

Continuity and change in Minoan palatial power

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The relationship between economic power and political centralization during the First and Second Palace Periods of Bronze Age Crete is a topical theme in Aegean studies. Here, two scholars argue the case for continuity in the economic base of palatial political authority.

Key-words: Minoan Crete, Knossos, political economy, First and Second Palace Periods

Introduction

The major palaces of Bronze Age Crete acted as regional power centres for a period of around 500 years, through both the First Palace (c. 1925–1750 BC) and Second Palace (1750–1425 BC) Periods. The question we wish to pose in this short paper is whether there were any significant changes in the *nature* of palatial power over this time. The most popular theory appears to be that Minoan palatial systems were centralized and redistributive in both the First and Second Palace Periods, with palatial centres exerting considerable economic and political control over their hinterlands (Finley 1970; Renfrew 1972; Branigan 1988; Palaima 1990).

For the First Palace Period at least, this orthodoxy has recently been challenged, in separate doctoral theses by each of the present authors (Schoep 1996; Knappett 1997). For example, in a study comparing the pottery from the palatial centre of Malia with that of Myrtos Pyrgos, a village site within its territory, it emerged that, although the centre may have had ideological influence over a wide domain, its economic power was relatively circumscribed at the regional level (Knappett 1997, 1999). It was suggested that this situation might represent the existence of a state more decentralized than centralized in character.

But if we wish to examine the nature of political organization in the Second Palace Period a very basic problem awaits us — how many states were there? Some believe that each palatial centre controlled its own polity (Warren 1985; Cherry 1986; Soles 1991: 73–6), as seems to have been the case in the First Palace Pe-

riod. Other scholars, however, consider Knossos to have been the political centre for the whole island (e.g. Hood 1983; Wiener 1990: 150). These seemingly opposed views need not be mutually exclusive, however; each palatial site may have held a certain degree of (economic?) control over its immediate hinterland, whilst at the same time ceding ideological supremacy to Knossos (*cf.* Soles 1991: 76). The picture of regional political organization is complicated still further by the discovery in recent years of yet more palatial centres, for example at Galatas (Rethemiotakis 1999), Petras (Tsipopoulou 1997) and Archanes (Sakellarakis 1997). Yet these discoveries would appear to be consistent with the notion of a mosaic of polities of different sizes, to a large degree independent but at the same time owing ideological allegiance to Knossos.

One question in particular arises: what is the nature of palatial power, and how does it change from the First to the Second Palace Period? In order to chart the shifting nature of political authority, attention should be given to both its cultural and its economic underpinnings. Brief consideration is given here to both, but our focus is predominantly on the economic aspects — in other words, how did Minoan élites manipulate economic resources further to integrate and centralize their power? This essentially amounts to a study of the numerous elements of the Minoan political economy. For the purposes of our analysis we shall here adopt the general approach outlined by Smith (1991), in which political economy is described in terms of three critical components; it is argued that all state polities find a need to accumulate,

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bureaucratize and capitalize. These three features Smith christens the 'ABC' of political economy. This format will be used to analyse certain aspects of the Minoan evidence from the First and Second Palace Periods.

Accumulation

In a particular situation which calls for decisions to be made, certain individuals may react to the situation and make choices on behalf of the wider community. When that situation is safely negotiated, those decision-making individuals may or may not continue in their role; at this stage a more permanent crystallization of these roles may depend on the resources available to the individuals involved. Without an accumulated fund to provide manoeuvrability in their actions, these individuals' roles will almost certainly remain situational and will therefore evaporate as the situation recedes. The accumulation of economic resources therefore represents a key strategy for individuals or groups wishing to be consistently effective in the socio-political arena.

