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PAST AND MEMORY IN THE AEGEAN BRONZE AGE

Proceedings of the 17th International Aegean Conference, University of Udine, Department of Humanities and Cultural Heritage, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Department of Humanities, 17-21 April 2018

Edited by Elisabetta BORGNA, Ilaria CALOI, Filippo Maria CARINCI and Robert LAFFINEUR

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THE UNCERTAINTIES INHERENT IN INTERPRETING THE PICTORIAL MEMORY AND THE BLEND OF IDEAS AND ACTUALITIES DRAWN FROM A GLORIOUS PAST: THE CASE OF POSTPALATIAL MINOAN RELIGIOUS ICONOGRAPHY

Minoan religious iconography is full of elements whose interpretation and meaning in the more composite scenes remain uncertain up to this day. The ambiguity of their meaning is exacerbated due to the absence of accompanying inscriptions – and more generally of any religious written sources – as well as because of the symbolic nature of isolated motifs, which in most cases appear to have been simply and randomly assembled to form the iconographical *mélange* presented to us.¹ Apart from a few cases of ceremonial scenes depicted on walls or other large surfaces during the Neopalatial and Final Palatial periods,² the composition of the different elements of the scenes is loose. No doubt it follows some iconographic conventions, but they are not always fully understandable by uninitiated viewers -namely us.

A factor which has not been properly evaluated till now is the dynamics of the continuous transformation of the original meaning of the iconographic elements, as they come under the influence of associated motifs, symbols or, even, ritual equipment and actions. A good number of motifs occurring in the Minoan iconography are considered to have been directly imported from Egypt³ or the Levant, while some others appear to have come to Crete in a more roundabout manner. It has been also widely accepted that these motifs have been drastically transformed, either in their form or their meaning, under the influence of those beliefs and iconographic elements pre-existing in the substratum of the religious, and more generally, cosmological conscience of the Minoans.⁴ As far as the iconography is concerned, the imported motifs may either closely mirror the archetype or diverge from it under the influence of other morphological elements pre-existing in the artisans' conscience. It should be noted here, however, that this procedure appears to be mutual, since some motifs appearing in iconographical cycles of the East have been obviously transformed under the influence of Minoan input. A good example of the interplay of such influences is offered by the iconography of the high-footed offering tables, on whose top surface libations or food offerings are deposited, a ceremonial action often occupying the centre of the religious scene.⁵ It is obvious that the Egyptian and Mesopotamian iconography, especially rich in ceremonial scenes of this kind, played an important role in the establishment of similar ritual actions in Minoan Crete.⁶ The latter, once in existence, in its turn contributed to the ritual with the addition of new elements, such as the creation of new types of ceremonial vessels, among which is one in the form of a column.⁷ Such elements then exerted influence on the religious iconographic cycles of the East (Pl. CXLIIa).8

The enduring use of stereotypical motifs in religious iconographic contexts, combined with the influences from abroad, will clearly, in the course of time, have induced changes in the archetypes' original

¹ E.g. for the iconography on the LMIII larnakes, see N.I. MEROUSSIS, Οι εικονογραφικοί κύκλοι των ΥΜΙΙΙ λαρνάκων. Οι διαστάσεις της εικονογραφίας στα πλαίσια των ταφικών πρακτικών (2000) 386-403.

² D. EVELY (ed.), Fresco. A Passport into the Past. Minoan Crete through the Eyes of Mark Cameron (1999) 73.

³ For a summary of various cultural influences from Egypt to Crete, see P. WARREN, "Crete and Egypt: The Transmission of Relationships," in A. KARETSOU (ed.), Κρήτη – Αίγυπτος. Πολιτισμικοί δεσμοί τριών γιλιετιών, Μελέτες (2000) 27.

