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Figurines as further Indicators for the Existence of a Minoan Peak Sanctuary Network

ABSTRACT

The connection maintained between the Minoan peak sanctuaries of Crete is usually examined in the light of geographical and topographical features. Rarely are close material analyses of peak sanctuary ceramic datasets considered relevant where this inter-site network is concerned. In this paper, therefore, drawing upon existing published evidence and direct engagement with the Philioremos assemblage, it is proposed that the manufacture and consumption processes through which peak sanctuary figurines went further point to the existence of a connection between these very characteristic sites. The similarities between these processes here confirm the fact that a form of communication took place between peak sanctuaries, but also suggest some new possibilities about what kind of relationship the sites maintained and its dynamics. Although the exact way in which information travelled remains difficult to assess, the existence of a network in which the adoption and adaptation of certain practices took place appears more likely than the existence of a hierarchically pyramidal pattern in which information was transmitted intact. It is here proposed that while each peak sanctuary adhered to certain standards in the production and consumption of figurines, the artefacts' makers and users were also allowed a degree of freedom of expression within their adherence to these standards.

KEYWORDS: peak sanctuaries, figurines, production, consumption, adoption, adaptation

The nature of the relationship existing between the Minoan peak sanctuaries of Crete has been a topic of interest ever since their discovery. Their pan-Cretan connection has mostly been examined through externally visible similarities, such as their topographical situations and the appearance of their artefact assemblages. Building upon these existing works, I here examine the connections maintained between such sites through a closer material analysis of items belonging to the typical peak sanctuary artefact 'kit', namely figurines. Figurines – rather than clay vessels or models – were selected for study because they have frequently served as identifying features for peak sanctuaries, more so than vessels (Rutkowski 1988; Peatfield 1992; Briault 2007), and because they have been less frequently materially studied than they have been visually. By assessing the similarities and differences between the figurines' clay sourcing, their manufacture and assemblage techniques, their ergonomic qualities, their fragmentary condition and their distribution on site, I propose that, despite local idiosyncrasies characteristic to each site, some overarching pan-Cretan patterns also appear where the material aspects of peak sanctuary figurines are concerned.

I. SETTING THE SCENE: THE PEAK SANCTUARY NETWORK AND PEAK SANCTUARY FIGURINES

In order to clearly situate the present study, it is necessary to advance a few words about how Cretan peak sanctuaries and the connections maintained between them have been understood to date. It can first be stated that these sites have been identified as such for their very particular characteristics, namely their isolated situation, their location at particularly visually-dominating parts of mountain tops, their visibility, their inter-visibility and their hosting of specific datasets generally consisting of small cooking, serving, consumption and storage vessels, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines and occasionally stone and metal objects. Sometimes, peak sanctuaries also present some small-scale architectural remains (Cherry 1978; Rutkowski 1986; Peatfield 1987, 1990; Nowicki 1994; Soetens *et al.* 2002; Kyriakidis 2005; Briault 2007). These characteristics have allowed peak sanctuaries to be differentiated from other contemporaneous Minoan sites and to form their own group of ritual site. Their ritual nature is evidenced by the presence of broken remains of the aforementioned artefacts which, over time, demonstrate similar uses, which were carried out over regular periods of time, imbued with an air of tradition (Kyriakidis 2005). The presence of these sets of objects has also allowed peak sanctuaries to be identified as existing as part of an established religious system (Kyriakidis 2005; Peatfield 2013). It has been widely argued that peak sanctuaries shared a particular form of ritual unity not evidenced in this way at other sites (Cherry 1978; Peatfield 1990).

The reasons for the existence of this peak sanctuary system have also been widely discussed. There is an ongoing debate regarding the origins of peak sanctuaries and about which one of these sites might have been the first to establish the practices common to all (Peatfield 1990; Nowicki 1994; Watrous 1995). It has however most generally been argued that the initial establishment of peak sanctuaries in the Proto-palatial period and the subsequent maintenance of a select number in the Neo-palatial period were the products of a progressive centralisation of cult on the part of increasingly controlling – palatially-based – Minoan ruling powers (e.g. Evans 1921; Cherry 1978; Rutkowski 1986; Peatfield 1987, 1990, 2013; Haggis 1999; Kyriakidis 2005). The peak sanctuary system, thus eventually governed by the palatial complexes in the Neo-



Fig. 1. Map of the Cretan Minoan peak sanctuaries. Drawing by the author.

palatial period, but set up for non-palatial residents (Peatfield 1990), served to unify different regional peer-polities through the adoption of an overarching pan-Cretan ritual practice (Cherry 1986; Peatfield 1987; Haggis 1999; Knappett and Schoep 2000; Cunningham and Driessen 2004). To date, no new archaeological evidence has allowed for these interpretations on the existence of this peak sanctuary system to be disputed.