In the First Palace Period there is certainly convincing evidence for large-scale accumulation of staple goods within palatial centres. The storage capacities of the Early Palaces at Knossos, Malia and Phaistos are substantial, whether or not one considers the *kouloures* (very large circular stone-lined pits) to have been used for the storage of grain (for debate *cf.* Strasser 1997; Halstead 1997). What is less clear-cut is how the situation develops in the Second Palace Period. In an oft-cited article, Moody (1987) maintains that storage capacities in the palaces actually decrease, which is perhaps not in line with a scenario of increasingly centralized control, as envisaged by some scholars. However, Moody proposes that this decrease is matched by a corresponding increase in storage capacities in the 'villas' of the Late Minoan I period. Her argument is that the decrease occurs only because of a palatially-planned process of decentralization whereby 'villas' take over some of those storage functions previously regulated by the palaces. This appealing argument has seduced a number of scholars, among them Manning (1994) and Walberg (1994). Unfortunately it oversimplifies the evidence in two main ways. First, it is very difficult to compare food-storage capacities at Knossos (and indeed the other palaces) from one period to the next, and a few recalculations

change the picture considerably: one can argue, for example, that food-storage capacities remain broadly constant between MM II and LM I, with a brief increase during MM III (Christakis 1999: 126–9). Second, it should be remembered that a considerable number of second-order centres ('villas') did have MM II predecessors, as at Nerokourou and Myrtos Pyrgos. Although the nature of such MM II sites is not at all clear, it is quite possible that they had storage capacities comparable to those witnessed in LM I. When the storage facilities of a MM II second-order site like Monastiraki are considered (Kanta 1992; Niemeier 1997), the alleged growth of storage capacities at LM I second- or third-order sites may be something of an illusion. As a whole, it seems that there may have been broad continuity through time, rather than any increase or decrease in economic centralization.

Bureaucratization

Not only is it a good strategy to accumulate, it is also desirable to have professional managers to oversee accumulation. Effective bureaucratization should increase the élites' chances of maintaining economic integration. In the First Palace Period two different scripts, Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A, each with their own administrative system (Schoep 1999a), were used on Crete in different geographical areas, thus underlining the regional organization of Crete at this time. Hence, whereas the palace of Phaistos was using Linear A writing and a system mostly employing direct object sealing, the palaces of Knossos and Malia were keeping track of their administration in Cretan Hieroglyphic (FIGURE 1). To judge by the typological variation of the documents associated with both scripts, the management of resources seems to have been different at Knossos, Phaistos and Malia, and implies that the political economy of each of these First Palace 'states' was organized along different principles. Whilst the Knossos Cretan Hieroglyphic administration seems to have been very centralized, the Linear A administration at Phaistos appears to have worked with second-order centres (Monastiraki), suggestive of greater decentralization. It is possible that the Knossos state had a stronger centralizing tendency than the Phaistos state, which employed secondary centres. If these comments hold true, they indicate that Knossos and Phaistos had each reacted differently to the