⁴ A proposal for the mechanism acting in such transformations is found in P. WARREN, "A Model of Iconographical Transfer. The Case of Crete and Egypt," in I. BRADFER-BURDET, B. DETOURNAY and R. LAFFINEUR (eds), Κρης Τεχνίτης. L'artisan crétois. Recueil d'articles en l'honneur de Jean-Claude Poursat, publié à l'occasion des 40 ans de la découverte du Quartier Mu (2005) 221-227.

⁵ L. PLATON and Y. PARARAS, *Pedestalled Offering Tables in the Aegean World* (1991) 33-39, figs 14-15.

⁶ PLATON and PARARAS (*supra* n. 5) 38-39, 43-44.

⁷ PLATON and PARARAS (*supra* n. 5) 40-41, figs 11-13.

⁸ For such an example, see PLATON and PARARAS (*supra* n. 5) 37, 40, fig. 14m.

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meaning – perhaps either transforming them into symbols, or conflating two or more ideas into one.⁹ Finally, they may have become disassembled into isolated morphological elements, whose original meaning thus becomes quite lost. Good examples of such processes of alteration may be detected in the obviously symbolic use acquired by the columnar table in Aegean,¹⁰ but also in east-Mediterranean, iconographical scenes, and again by the transformation of the hippopotamus goddess Taweret into a lionheaded genius with an important role in cult actions,¹¹ as well as the conversion of the architrave of sacred buildings into a standalone iconographic element, bearing but a vague religious meaning.¹²

The pace and scope of this disassociation on the part of the Minoan artisans a propos the iconographic archetypes was accelerated during the Postpalatial period, probably for two additional reasons. The first is the gradual distancing of the artists from the neopalatial naturalism, something probably due to the disappearance of the palatial workshops and the concomitant degrading of both the most refined and the monumental arts. The second is the collapse of the palatial system itself, with the parallel abandonment of the large-scale and centrally organized ceremonies, requiring the strict keeping of formal rites. As a result, the iconographic compositions of the Postpalatial period are characterized by confusion, not only regarding morphology but also in their religious inferences. The artists obviously drew upon a religious iconography, whose initial meaning they were barely aware of, but they still considered its reproduction necessary, probably as a means to show attachment to a glorious palatial past¹³ and, perhaps, to ensure that things were done properly for the deceased.

Thus, isolated themes and symbols of the neopalatial religious iconography, such as the double axe, the "horns of consecration," solar and astral symbols, the bull, the octopus and other marine creatures, the papyrus, the palm and other plants, even the now but newly arrived chariot motif, were composed into a great number of syntactical variations, aiming to emphasize the broad religious context in which the depicted item belonged rather than to render or to give meaning to any specific ritual action, to any precise cosmological idea, or any accurately described, natural or supernatural, landscape. For this reason, Nanno Marinatos' imaginative proposal that the iconographic compositions of the Cretan *lanakes* illustrate the Minoan underworld¹⁴ is difficult to confirm: some aspects clearly do depict specific burial practices practised by humans¹⁵ and the motifs, which enjoyed a wide usage, also occur in vessels with an exclusively secular function.¹⁶

So, it seems that the motifs used in the postpalatial iconography are drawn from a rendered down *purée* of more or less confused ideas, a fact which very often negates the efforts of the scholars to identify their precise provenance and meaning. For example, what is gained in attempting to identify the provenance and meaning of the widely known motif of the so-called "horns of consecration,"¹⁷ since,

⁹ As in the case of the combination of the double axe motif with the sacral knot symbol. M. NILSSON, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion* (1950) 212.

¹⁰ PLATON and PARARAS (*supra* n. 5) 33, 37.

¹¹ J. WEINGARTEN, "The Transformation of Egyptian Taweret into the Minoan Genius," in KARETSOU (*supra* n. 3) 114-119; WARREN (*supra* n. 4) 225-226.

¹² MEROUSSIS (*supra* n. 1) 231, 239, 374-375.

¹³ See also MEROUSSIS (*supra* n. 1) 419.

