

PER UNA RILETTURA «FUNZIONALE» DELL'ALA SUD-  
OCCIDENTALE DEL PALAZZO DI FESTOS:  
IL CASO DEI VANI IL-XXVII/XVIII

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SUMMARY

The purpose of this research is to verify, in a preliminary form, a sector of the South West wing of the first palace of Phaistos, excavated by D. Levi during the 1950s. This part of the building, which has yielded a substantial number of finds, has always been highly problematic for the interpretation of data. This contribution is a proposal to create a connection to research carried out in recent years and concerning structures within and outside the palatial building, which now offers a more comprehensive reading of the context for the Protopalatial period. While waiting for a new, extensive architectural survey we found it necessary to conduct a review of the contexts in a limited number of rooms, with a series of preliminary observations on the nature and function of some architectural features, taking into account the recent shifts in methodological approach. In subsequent contributions, dedicated to the remaining areas, we consider the first results, fitting them into an overview, which requires a further detailed analysis of the data.

The theory of the three subsequent reconstructions of the SW wing of the Palace assumed by Levi as the only key to the interpretation of the entire site of Phaistos is no longer tenable. It is necessary to consider this complex a building with two (at least for part of its period of use), or three floors, which, before its final collapse, underwent a number of transformations and partial reconstructions. The analysis of those structures and of the considerable mass of findings recovered inside them, can still offer, through a different vision of the contexts, significant information on the forms of organization of the palatial elites at the time of the Palace foundation and during the first period of development of the palatial system.

This investigation, preliminary in nature as it is restricted to a small number of rooms, was conducted on two levels. Firstly, the issue of internal circulation systems is considered, as part of a more comprehensive overview of the multi-storey structure. Subsequently, on the basis of the findings and of their different assemblages, an attempt to define the functions of the different rooms is presented. A prerequisite for this type of analysis is an arrangement of relative chronologies through careful review of the documentation of the excavation, with the same method used in previous revision of other structures.

Compared to those of its foundation, the features of the first palace of Phaistos in the period before its final destruction at the end of MM IIB had significantly changed, and not just in the South-West wing. All the trials carried out so far indicate an initial establishment of the

palace complex in MM IB, followed by architectural phases relating to significant transformations represented by extensions (primarily the advancement to the West of the orthostate façade in the Middle West Court, Piazzale I), changes to access systems and internal circulation patterns of the building (opening and closing passages, addition of rooms with different features and stairs, raising floor levels, rebuilding walls, terracing) which occurred during MM II.

Here we propose to examine in detail the case of the rooms of the northern block (A) of the SW wing, the first to be excavated by Levi, previously partly explored by Pernier. It should be noted that with the system adopted for excavation, especially in the early stages, there were errors and uncertainties on how to proceed, resulting in problems of identification of the levels, particularly the floor of Room IL. This applies to the group of Rooms (L, LII, IL/XXVII-XXVIII), which, as noted, is a hinge between the north-west and the south-west sectors of the building, to fill the difference in level between the Middle (Piazzale I) and Lower (Piazzale LXX) West Courts. The aim of this review is to consider the rooms as parts of a building functioning on three floors, whose internal and external connections underwent several changes over time, due to building transformations, with additions and modifications, and thereafter leading to a structural collapse due to an earthquake. However, the focus is on the groups of findings recovered in the considered area, in order to assess the possible assemblages in relation to the functions of the different rooms and to find a link to the general chronological framework that recent research on the site has been reconstructing. Some of the main architectural features of the rooms were considered, starting from the ground floor and then the remains of the first and second floors. The conclusions of this review can be summarized as follows, with reference to the phases defined in previous studies.

At the time of the foundation of the palace (Baetyl phase), Block A was probably formed by two Rooms (IL/0 and XXVII-XXVIII/0) on the ground floor and two (IL/1 and XXVII-XXVIII/1) on the upper floor, while the existence of a second floor can be excluded. The rooms on the ground floor were connected to the upper floor through a small staircase and were not in communication with the outdoor space. They were a sort of basement, perhaps with storage functions, but we do not know what was stored there, owing to subsequent changes. At the eastern end of Room XXVIII was a foundation deposit (with a MM IA jar) that marked the limit of the building towards the hillside. It may have been linked to ritual activities. The presence of a small recess with two benches could also confirm, for the subsequent phases, the nature of this area within the complex on the ground floor, in connection to a small shrine (XXVIII A-B) set up on the upper floor.

The upper floor was accessible from outside through a narrow ramp (LII) ascending from the level of the Lower Western Court (LXX), but also linked to the largest paved ramp that goes west towards the Middle Western Court (I). An opening on the West wall of Room IL/1 on the first floor allowed access to the interior of the complex that was connected with the central sector of the south-west wing (Room LIII in Block B) through another passage on the south wall. At the east end of the second room (XXVII-XXVIII) there are a couple of small rooms (XXVIII A-B), one of which was equipped with a sort of table of offerings. Even in this case there is no certainty about the belonging of these small rooms to the oldest period of the building. The materials related to all these rooms are in fact connected to the time of a partial destruction of the building.

After this initial phase (between the Lustral bath phase and the Kouloures phase), the group of rooms was subject to a number of changes made over time until the moment of destruction.

In particular the ground floor room IL / 0 was made accessible from outside and apparently was no longer connected to the upper floor. Thus, the group of rooms on the ground floor was to be transformed into a small independent complex, accessed from the outside through a narrow corridor (L). This corridor was, in turn, part of a series of structures added to the original complex in terms of a more complex system of access to the SW wing from the Lower West Court (Piazzale LXX), and the creation of a prestigious room (L / 1) on the first floor, precisely in correspondence to the access corridor to Block A. The view on the courtyard of this room may well have increased the importance of this space as a meeting place.