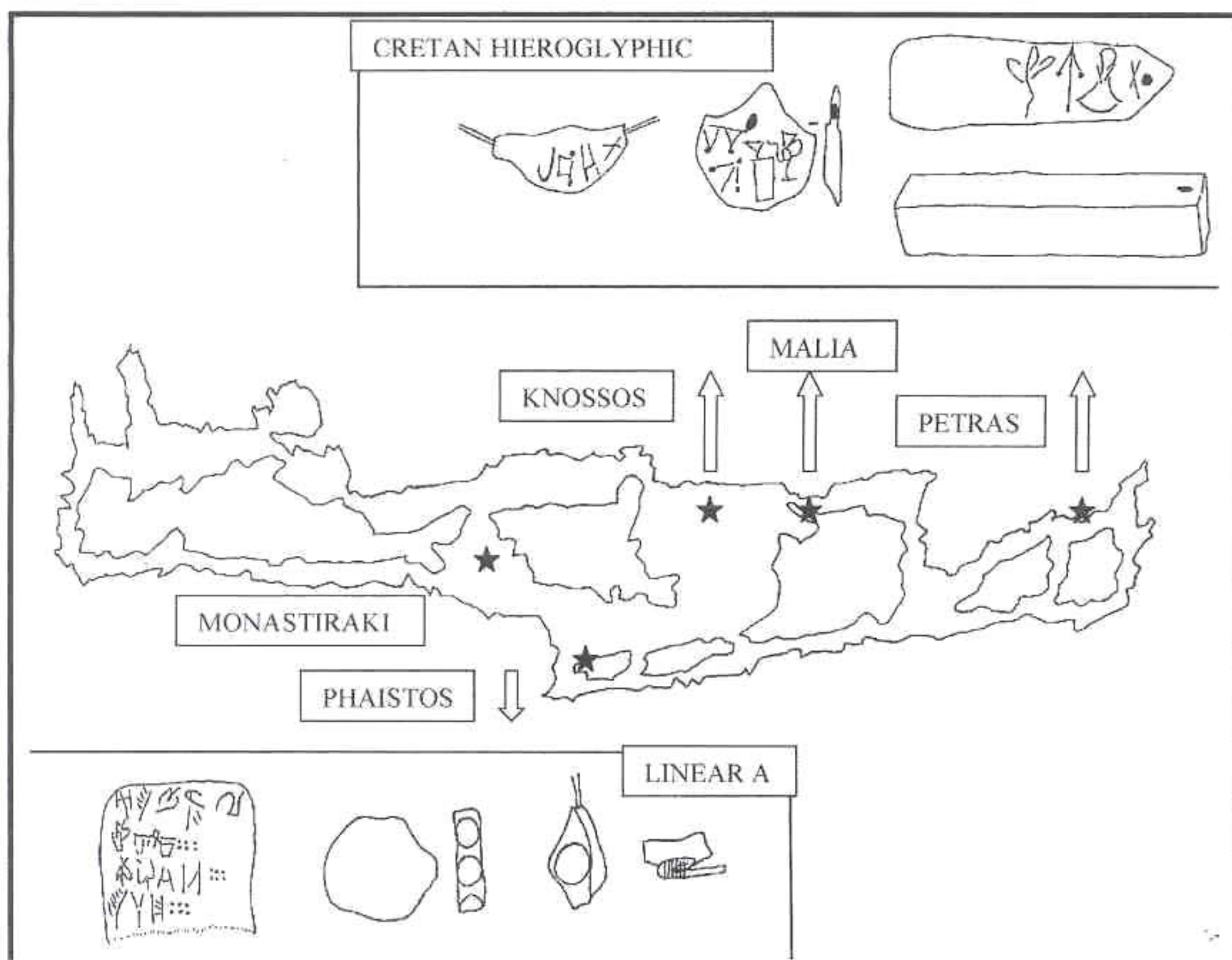


FIGURE 1. Map of Crete showing Protopalatial administrative centres of Knossos, Malia, Petras and Phaistos.

challenge of establishing and institutionalizing economic integration.

Turning to the Second Palace period, the major difference with the preceding period is first of all the obsolescence of Cretan Hieroglyphic and the fact that now all over Crete, and even beyond it, Linear A is the dominant mode of administrative script. A second radical change concerns the disappearance of direct object sealing as the principal means of managing resources. Instead, tablets and different types of sealed documents ceased to seal any goods, but instead represented a particular transaction. In comparison to the administration in the First Palace Period, one can note an increasing degree of decentralization, whereby administration (as represented by tablets) is being conducted not only at palatial centres but at many different levels. The regional features of the administration at the major sites of Khania, Haghia Triadha and Zakro sug-

gest that the state in the Second Palace Period may have been much more decentralized than previously argued (Schoep 1999b). Thus one can see changes from the First Palace period as political authorities adapted their systems to ensure continued or even enhanced economic integration between differentiated units.

In the First Palace Period the process of 'overseeing' seems to be direct and *sur place*. Yet in the subsequent period there is a general move towards a less direct, more 'literate' and perhaps more specialized bureaucracy, with what one might even describe as more 'paperwork'. Less cumbersome, the system facilitated economic integration, and allowed for more efficient accumulation and mobilization of resources to be used in the socio-political arena.