¹⁴ N. MARINATOS, "Minoan and Mycenaean Larnakes: A Comparison," in J. DRIESSEN and A. FARNOUX (eds), La Crète mycénienne. Actes de la Table Ronde internationale organisée par l'École francaise d'Athènes, 26-28 mars 1991 (1997) 282-283, 288; EADEM, "Minoan Beliefs of the Afterlife," in M. ANDREADAKI-VLAZAKI, G. RETHEMIOTAKIS and N. DIMOPOULOU-RETHEMIOTAKI, From the Land of the Labyrinth. Minoan Crete, 3000-1100 BC, Essays (2008) 143-145.

¹⁵ *E.g.* a *larnax* from Pigi, Rethymnon. MARINATOS (*supra* n. 14, 1997) 282. MEROUSSIS (*supra* n. 1) 175-176, Pl. 19.

¹⁶ For example, the octopus motif appears often as the main decorative theme in LM IIIA2/B transport stirrup jars and amphoroid kraters, the latter usually connected with the mixing of wine with water. L. PLATON, "Τα μινωικά αγγεία και το κρασί," in A.K. MYLOPOTAMITAKI, Οίνος παλαιός ηδύποτος. Τοκρητικόκρασί από τα προϊστορικάως τα νεώτερα χρόνια (2002) 15-16, fig. 15.

¹⁷ A. EVANS, The Palace of Minos. A Comparative Account of the Successive Stages of the Early Cretan Civilization as Illustrated by the Discoveries at Knossos I (1921) 136-137; NILSSON (supra n. 9) 165-193.

judging from the way it is used in the postpalatial compositions, it seems that these aspects (original provenance and meaning) were equally unfamiliar to the artisans who used the motif? An interesting example depicted on a postpalatial *pyxis* from Zakros¹⁸ offers a proof for the above observation (Pl. CXLIIb).

Here, the "horns of consecration" motif has been drawn twice: the original portrayal rendered the lateral ends more or less rectilinear, so approaching the known architectural type (Pl. CXLIIc, left), which in some cases recalls the Egyptian symbol of the "horizon," a similarity that has led a number of scholars to consider that the iconographic element of the "horns of consecration" was directly transferred from Egypt to Crete.¹⁹ However, a closer observation of the motif on the *pyxis* reveals that the original drawing has been overdrawn by a second one, which now emphasizes the curvilinear S-shaped lines, that in other cases render the bull horns (Pl. CXLIIc, right).²⁰ Are two different hands at work here? One of an apprentice, who, ignorant of any precise attendant meanings, simply copied an iconographical archetype, and one of a master who corrected the drawing to make his own view the clearer? Or are we confronted by a single artisan who wavered between a simplistic statement of the symbol and a clearer rendering, one which aimed to remind the ill-informed of its true provenance? Whatever the answer, the later correction of the original drawing betrays an uncertainty on the precise meaning of the symbol, which confusion argues that it was dredged up from chaotic unconscious *mélange* of the artisan's religious ideas.

At this point, an important question arises: during the Postpalatial period, were there any largescale public or semi-public rituals from which information on the meaning of specific cult objects and symbols could be directly drawn by the artists? With the abandonment of the great art of wall painting and the stereotypical repetition of known neopalatial motifs in postpalatial seals, the only iconographical art flourishing during this period was that of the painting on *lamakes* and other burial vessels.²¹ This fact, alongside others, affirms the strengthened importance attaching to funerals, which function as a kind of arena of competition between social groups or, even, individuals. It is reasonable, then, that the prominence accorded to the burial practices and, through them, the discrimination of the identity of the dead and, by extension, of the social group to which he belonged, would be foremost in importance to the people performing the funerary and/or memorial actions. This is the reason why *lamakes* and other burial vessels are decorated either with themes drawn from the old emblematic palatial religious iconography, or with scenes referring to funerary rituals or beliefs, in which the relatives of the dead, as well as the deceased himself, played an important role.²²

