elite culture at Myrtos-Pyrgos and the local production and emulation of Maliote fine tableware (Knappett 1999). Outside knowledge seems to have been restricted to that gained via interregional networks, especially connecting this site with the Malia region. Also the practice of using Cretan Hieroglyphic sealstones to impress handles and weights seems to imitate Maliote practice and two four-sided prismatic sealstones were found (Knappett 1999, 633). At Monastiraki, polychrome pottery imitates the pottery consumed at Phaistos, although it is clearly of a lesser quality (Kanta 1999). The use of direct object sealings also seems to be inspired by the Phaistos system, although there are differences in the way the system was put to use (Kanta and Tzigounaki 2000; Militello 2000).

The situation in Lasithi, an independent polity between Malia on the north coast and Myrtos Pyrgos on the south coast (Nowicki 1995), is also enlightening. By MM I the plain was densely occupied with several large settlements (Plati Kefala, Tzermiado Kastellos, Kaminaki Afendi Christos and Avrakontas Kastellos) on defensible hills (Nowicki 1995). The dynamic among these different sites is not clear but Nowicki (1995, 39) has suggested that these sites may have controlled different parts of the Lasithi plain and the mountains beyond. The fact that the Trapeza cave was in use from the Final Neolithic till the MM II period and that the Psychro cave seems to take off when the Trapeza cave declines (Poursat and Knappett 2005) may suggest a shift in power on the plain. Egyptianizing objects were found in the Trapeza Cave and recently also in the Ayios Charalambos Cave. None of these seem, however, to have been produced locally. The scarab in white paste from Ayios Charalambos points towards the Mesara (Pini 1990), as does the pendant in the shape of a monkey in hippopotamus ivory (other examples from Mesara tombs; Betancourt 2005a, 451). Daggers of Mesara type, a sealstone in the shape of a monkey and an ivory human head (Pendlebury and Money-Coutts 1935–36) also point towards the Mesara as the place of manufacture. This suggests that elites in Lasithi were relying on the import of finished products from the Mesara. The picture painted by the pottery is different and the pottery from Kastellos-Tzermiadon shows resemblances with Malia and pottery types common at Malia are also found here (Poursat and Knappett 2005, 195, note 1). It is not clear, however, whether this pottery was locally produced or imported. The Ayios Charalambos Cave has yielded local pottery, but also imports from Mirabello, Malia, and Knossos (Langford Verstegen 2007).

Conclusions

Early approaches to Middle Minoan political economy were top-down, focusing on the First Palaces as the principal political, economic and religious power base and sub-dividing the Cretan landscape into a handful of large territorial states that were

considered to be peer polities. However, it is becoming more and more clear that Crete did not consist of a handful of large peer polities but of an unknown number of larger and smaller polities. Power and agency, expressed in terms of control over the production, ownership and deployment of material, social and symbolic resources, do not appear to have been concentrated in the Palaces, but were distributed at multiple places in the settlements and the landscape and operated at different levels. These power configurations may be usefully modeled through detailed study of the production, diffusion, emulation and consumption of what might be termed elite or "high culture." Baines and Yoffee make a distinction between inner or core elites and sub-elites. A similar distinction between elite high culture and sub-elite lower culture must be made when studying elite culture and social power on Crete. It may be assumed that high culture was restricted to the inner elites whereas the sub-elite was merely imitating high culture at a lower level (e.g., cheaper non-exotic material). In order to define the upper end of the echelon or elite "high" culture, production and consumption in Quartier Mu, an elite building complex par excellence, was assessed. This yielded interesting insights in the ways the Mu elite was deploying material culture to maintain and legitimize its elite ideology. Although elite ideology is propagated through elite culture, it seems that the main production of the attached Mu workshops was aimed at sealstones of average quality, stone vases and utilitarian metal objects. In addition, apart from the egyptianizing reliefs in Malia, there is no evidence that any of the high-quality pottery, sealstones and metal objects (dagger, bowls) were produced in the Mu workshops. On the contrary, they seem to have been purchased from other local and non-local and presumably highly specialized workshops for which there is no reason to assume that they were controlled by the Mu elite. This is perhaps a surprising conclusion, which requires a discussion of the relationship between workshops producing items of elite culture and the elite groups but which falls beyond the scope of the present article. The wide distribution of seals in the style of the *Atelier de Sceaux* (Poursat and Papatsaroucha 2000), of stone vases, of high quality tableware could suggest that these were objects that are better associated with sub-elites rather than with inner elite high culture.

The social implications of a study of elite culture can only be understood when the latter placed in a wider context, whether locally (settlement), regionally (wider region) or interregionally. This also applies for Quartier Mu, which although exceptional in the current archaeological record, may only have been one of several elite groups in Malia. A study of the goods consumed and produced in Quartier Mu suggests that the latter does not distinguish itself from other groups in town by the extraordinary character and quality of the goods consumed (which are limited to a restricted number of objects) as much as by the quantities in which goods were consumed. In addition, it would seem that the practices that took place in Building A and left little archaeological traces apart from the concentrations of fine tableware must have been an important strategy in the underpinning of the social power held by the Quartier Mu group.

The same methodology may be applied to other settlements, but unfortunately this is hampered severely by the fact that there are few extensive excavations of settlements. Promising sites are Poros-Katsambas, Monastiraki and perhaps also Petras. However, elite culture will take on different forms in different places as it is influenced by factors

such as access to foreign resources and networks, which in itself is closely connected with the scale and complexity of the polities. In addition, what constitutes elite and sub-elite culture may differ even in places of similar complexity and access to resources. However, since metal objects, monumental architecture, innovative techniques and exotic goods are the most common ways of underpinning elite strategies, it may be assumed that elite high culture at other centers such as Knossos and perhaps at Phaistos took these forms. Styles and themes may, however, have been different (as was the case for the glyptic traditions) although one may expect fascination with the East to have played a role, especially in north-central Crete with its affluent harbor at Poros.

Note

- 1 This observation is based on the catalogue compiled by Lambrou-Phillipson (1990). It is clear from the contexts that most Orientalia come from earlier burial contexts although obviously imported raw materials are making their way to Crete: gold, copper, tin, semi-precious stones, etc.

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