Capitalization

This can be quite simply described as 'putting resources to work'. It is an important process

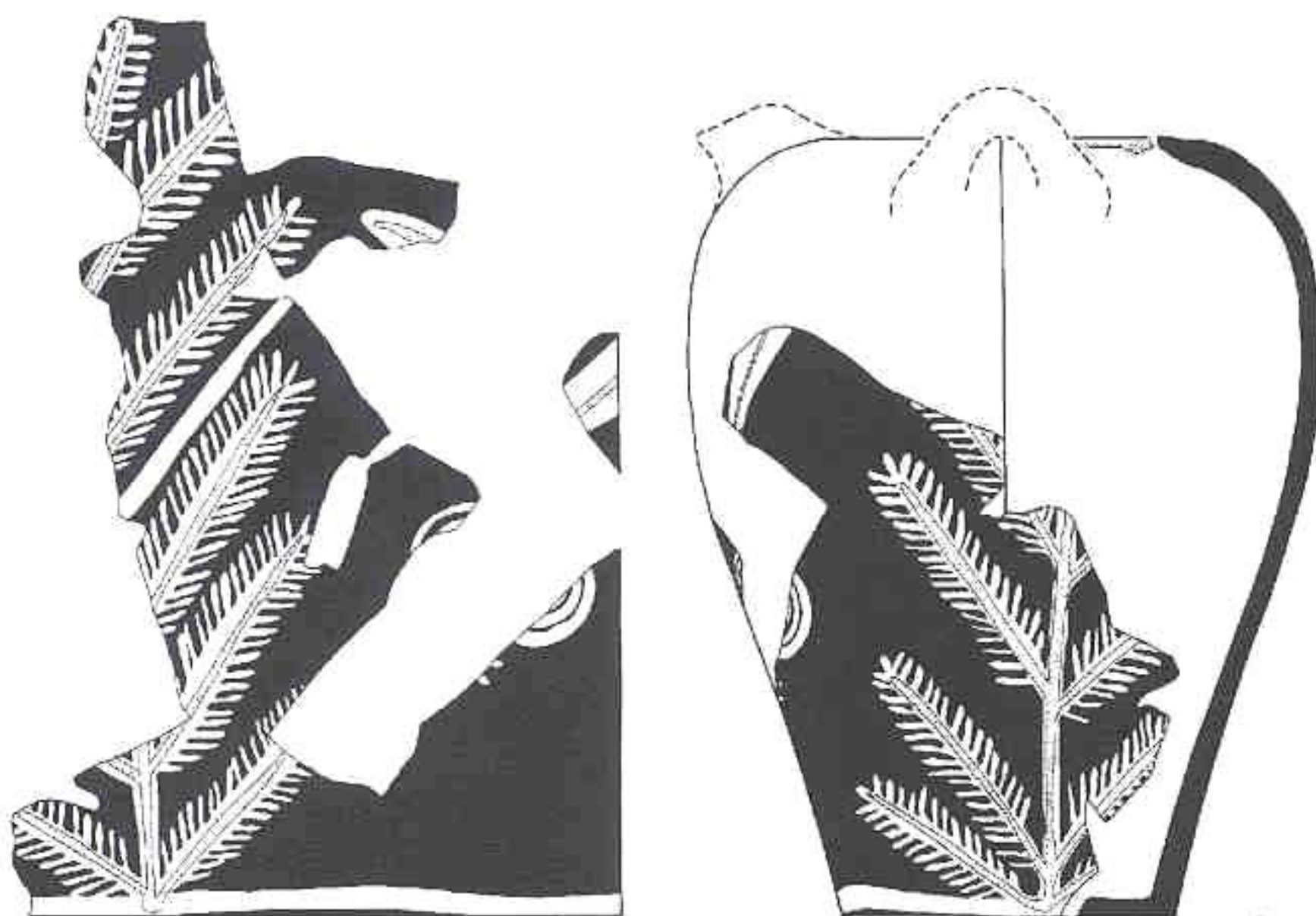


FIGURE 2. *Kamares polychrome vase (Middle Minoan Ib, c. 1900 BC), from recent excavations at Knossos. (Courtesy of the British School at Athens.)*

in order to sustain an élite's position and, in an indirect and perhaps ideological sense, ensures the ability to implement of future community programmes. One way of putting resources to work is to invest in skilled artisans so that they produce luxury craft items, or indeed palatial architecture, which may then be used in conspicuous consumption.