A good example of this iconographical practice is offered by the fully illustrated clay *lamax* from Episkopi Hierapetra.²³ The scenes were undoubtedly ritual depicting as they do either the burial or some ceremonial practice, as is confirmed by the gestures of the human figures: some of them raise *kylikes*, but also a type of unidentified discoid and stemmed objects, which have been interpreted as solar symbols (Pl. CXLIIIa).²⁴ The only other known representation showing the raising of a similar discoid object is that on

¹⁸ The *pyxis* was found in a fragmentary state of preservation just outside the N. corner of House B of the SW hill.

¹⁹ L.V. WATROUS, "Egypt and Crete in the Early and Middle Bronze Age: A Case of Trade and Cultural Diffusion," in E.H. CLINE and D. HARRIS-CLINE (eds), *The Aegean and the Orient in the Second Millennium*. *Proceedings of the 50th Anniversary Symposium, University of Cincinnati, 18-20 April 1997* (1998) 23; J.A. MACGILLIVRAY, "The Religious Context," in J. A. MACGILLIVRAY, J.M. DRIESSEN and L.H. SACKETT (eds), *The Palaikastro Kouros. A Minoan Chryselephantine Statuette and its Aegean Bronze Age Context* (2000) 123-130; N. MARINATOS, *Minoan Kingship and the Solar Goddess. A Near Eastern Koine* (2010) 103-113.

²⁰ Compare this shape with that of the bull's horns rendered in a vessel carried by Minoans on an Egyptian painting from the tomb of Senmut. MARINATOS (*supra* n. 19), fig. 9.5: c.

²¹ MEROUSSIS (*supra* n. 1).

²² MEROUSSIS (*supra* n. 1) 418-419.

²³ Μ. PLATONOS, "Εικονιστική σαρκοφάγος από την Επισκοπή Ιεράπετρας," in Υπουργείο Πολιτισμού. Ταμείο Αρχαιολογικών Πόρων και Απαλλοτριώσεων (ed.), Amicitiae Gratia. Τόμος στη μνήμη Αλκμήνης Σταυρίδη (2008). For previous bibliographical citations, see esp. supra n. 4.

²⁴ PLATONOS (*supra* n. 23) 27-28. Kanta and Meroussis believe that they represent flags. A. KANTA, *The*

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a signet ring now in the Berlin Museum.²⁵ On this, a seated female figure, identified as a Goddess, raises a discoid stemmed object described as a mirror.²⁶ In neopalatial Crete, mirrors come almost exclusively from palatial contexts²⁷ and, with one probable exception,²⁸ do not appear to be connected with grooming.²⁹ Moreover, the largest specimen at present known comes from the destruction layer of the Zakros palace Central Court,³⁰ a fact which supports a public, very probably ceremonial, employment (Pl. CXLIIIb).³¹ Such use is also maintained by the almost exclusively religious decoration of the elegant ivory handles belonging to Minoan and Mycenaean bronze mirrors.³² Most usually, recovered bronze mirrors in Crete date to the Final and Postpalatial periods and are to be found in graves.³³ However, it is worth mentioning that they are not exclusively connected with females,³⁴ so their interpretation as toilette implements, although possible, remains unproven.³⁵ Thus, the question may be posed as to whether such objects were possibly used in specific burial rituals,³⁶ a snapshot of which has been preserved in one of the scenes of the Episkopi sarcophagus.

Whatever the case, the discoid shape of the objects, their metal surface which shines in the light, as well as the fact that they are depicted as being upraised in the scene on the *lamax*, all suggest their semantic connection with the sun, transforming them into solar symbols.³⁷ If this is true, then the identification of some peculiar iconographic elements, occurring on a postpalatial *pyxis* from Mochlos, with mirrors is probable.³⁸ This identification is also supported by the addition of one other probable solar symbols³⁹ in the

Late Minoan III Period in Crete. A Survey of Sites, Pottery and their Distribution (1980) 150; MEROUSSIS (supra n. 1) 217.