Having frequently served as identifying features for peak sanctuaries (Rutkowski 1988; Peatfield 1992; Briault 2007), given that – unlike the types of vessels present at these sites – they are exclusive to them, figurines are of interest here. These clay figurines, generally measuring no more than 20 cm in height and consisting of animals and human representations, do not appear at any other types of Minoan sites in Crete. It thus appears that it was common practice to keep these artefacts at the mountain-top sanctuaries. It is usually believed that the figurines belong to the earlier, and most widespread, periods of peak sanctuary activity. Myres (1902/3) initially suggested that they date to the MM II period based on the colours they present which resemble those used in the Kamares ware. This dating was however very hypothetical, but it has generally been adopted given the presence of MM II vessels on site and the general Proto-palatial character of the activity taking place at these sanctuaries. Peak sanctuary figurines are, moreover, usually believed to have consisted of votive offerings deposited by adorants in plea or gratitude for health and fertility. They are not regarded as items designed to last, and because of their generally standardised appearance across the island, they have been perceived as common, easily produced items of little quality (for discussion on this matter, see Murphy 2018).

Little time has however been spent on examining the ways in which the material transformations undergone by the artefacts found at peak sanctuaries contribute to their belonging to a network. The figurines are indeed interesting to examine for this purpose since, being in a fragmentary condition, their breakage points often reveal how they were originally assembled and what gestures were used in their modelling, and provide information about their firing conditions. What is more, their broken state, noted at every site, indicates that they were probably designed to eventually come apart after the completion of the rituals and that they were therefore not meant to be actively reused, thus enriching the ways in which these



Fig. 2. Peak sanctuary figurines from Petsophas. Images from Dimopoulou-Rethemiotaki 2005.

sites' ritual activities might be understood (Murphy 2018). In the following pages, therefore, are a series of observations about the figurines' production and consumption processes. These observations consist of material aspects that all peak sanctuaries hold in common. Following these observations are some comments on the way in which idiosyncrasies and differences – which can only be identified through close material analyses – nevertheless appear at different sites. The paper concludes with a discussion on the implications these observations have on the existence of a communication pattern between these specific sites and ultimately on the nature of this peak sanctuary network.

II. OBSERVING THE EXISTENCE OF MATERIAL SIMILARITIES BETWEEN PEAK SANCTUARY FIGURINES

CLAY

Peak sanctuary figurines are all made of clays sourced locally to their respective peak sanctuaries. Myres, for example, noted that the Petsophas figurines were composed of clay mixes issued from the “debris of the late clayey limestones of the Palaikastro valley” (1902/3, 360), thus pointing to a local provenance. Observations on local provenance were also made for, for example, the material from Vrysinas (Davaras 1974; Sphakianakis 2012), Atsipadhes (Morris and Peatfield 1995), Kophinas (Rethemiotakis 2001) and Philioremos (Kyriakidis forthcoming). It therefore appears that figurines were produced in the areas close to the peak sanctuaries and that they were not produced centrally and distributed across the island.

MANUFACTURE TECHNIQUES

Another material similarity existing between peak sanctuary figurines relates to some of the modelling and assemblage techniques employed in their manufacture. The manufacture technique of some of the male and female figurines from Petsophas (Myres 1902/3; Rutkowski 1991) is very similar to those evidenced at, for example, Philioremos (Murphy 2016; Kyriakidis forthcoming) and other central Cretan peak sanctuaries (Pilali-Papasteriou 1992). Where animal figurines are concerned, the same is apparent (Platon 1951; Kyriakidis forthcoming). It thus appears that, while the clay composing the figurines was locally sourced, thus indicating the artefacts' local rather than centralised production, some techniques – and not necessarily the most intuitive ones – were used across Crete.

