

SUMMARY

FROM THE «TRIPOD TRAY» TO THE KERNOS: A LM IA POTTERY SET FROM HAGHIA TRIADA AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE KNOWLEDGE OF MINOAN RITUAL

I. The archaeological context

In 1985, during stratigraphical soundings carried out by V. La Rosa in the north sector of the Haghia Triada settlement, remains of a house destroyed by fire at the beginning of LM IA were brought to light under the floor of room c of the LM IIIA monumental *Edificio Ovest*. The best preserved sector of the LM IA house was a small rectangular room named c/2, partially covered by the later structures and 1.65 m in width on its east-west axis in its better preserved southern part. In its southeast corner, 21 vases and 8 stone tools were found around and upon a large high slab (0.30 × 0.25 m) placed on the floor, while the deep destruction layer of the house also yielded four loom weights and fragments of two potter's wheels.

II The vases: typological, functional and symbolical analysis

II.1 The «tripod tray» HTR 1060

Since the discovery, some of the vases from room c/2 appeared to be of clear ritual destination on account of their typological features and dimensions. The most obvious ritual tool was the tripod tray HTR 1060, after which the house was named *Casa del Vassoio Tripodato*. It differs from a common Minoan cooking tripod tray for many reasons: for the six circular holes on the bottom; for the fabric, not unpainted red coarse but painted buff-yellow coarse; for being decorated with reeds, an otherwise very rare motif in LM IA Initial contexts at Haghia Triada; and for its foot shape, not round in section, as usually in the tripod cooking vases, but flat as in Minoan tripod offering tables. Similar examples of «tripod trays» (hereafter within inverted commas to distinguish them from the cooking type) were recovered at the beginning of the XXth century by Evans at Knossos. The excavator described these examples as having a peculiar lustrous surface, which is the same as that usually reserved for Protopalatial lamps and braziers. According to Gesell, at least braziers had in this period a ritual function similar to Neopalatial tripod offering tables. This fact, confirming a special morphological link between «tripod trays» and tripod offering tables, strongly suggests that both shared the function of displaying offerings during ritual ceremonies. Differently from offering tables, however, «tripod trays» show a peculiar care in keeping the offerings separate, a concern typical of another well known Aegean ritual vase, characterized by many compartments and usually called a multiple vase or, following the definition of ancient Greek sources, a *kernos*.

II.2 The miniature bowls HTR 1056, HTR 1068 and HTR 1069

Three two-handled miniature bowls (HTR 1056, 1068, 1069) were gathered next to the «tripod tray». Find place, shape and dimensions strongly suggest that they were used

in connection with the «tripod tray», probably being placed in its holes during ritual performances. A similar practice seems to be documented by a lucky find made by Levi in the southwest sector of the first Palace of Phaistos. On the threshold between rooms LI and LIV, he discovered the stone multiple vase F 774 *in situ* with three miniature stone vessels, among which was a conical rhyton, still placed in the holes. A further group of twelve miniature stone cups, defined by Warren as «a cult set», was stored on the first floor of the same room LI. As in the other two cases, this miniature set could also have been used in a ritual performance centered on handling miniature offering containers intended to be finally reassembled in a symbolically connoted support. Many other ritual activities were probably performed in this sector of the First Palace of Phaistos, as is documented by many ceremonial objects recovered there. Among these, it is here worth mentioning two famous kamares vases with representation of girls dancing around a Minoan goddess: they were probably depicting a ritual carried out in court LXX.

II.3 The miniature teapot HTR 1057

A miniature teapot (HTR 1057) was also part of the ritual set stored in room c/2. Also in this case, its miniature dimensions allow it to be inserted in the «tripod tray» holes. The teapot, a very typical Prepalatial shape, strongly decreases in frequency in Protopalatial contexts, becoming very rare in the Neopalatial period. In this phase, it mostly occurs in ritual contexts, and is decorated many times with the palm tree motif. A symbolical connection between this motif and bloody sacrifice has been recognized some time ago by N. Marinatos. Thus, the hypothesis is here supported that Neopalatial teapots, such as HTR 1057, could have been used exclusively for ritual functions, as items for offering blood or some other substitutive liquids.