- ²⁵ CMS XI 30, with a complete list of bibliographical citations.
- ²⁶ A. EVANS, "Tree and Pillar Cult," JHS 21 (1901) 190, fig. 64; A. PERSSON, The Religion of Greece in Prehistoric Times (1942) 43-46. NILSSON (supra n. 9) 351; A. PAPAEFTHYMIOU-PAPANTHIMOU, Σκεύη και σύνεργα του καλλωπισμού στον κρητομυκηναϊκό χώρο (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Thessaloniki, 1979) 159-160.
- ²⁷ PAPAEFTHYMIOU-PAPANTHIMOU (*supra* n. 26) 132-133.
- ²⁸ It deals with a specimen found in a room devoted to the application of female make-up, in the so-called "East Building" at the palatial settlement of Zakros. L. PLATON, "Sacred Prostitution in Minoan Crete? A New Interpretation of Some Old Archaeological Findings," *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 7:3 (2015) 77, 80.
- ²⁹ Probably, things were different in Mycenaean Greece, where mirrors were connected principally with female beauty. C. PASCHALIDIS, "Reflections of Eternal Beauty. The Unpublished Context of a Wealthy Female Burial from Koukaki, Athens and the Occurrence of Mirrors in Mycenaean Tombs," in M.-L. NOSCH and R. LAFFINEUR (eds), KOSMOS. Jewellery, Adornment and Textiles in the Aegean Bronze Age. Proceedings of the 13th International Aegean Conference, University of Copenhagen, 21-26 April 2010 (2012) 552-556.
- ³⁰ Ν. PLATON, "Ανασκαφαί Ζάκρου," *Prakt* 1965 (1966) 193, Pl. 236α. L. PLATON, "Εργασίες μελέτης και συντήρησης ευρημάτων Ανασκαφών Ζάκρου," *Prakt* 2011 (2014) 182, Pl. 145γ.
- ³¹ PLATON (*supra* n. 28) 80. A second bronze disc belonging to a mirror comes from the so-called "Hall of the Ceremonies" in the Zakros palace, betraying more religious connotations. N. PLATON, Zάκρος. Το νέον μινωικόν ανάκτορον (1974) 144-145.
- ³² PASCHALIDIS (*supra* n. 29) 550.
- ³³ PAPAEFTHYMIOU-PAPANTHIMOU (supra n. 26) 133-140, 156; E. BABOULA, "Bronze Age Mirrors: a Mediterranean Commodity in the Aegean," in A. SERGHIDOU (ed.), Dorima. A Tribute to the A.G. Leventis Foundation on the Occasion of its 20th Anniversary (2000) 65.; PASCHALIDIS (supra n. 29) 550-555.
- ³⁴ BABOULA (supra n. 33) 68; PASCHALIDIS (supra n. 29) 551-554.
- ³⁵ PAPAEFTHYMIOU-PAPANTHIMOU (*supra* n. 26) 157.
- ³⁶ See also BABOULA (*supra* n. 33) 74.
- ³⁷ PERSSON (*supra* n. 26) 45-46. PLATONOS (*supra*, n. 23) 28. It should be noted here that mirror-like objects appear, together with other religious symbols, on the head of a "Goddess with Upraised Arms" from the shrine of Karphi. H.W. PENDLEBURY, J.D.S. PENDLEBURY and M.B. MONNEY-COUTTS, "Excavations in the Plain of Lasithi," *BSA* 38 (1937-38) Pl. 31. Similar rounded and stemmed objects, combined with the symbols of "horns of consecration" and birds, appear also on the lid of a *lamax* from Tanagra, Boeotia. V. ARAVANTINOS, *To Apyatoλoyuxó Movoείo Θηβών* (2010) 100.
- ³⁸ E. BANOU, "LMIII Mokhlos (East Crete) versus LMIII Viannos (Central Eastern Crete): Differences

centre of the discoid surface of the *pyxis* motif. This symbol finds a close earlier parallel in an element which constitutes the single motif of a lentoid seal, now in the Ashmolean Museum.⁴⁰ It should be added here that in this last case the periphery of the disc is framed by short lines, which might portray the refraction of the sun's rays on the surface of a bronze mirror.