APPEARANCE

Peak sanctuary figurines, as was noted above, rarely exceed 20 cm in height. What is more, they share certain externally apparent features such as similar gestures, clothing and colours (Fig. 3). The gestures first noted at Petsophas (Myres 1902/3; Rutkowski 1990, 1991) have been widely noted across Crete (e.g. Morris 2001, 2009; Morris and Peatfield 2001, 2004, 2014; Murphy 2016; Kyriakidis forthcoming). The clothing worn by anthropomorphic figurines consist of the typical loincloth or codpiece associated with a belt and occasionally a dagger and boots for the male figurines, and of bell skirts, peak-back collared bodices and hats for the female figurines. The colours used in the decoration of these items are dark red, brown, black, white



Fig. 3. The appearance of anthropomorphic figurines from: L to R Piskokephalo, Philioremos, Vrysinas, Petsophas and Philioremos. Images from Dimopoulou-Rethemiotaki 2005, Papadopoulou and Tzachili 2010 and courtesy of E. Kyriakidis.

and cream. The animal figurines also share similar appearances, namely the fact that they consist principally of standing bulls, small sheep and beetles, weasels, tortoises, snakes and birds.

THREE DIMENSIONALITY

Most figurines – be they anthropomorphic or zoomorphic – were made to be stood upright. This is indicated by the presence of base fragments, the figurines' flat feet and the absence of attachment marks on the objects' back surfaces. This would imply (Murphy 2018) that the figurines were, at all sites, to be displayed – or at least left standing somewhere – for some time.



Fig. 4. Bases of peak sanctuary figurines: L to R Petsophas, Piskokephalo, Philioremos. Images from Dimopoulou-Rethemiotaki 2005 and courtesy of E. Kyriakidis.

FIRING

All peak sanctuary figurines are fired, and intentionally so, prior to use. It is conspicuous that certain clay recipes were sandier than others and some were more resistant than others, but all items appear to have been fired under controlled conditions (Murphy 2016; Kyriakidis forthcoming).

FRAGMENTARY CONDITION

Where the consumption of peak sanctuary figurines is concerned, their entirely fragmentary condition at every site is noticeable. Although the items' distribution differs depending on the topography of each peak sanctuary and according to whether they present built structures or not, it is important to note that very few, or none, of these objects – as is the case for the ceramic



Fig. 5. Fragmentary figurines: L to R Juktas, Petsophas, Maza, Pyrgos, Philioremos. Images from Dimopoulou-Rethemiotaki 2005 and courtesy of E. Kyriakidis.

vessels too – were found in a complete state of preservation. While museums may seem to host some ‘complete’ examples, these items have been reassembled or reconstructed. Complete figurines are indeed very rare, and it is also uncommon that the figurine pieces present at peak sanctuaries can be joined.

III. OBSERVING LOCAL IDIOSYNCRASIES WITHIN THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN PEAK SANCTUARY FIGURINES

In the light of the above observations, the Minoan peak sanctuaries of Crete clearly present similarities which cannot be simply attributed to chance and coincidence. Certain standards appear to have existed where the figurines’ manufacture and consumption patterns were concerned. Similarities were thus not uniquely reserved to these items’ appearances. It is evident that material standards, such as the use of specific techniques and firing temperatures ensuring a successful outcome, had to be adhered to. Peak sanctuary figurines were to be fired, to be kept in a complete and solid form until they were brought to site, but were eventually meant to break (Murphy 2018).

Consequently, the similarities noted above also revealed that a form of communication existed between these sites. While some of the similarities such as the materials’ local sourcing and the objects’ firing are simple to explain and are not phenomena reserved to peak sanctuaries alone, other similarities such as the use of specific manufacture techniques and the adherence to specific appearances across the island, and the broken condition of all figurines, evidence the occurrence of a transmission of information between the sites. Before further exploring the question of how the aforementioned similarities might have been communicated throughout the different regions



Fig. 6. Idiosyncratic renderings of peak sanctuary figurine standard traits: L to R Petsophas, Piskocephalo, Traostalos, Vrysinas, Philioremos. Images from Dimopoulou-Rethemiotaki 2005, Papadopoulou and Tzachili 2010 and courtesy of E. Kyriakidis.

of Crete, however, it must be noted that although striking resemblances unite peak sanctuaries, some important differences also provide each site with its own idiosyncrasies. While certain techniques are used island-wide, others nevertheless also appear to be specific to certain sites, or at least, common to just a few. For example, the renderings of the figurines' features, despite adhering to standards, differ slightly from site to site (Fig. 6). A similar phenomenon also occurs where their clothing is concerned: for example, the anthropomorphic figurines from Kophinas present conical hats and boxer gloves (Rethemiotakis 2001; Spiliotopoulou, pers. comm.).