II.4 The firebox HTR 1058

The function of Minoan fireboxes, such as the example HTR 1058 from room c/2, remains controversial. Following the traditional hypothesis of Chapouthier, they were used for burning perfumed substances in both secular and ritual contexts; according to Georgiou, instead, they were tools for the production of aromatics and, therefore, archaeological indicators of craft activities. This later hypothesis, however, is not unanimously accepted by the scholars and also in this study it is rejected in favor of the traditional one. Regarding Georgiou's hypothesis, however, it is here accepted that fireboxes of type IA, such as HTR 1058, couldn't have been used without an underlying support, which in our case remains to be identified.

II.5 The disc HTR 1060

A possible candidate could be the ceramic disc HTR 1060. No less than ten whole or fragmentary examples of this type have been recovered at Haghia Triada, from Villa and settlement, while not even one is known from outside the site. The shape is rather enigmatic: on the center of the circular body a low cylindrical element is applied which sometimes, as in the case of HTR 1060, has a cut in the bottom; the plentiful painted decoration is placed on the upper surface of the disc, and sometimes also on the interior of the central cylinder. In the case of HTR 1060, the dimensions are exactly compatible with the hypothesis that it was used as a sort of ceremonial support for firebox HTR 1058. The Minoan taste for arrangements of fireboxes on ceremonial stands is repeatedly documented. Among these, it is worth referring to the Protopalatial Phaestian group formed by the stand F 480 and the censer (?) F 526 stored in the already mentioned room LI, on the first floor.

II.6 The jugs HTR 1032 and HTR 1031

The juglet HTR 1032 and the trefoil mouthed jug HTR 1031 from room c/2, both unpainted and coarse, could have been used in ceremonial activities in spite of their unattractive appearance. The first is very similar to the so called «milk jug», a small unpainted coarse juglet with atrophic handle, very frequently recovered in ritual contexts at Knossos and Kommos, and for this reason interpreted, since Evans, as a ritual object. It is more difficult to attribute a similar connotation to the trefoil mouthed jug HTR 1031. This type is very common in LM I Crete, but in the case of HTR 1031, the low body and the large base gives the vase a very distinctive outline, which occurs only in LM I examples from the south central Mesarà, some from possible ritual contexts.

II.7 The other vases from room c/2

Side by side with the vases already discussed, 9 conical cups, 2 lids and a two-handled jar were stored in room c/2. Some of these, such as the conical cups, may have been used for replacing miniature two-handled bowls in the «tripod tray» holes during ritual performances, but others, such as the two handled jar HTR 1063 and its probable lid HTR 1065, were utilitarian items without any clear symbolic connotation. Thus, their presence suggests that room c/2 was used not only for storing ritual objects.

III. From the «tripod tray» to the *kernos*: affinity and persistence of a ritual practice

After the typological and functional analysis of the pottery from room c/2, the relationship between the «tripod tray» and the Aegean ritual vase traditionally called a *kernos* is discussed. According to the description of Athenaeus, this vase had multiple containers for offerings and was used in association with ecstatic dances during the initiation ritual to a mystery ceremony, traditionally (even if groundlessly) identified with the Eleusinian one. Since the end of the XIXth century, the vase was identified both with a small globular clay container typical of the Eleusinian cult, and with Aegean multiple vases of prehistoric and historic times. During the first decades of XXth century, authors such as Dawkins, Xanthoudidis and Chapouthier further extended the use of the Greek word to indicate some other Aegean objects rather different from Athenaeus' description such as the so called ring vases and the Minoan stone tables with depressions. Even if rejected by authors such as Pollit and Bignasca, the association between *kernos* and multiple vase appears strengthened by the recent proposal of Brommer, Miles and Mitsopoulou, to identify the small globular Eleusinian container not with the ancient *kernos* but with the *plemochoe*, a shape explicitly referred by Athenaeus to Eleusinian cult, and whose description is very similar to the archaeological examples from Eleusis.