Consequently, the scene on the Episkopi sarcophagus probably preserves the memory of a palatial ceremony concerning the solar goddess,⁴¹ which, in the Postpalatial period, was connected with burial rituals. It remains unclear though, if, in this case, such rituals did take place during the burial or if they were simply a painted reminder of a palatial ceremony, an attempt by some social group(s) to display connections with the glorious past.

Finally, it is particularly interesting that the postpalatial iconography usually related to the dead and the underworld is also used to decorate ritual and secular vessels found in domestic contexts. Three specimens from the Zakros postpalatial settlement are worth mentioning here: an illustrated krater,⁴² a richly decorated bath-tub⁴³ and a giant pithamphora. Their decorative motifs, rendered either in a loose syntax or completely unconnected with each other, have been obviously drawn from the palatial religious iconography. They comprise a bull, a griffin, octopuses, sea urchins or anemones used probably as solar symbols, double axes, half-rosettes, ivy and papyri. The iconography also includes birds and fish, motifs added in postpalatial religious scenes probably to represent the divine spheres of the heavens and sea. All the above-mentioned three vessels were found in the interior of two big neopalatial houses in a semiruined state of preservation, defining the loci of ritual actions.⁴⁴ (Pl. CXLIVa-b) Other ceremonial objects, such as triton-shells and a circular model representing a shrine or a tholos tomb, further support the performance of specific rituals in the centre of the ruins.⁴⁵ An attractive hypothesis is that these rituals were connected with an ancestral cult, and, more specifically, that of the earlier inhabitants of these same important buildings.⁴⁶ In this case, the use of iconographic elements of a somewhat concealed (to us) meaning, but deriving from the palatial vocabulary, would have been aimed at connecting the new rising social groups with the glorious past of the settlement.

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and Similarities," in A.L. D'AGATA and J. MOODY with E. WILLIAMS (eds), Ariadne's Threads. Connections between Crete and the Greek Mainland in Late Minoan III (LM IIIA2 to LM IIIC) (2005) 163-164, fig. 26; Chr. SOFIANOU, "Pyxis with Lid," in M. ANDREADAKI-VLAZAKI, G. RETHEMIOTAKIS and N. DIMOPOULOU-RETHEMIOTAKI (eds), From the Land of the Labyrinth. Minoan Crete, 3000-1100 BC, Catalogue (2008) 191.

³⁹ For some similar motifs identified as rayed suns, see L. PLATON, "On the Dating and Character of the 'Zakros Pits' Deposit," in O. KRZYSZKOWSKA (ed.), *Cretan Offerings. Studies in honour of Peter Warren* (2010) 254, n. 71. Also, L. GOODISON, *Death, Women and the Sun: Symbolism of Regeneration in Early Aegean Religion* (1989), 72-74. It should be noted, however, that M. Nilsson doubts if all the star-like rayed orbs, like the one depicted in the centre of the Mochlos *pyxis* theme, might be interpreted as solar symbols. NILSSON (*supra* n. 9) 414-417.

⁴⁰ V.E.G. KENNA, Cretan Seals. With a Catalogue of the Minoan Gems in the Ashmolean Museum (1960) 141, no 381, Pl. 15; CMS VI 2 471.

⁴¹ See also BABOULA (*supra* n. 33) 67.

⁴² Ε. KARANTZALI, "Ένα ενδιαφέρον εικονιστικό αγγείο από τη Ζάκρο," in Πεπραγμένα Ι΄ Διεθνούς Κρητολογικού Συνεδρίου (Χανιά, 1-8 Οκτωβρίου 2006) Α3 (2011) 619-645.