For the First Palace period, it is unclear what the situation was with regard to workshops within the palaces. Branigan (1987) has suggested that there was very little craft production within the Middle Minoan palaces, but on the whole the evidence is weak (e.g. Phaistos room LX, *cf.* comments in Platon 1993). By far the best evidence comes from Middle Minoan II Malia where, in Quartier Mu (an impressive town complex close to the palace), a number of workshops were occupied by skilled artisans devoted to the production of fine craft items (Poursat 1996). Quartier Mu has most of the features of the contemporary palace at Malia, but its relation to the latter is still ambiguous (Poursat 1983; 1988). Despite the limited evidence 'on the ground' for workshops in this period, study of the finished products makes it quite clear that there were immensely skilled artisans devoted to the creation of luxury items fit for élite consumption. Kamares pottery (notably the famous 'eggshell ware') was the finest pottery in the whole of the East Mediterranean at this time (Hood 1971; Betancourt 1985;

MacGillivray 1998). An example of a Kamares vase (of Middle Minoan IB date) from recent excavations at Knossos is shown in FIGURE 2. Stone vases and seal-stones also betray the presence of skilled craftspeople, not to mention other areas of artisanal expertise such as masonry and metalworking. It seems certain that in this period palatial élites were putting their resources to work by investing in skilled craft production and accruing teams of attached specialists.

In the Second Palace period the emphasis on capitalization through craft production continues strongly, and may even intensify or branch out into new areas. Relief stone vases, impressive metal vases and relief ivory plaques are amongst some of the extremely fine luxury items produced, presumably by attached specialists. It has been argued by Moody (1987) that in the Second Palace Period various forms of skilled craft production are increasingly brought within the palatial domain. She then states that areas previously given over to storage are now devoted to either craft production or ritual activity, a notion taken up also by Manning (1994) and Walberg (1994). At face value this change would seem to represent a clear change of strategy by palatial élites towards increasing capitalization within the political economy, perhaps at the expense of accumulation. This change might represent a shift in emphasis from staple finance towards wealth finance (D'Altroy & Earle 1985; Walberg 1994).

However, the situation is not quite as Moody portrays it. Firstly, the term 'palatial domain' can mean two things. On the one hand it can imply 'organizational domain', and on the other it may mean 'spatial domain'. Craft production may very well be under the organizational auspices of the palace, without the activity of production having to take place in the palace itself. On both these counts, Moody's argument may be wide of the mark. It is not apparent that in LM I craft production became more palatial in organizational terms, neither is it true that production was brought into the palace proper. For example, recent excavations at the site of Poros have shown it to be an important centre for specialized craft production during the Second Palace Period (Dimopoulou 1997). Although Poros was probably the harbour town of Knossos, Dimopoulou suggests that, at least in the Second Palace Period, the craft specialists at Poros may have been relatively independent of, or at least only partially attached to, the palatial authorities. Within the palaces themselves there is little clear evidence that the number of workshops increased during the Second Palace Period — none of the Knossian workshops seem to be identified with certainty and the same can be said of the palace at Malia. Only at Zakro are there workshops from the LM I period within the palace (Platon 1993), although one might well argue that Zakro is different, given, for example, its relative disinterest in centralized storage.

A second aspect of capitalization is the acquisition of luxury items through long-distance exchange. Is it possible to identify any fundamental shifts from the First Palace to the Second Palace Period in this behaviour and, if so, what are the implications in terms of political economy and state organization? Branigan asserts that in the First Palace Period long-distance exchange was widespread but not particularly intense (Branigan 1989: 65). Although there is little direct evidence, Wiener posits that Crete must have developed major exchange links with the Near East in order to import raw materials such as bronze (Wiener 1991; *cf.* also Watrous 1994: 748). Whilst bronze and other raw materials, such as gold and silver, were brought in for the manufacture of prestige items, finished products such as Egyptian scarabs and stone vases were also imported (Warren 1995: 2).