A significant contribution in favor of the supposed affinity between multiple vases, ring vases and stone tables with depressions, comes from the «tripod tray's» set discovered in room c/2 and from the similar sets stored in the first palace of Phaistos. All these suggest that a common ritual practice existed in the Minoan world centered on handling offering containers and on reassembling and placing them in a single symbolically connoted support. Differently from historical times, Minoans may have performed this ritual practice not with a single type of vessel, namely the *kernos*, but with a variety of ritual tools among which were ring vases and stone tables with depressions. Thus, the recent hypothesis by Hillbom and Whittaker that Minoan stone tables with depressions were used as secular board games is rejected, and the expression «ritual of *kernos*» is tentatively introduced for indicating this specific ceremonial practice. The old theories of Dawkins, Xanthoudidis and Chapouthier about

a link between *kernos*, ecstatic dance and cult of Minoan Goddess are examined anew. To the oldest evidence, consisting especially of the LM IIIA group of dancing feminine clay figurines from Block Delta at Palaikastro, recovered together with clay multiple vases, and of a Protogeometric ring vase with dancing figurines from Kourtes, new supporting evidence from Knossos (circular platforms in the Stratigraphical Museum excavation sector), Phaistos (kamares representations with girls and a goddess from the southeast sector of the first palace), Haghia Triada (stone *kernos* in the necropolis) and Gortina (early Greek kernoi associated with hut models from the Athenaion) is discussed.

New hypotheses, moreover, are formulated about the possibility that the Minoan ritual of the *kernos* may have also had an initiatory function and that, as in the historical scene described by Athenaeus, opium latex was used during the performance to bring about an ecstatic trance. The first hypothesis is sustained on the basis of the frequent finding of stone tables with depressions, but sometimes also of multiple vases, on thresholds and spaces of access to funerary or sacred areas, that is in spots that involved a change in the social status of individuals crossing them. Moreover, in the representations of dancing feminine figures connected with the ritual of the *kernos*, it can be observed that there was a specific care in the indication of hairstyle, an element very commonly used in the Minoan world as a mark of age and status. The involvement of opium in the ceremony is tentatively proposed, even if difficult to demonstrate. Its use was, however, certainly known to Minoans since LM IIIB, if not earlier, as attested by the incised capsules of *papaverum somniferum* on the diadem of the goddess from Gazi.

IV. The ceremony of *Casa del Vassoio Tripodato*: ritual actions, cult connotations, social implications

The elements derived from the typological and functional analysis of the pottery and from the discussion on the Minoan *kernos* ritual are finally recomposed in a hypothetical reconstruction of the ritual use of the room c/2 ceramic set. This reconstruction is conducted by keeping separate the analysis of ritual strategies, cult connotations and social implications of the ceremony.

On the basis of the parallel with the Knossian *Cult Snake Deposit*, consisting of a similar set with multiple vases, stands for probable fireboxes and milk jugs, it is supposed that the ritual vases from room c/2 were also used for a single ceremony involving three fundamental ritual actions: the ritual of the *kernos*, fumigations and libations. The Knossian set had been stored inside a pithos in the room of an unassuming house near the palace of Knossos. In the same way, the set from room c/2 was probably stored on and around a slab in a small store-room of *Casa del Vassoio Tripodato* for use in a more spacious area, where dances for ecstatic trances could also have been performed.

Regarding cult connotations, the clay snakes applied on the vases from the Knossian Cult Snake Deposit and the goddess representations from the Phaistos palace suggest a link between the Minoan *kernos* ritual and a feminine divinity with chthonic connotations.

The social implications of the *kernos* ritual clearly involved the strong economic vitality attested in the Casa del Vassoio Tripodato where, despite the small sector investigated, textile and pottery production are attested. The concept of *Maison*, derived from Levi Strauss's anthropological studies which have recently gained an increasing following among Aegean prehistoric scholars for interpreting archaeological evidence that is not easily compatible with a nuclear family, is here employed for explaining the role of the *kernos* ritual in the com-

munity living in the *Casa del Vassoio Tripodato*. On the basis of the scant iconographic evidence it could be imagined that the *kernos* ritual was performed by feminine groups of the same age: pre-puberty girls at Phaistos, and mature women at Palaikastro. These groups may have used this ceremony for controlling, by initiation, access to the group, for strengthening their unity and for acquiring and redistributing resources for the productive activities of the household. Finally, the wide diffusion of the *kernos* ritual in Minoan Crete, leads one to wonder if a relevant role in the social structure of the Bronze Age island was performed by communities or households composed of individuals uniform in sex and age and mutually linked by participation in common initiation rituals.