Inside, the ceiling of Room IL / 0 (= floor of IL / 1) was raised and along the north wall a large bench was created, which included the remains of the stairs, discarded on this occasion. The material found inside the bench is useful to define the chronology of this operation: it can be dated between MM IB and an advanced stage of MM IIA and deserves a separate study. We are not sure that all of the fill material is pertinent to this complex of rooms. This is a group of objects related to the activities that took place in general in this wing of the palace in the early period of its life. Among them there are many elements attributable to ritual activities.

At the time of their destruction the rooms on the ground floor had a rich floor deposit, distributed in several groups. On the large bench of Room IL / 0 cake baking was probably carried out, with some kind of dressing, while liquid substances were drawn from two pithoi, placed at the center of the room, to be poured into bridge spouted jars of various sizes. It is interesting to observe the scarcity of cups, handless cups and drinking vessels in general. It is likely that the food and drinks prepared in this room were taken outside for some form of distribution or offering.

Inner Room XXVII-XXVIII retained its original character with some minor changes. In the north-east corner a pillar was built, necessary for placing a large pithos on the upper floor. The pillar interferes with the «enclosure» (or foundation deposit), close to the east wall, which was probably renewed and expanded, on this occasion, with the addition of some vessels. In the western sector (Room XXVII and western side of XXVIII), we can record the presence of groups of containers generally of medium or small size, suitable to contain and preserve various types of food associated with a fair number of pouring and drinking vessels, probably in a storage area, marked by the presence of shelves. In the eastern sector, the items appear to have different purposes, probably of ritual nature, in connection with the two benches in the southeast recess, but also with the enclosure / foundation deposit and perhaps with the shrine upstairs. It is plausible that some vessels found near the enclosure (small pithos, collared spouted jar, a set which is also found on the upper floor) were used for ablutions. In both areas we note the constant presence near the entrances and in other points of lamps of various type and size, to provide sources of illumination.

It is difficult to identify intermediate stages between the initial phase (Baetyl phase) and the final one (Sacelli or Shrines phase), which reflects the time of the partial restoration and subsequent ultimate destruction of the first Palace. On the first floor level, the passages were adapted to the raising of the level of the floor of Room IL/1 and, for a time, the access from outside was maintained. Later the passage was walled up and Ramp LII was filled. This task is likely to be linked to the great changes in the northern part of the palace and especially with the construction of the new orthostate façade on the Middle West Court (Piazzale I). It is in this phase that it can be assumed that the second floor was built. A second floor was added that reached the level of the slabs of the paved floor of Propileo II.

The north and west walls of Room IL / 2 were also realized with the orthostate technique, as a southward continuation of the façade. The remains that are visible today, however, as we shall see later, can be referred to a subsequent reconstruction, and are now extensively integrated in concrete.

The consistency of the items in the rooms on the first floor at the time of destruction was partially reconstructed by recovering materials that had fallen further down in the levels of the collapse, but with more damage and loss than those on the ground floor. In Room IL/1 there was a significant set of stone vessels, destined for libations, along with a set of containers (jars, small pithoi, filters, etc.) presumably for liquids. The drinking vessels are scarce, perhaps used as dippers. Adjacent Room XXVII-XXVIII/1 was characterized by the presence of three major assemblages consisting of a pithos and a collared jar, spouted in two cases, which could relate, together with the remains of a large richly decorated pithoid basin assigned to this level, to purifying ablutions.

At a time prior to the destruction of Rooms IL/1-XXVII-XXVIII/1 a small wall was built to prevent direct access from XXVIII/1 to Shrine XXVIII A-B. In this final moment the shrine, to which significant fragments of fruit stands can be attributed, could be reached only from the south, passing through Room LIV/1. This fact, together with the walling up of the access from outside, could indicate a loss of importance of these rooms, to the advantage of the new rooms built on the second floor, in direct contact with the ceremonial space of the Middle Western Court.

As has often been suggested in previous contributions, severe destruction damaged this wing of the building at an advanced stage of MM II B, but not at the very end of the period. This part of the building was partially rebuilt, the ruins of the first two floors of Blocks A and B being filled with a mixture of collapsed walls and floors, and astraki. Rooms IL, XXVII and XXVIII (now well separated) were rebuilt above this fill, perhaps together with some other rooms to the South. They are connected to other rooms to the west (XXV and XXVI).

The rooms of this latest rebuilding preceding the final catastrophe (Phase of the Shrines) retain a small quantity of finds. The connection to Room XXVI is interesting, which has some characteristics associated with cultual activities and perhaps inherited the functions of Shrine XXVIII AB, completely destroyed in the partial collapse of the building. The rooms in Block C (LVIII, LIX, LX, LXIII, LIV, LXV) were radically transformed by the opening of a wide passage in the orthostate façade on the west side towards Lower West Court LXX. It is possible that the group of rooms built beside the façade in the north-east corner of the court went to replace some of the rooms destroyed by the partial collapse in the South West wing. Within the horizon, necessarily limited, outlined here, some a trial to define some aspects of the actions deducible by the testimony of material remains has been carried out. They crystallize two different times: that of the destruction caused by the partial disaster of the ground and first floors (end of the Phase of the Koulouras) and that of the ultimate destruction of the rebuilding of the second floor (Phase of the Shrines).

The relationship between interior and exterior spaces assumes in our context a significant role, to characterize the nature, quite particular, of this wing of the Palace, about whose cultic nature little doubts are left. Task for future research will be a completing of the new interpretation, in order to connect all the data in a unified framework, chronologically marked, which will highlight many other factors, additional to those detected, still able to tell us something else about activities, forms of organization and aggregation of the elite groups gravitating around the first Palace of Phaistos in different moments of its existence.