⁴³ L. PLATON, "Εργασίες μελέτης και συντήρησης ευρημάτων ανασκαφών Ζάκρου," Prakt 2003 (2006) 108; KARANTZALI (supra n. 42) 636, 639-640; L. PLATON, "Δυο-δυο, στην μπανιέρα δυο-δυο. Ένα ενδιαφέρον πήλινο ομοίωμα από την ανατολική Κρήτη, με πιθανές σημασιολογικές διασυνδέσεις με την Κύπρο του τέλους της Εποχής του Χαλκού και της Εποχής του Σιδήρου," in Πεπραγμένα ΙΒ΄ Διεθνούς Κρητολογικού Συνεδρίου (Ηράκλειο 21-25 Σεπτεμβρίου 2016) (2018) 5, fig. 10.

⁴⁴ It deals with the Houses A and B of the SW hill. N. PLATON (*supra* n. 31) 53-54, figs 26-27. KARANTZALI (*supra* n. 42) 639.

⁴⁵ KARANTZALI (*supra* n. 42) 639-640.

⁴⁶ KARANTZALI (*supra* n. 42) 639.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Pl. CXLIIa Pedestalled offering table from Zakros (left), compared with a motif occurring on a seal ring from Enkomi, Cyprus.
- Pl. CXLIIb Post-palatial *pyxis* from Zakros with the motif of "Horns of Consecration."
- Pl. CXLIIc Two images of the Zakros *pyxis*, in which the original drawing (left) and the overdrawn motif (right) have been highlighted by white lines.
- Pl. CXLIIIa Detail of the Episkopi sarcophagus' representation, showing a human figure raising up a discoid stemmed object.
- Pl. CXLIIIb The bronze mirror found in the northern part of the Zakros palace's Central Court.
- Pl. CXLIVa Zakros, House B of the SW hill. Plan with the locus of the post-palatial ritual actions.
- Pl. CXLIVb Zakros, House A of the SW hill. The find spot of the post-palatial illustrated krater.

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CXLII



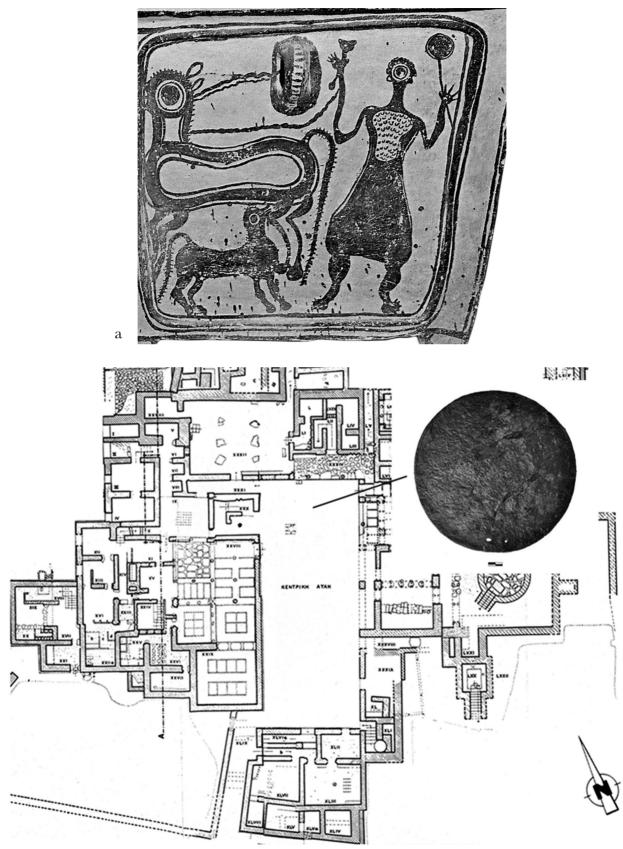




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