It thus appears, in the light of an examination of the material aspects of peak sanctuary figurines, that the objects were produced and consumed in accordance with some very specific standards. Within these standards, however, there appears to have been space for each site, or even each workshop and maybe potter, to use local or individually idiosyncratic traits. What is more, following a material examination specifically, it appears that it was the end product of the material processes, such as clay sourcing, manufacture and fragmentation, to which the common peak sanctuary rules most rigorously applied, but that the process through which these ends were achieved was less strictly controlled.

Consequently, evidence points to the fact that peak sanctuaries were required to adhere to certain characteristics, but nevertheless exercised some freedom to express their own particularities within these standards. It is therefore evident that a form of communication existed between the peak sanctuaries, which encouraged these sites to maintain these standards, and kept them within a network which was probably both rewarding and convenient for them to belong to.

The question nonetheless remains about how these standards were communicated between peak sanctuaries and how they might have had an impact on the wider maintenance of the peak sanctuary network more broadly. The above material factors successfully transcended geographical, and possibly cultural, distances, but how was this homogeneity maintained, how was the network organised? Under the following heading, some suggestions as to how the network dynamics might have functioned are advanced.

IV. DRAWING EVIDENCE FOR THE EXISTENCE OF A PAN-CRETAN NETWORK FROM THE MATERIAL ASPECTS OF FIGURINES

It would be too simple to explain the variations in material practices in figurine production and consumption as the result of the transformation and progressive loss of information transmitted from one peak sanctuary to another. First, this explanation would significantly undermine the pan-Cretan nature of the sites' connection and would imply the existence of a form of hierarchical organisation. While the origins of the network have been pondered (Peatfield 1990; Nowicki 1994; Watrous 1995), it has never been suggested that the peak sanctuary network relied on a pyramidal hierarchy. Rather, it would seem that, to date, archaeologists have perceived the nature of these sites' connection as commonly-run phenomenon, at least during the Proto-palatial period. What is more, were the above material practices simply passed on in a chain from one site to another, it is likely that much wider discrepancies in material practices would have occurred amongst these sites.

Second, this suggestion implies that where variations did occur, such as in the use of locally-sourced clays and different appearances, for example, the latter resulted from pure necessity alone. It is however conceivable that the decision to maintain such idiosyncrasies was significant to the connection shared between peak sanctuaries. Indeed, it is possible that demonstrating difference, within a wider capsule of similarity, indicated how despite individual local characteristics these sites shared a more important common spirit, or maybe even vice versa, that the common spirit nonetheless allowed for a degree of freedom.

It is therefore argued that the term 'transmission' would not be adequate in the context of this study. Rather, it is suggested that the use of the terms 'adoption' and 'adaptation' is more appropriate. Indeed, 'transmission' implies the communication of information in an intact form, leaving from one original point at which decisions were taken and arriving at another point of reception in the same state. However, as was argued above, evidence presently does not allow for a pyramidal hierarchical mapping of peak sanctuaries to be drawn. Despite the 'richness' and 'centrality' of Juktas, for example, to date nothing points to its domination or control over other

peak sanctuaries, and especially during the Proto-palatial period. Hence, it is here proposed that information between peak sanctuaries was communicated, adopted and adapted locally while nonetheless remaining within the agreed parameters. The dynamics of these sites' wider similarities and idiosyncratic differences could indeed have been an actively acknowledged phenomenon rather than an accidental occurrence left to chance.

V. CONCLUSION

This article, although brief, has demonstrated that the use of a closer material analysis can contribute information to the present understanding about the network believed to be held between the Minoan peak sanctuaries of Crete. Examining the production and consumption processes through which peak sanctuary figurines went allowed for an identification of the existence of certain striking material similarities, but also some important differences, between these sites. It indeed became clear that peak sanctuaries were connected not only through their topographical, geographical, assemblage characteristics and their use of certain practices, but also in the way that their material datasets were treated.

The study revealed that no pyramidal hierarchical pattern of information transmission is presently perceptible between the peak sanctuaries of Crete, thus favouring the use of the terms 'adoption' and 'adaptation' of standard material practices rather than their 'transmission'. Of course, at present these theories remain but suggestions. More research on the material aspects of peak sanctuary artefacts is required, and especially the publication of datasets, for this kind of research to be taken further. In the meantime, however, this investigation, using a bottom up approach – starting from the material and widening to connections between sites – has helped demonstrate both how significant the close analysis of peak sanctuary artefacts is, and also how significant non-palatial or settlement-based interactions were in Bronze Age Crete.

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