The Second Palace Period, many scholars would argue (*e.g.* Branigan 1989; Sherratt &

Sherratt 1991), saw an increase in the exchange of fine materials — Warren mentions the ivory tusks found in the palace at Zakro, alabaster used for Minoan vases, wood from Lebanon, and ostrich eggs (1995: 5–6). As in the First Palace Period, finished products were also imported, such as Egyptian alabaster vases and other types of Egyptian stone vessels. In neither period, however, is the evidence particularly clear or abundant. It might be possible to chart some sort of a quantitative increase in the Second Palace period, but whether the character of exchange shifted is a much more difficult proposition to determine. Currently, expert opinion appears to be divided as to the extent of palatial involvement in long-distance exchange. Some believe there to have been a development from palatially sponsored trade in the First Palace Period towards more independent entrepreneurial or freelance trade in the Second Palace Period (Sherratt & Sherratt 1991; Wiener 1991), whereas others maintain that the opposite scenario is more probable (*e.g.* Branigan 1989). A compromise scenario, with both forms of exchange important throughout, also finds support (Cline 1994).

MM III, LM IA and IB

For the sake of clarity we have chosen thus far to draw broad comparisons and contrasts between the First and Second Palace periods. Yet in painting in broad strokes there is inevitably a loss of detail and resolution. Perhaps the most serious of such losses is that, in talking of the Second Palace period as a monolithic whole, we may be missing a set of important changes within the period itself, particularly between LM IA and LM IB (Driessen & Macdonald 1997). Although beyond the scope of this brief contribution, it may be interesting to consider this transition too in terms of accumulation, bureaucratization and capitalization. The possible developments, and even decline, between LM IA and LM IB demand much closer scrutiny. Moreover, changes in the MM IIIA and MM IIIB periods have not been discussed here, as there are still considerable problems in their definition. This does not amount to a disregard for their importance in the processes of state development and decline, but that these periods will be tackled in subsequent contributions once more work has been completed on these difficult transitional periods.

Political culture

In this article only the economic underpinnings of political institutions have been considered; of course attention should also be afforded to the ways in which the cultural and political aspects of Minoan society were integrated in each period. During the First Palace Period there is a high degree of regionalism in the distribution of material culture, seen especially in fine pottery styles; each polity developed its own styles, and they were often used to signify political links and status, both within and between polities. Fine pottery styles at Malia, for example, are quite distinct from those of both Knossos and Phaistos, and there are grounds for believing this to have been a political choice. There is no way that a specifically Knossian material culture can be said to dominate the island during the First Palace Period. For the Second Palace Period, however, this idea does find some support, through various sorts of archaeological evidence including pottery styles (Hood 1971; Betancourt 1985), architectural forms and techniques (Driessen 1989–90), seal iconography (Hallager & Hallager 1995), figurative wall painting (Rehak 1997) and administration (Schoep 1999b). In each of these cultural domains, very similar styles can be seen to exist across much of the island, and it may be that Knossos was the major source of cultural innovations in this period (although demonstrating unequivocally that Knossos was chronologically 'a step ahead' of other sites is another matter). The idea that such cultural influence betokens Knossian political domination is accepted as a possibility by many scholars (Cherry 1986: 43–4; Treuil *et al.* 1989: 307; Driessen & Macdonald 1997: 74), but only reluctantly, due to the lack of firm evidence showing such a link did exist between the cultural and the political spheres. Yet, if the various forms of material culture and social activity listed above can be shown to be élite-oriented, as many of them surely can, then

the overlap between the two (constituting 'political culture') becomes much more probable. If this were the case, then the above-mentioned features can be seen as not just 'cultural', but as 'ideological'. In other words, we would suggest that, although still a problematic issue, the widespread cultural influence that Knossos appears to have exercised, for some if not all of the Second Palace Period, held a significant political component (Warren 1999: 902).

Conclusions

It appears that between the First and Second Palace Periods there occurred substantial changes in the character of Minoan palatial power. Yet the ways in which political authority was underpinned economically seem to have stayed surprisingly constant, and certainly more so than has usually been assumed (this can be said more convincingly of accumulation and capitalization than of bureaucratization). It is in the nature of political culture that the real changes are seen, with the strong regional character of ideological influence in the First Palace Period replaced by an island-wide pattern of influence in the mid part of the Second Palace Period (LM IA). However, this theme of political culture, although ultimately intertwined with political economy, is beyond the scope of this paper: it is a theme to which much more attention needs to be addressed, a move that is already afoot.

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