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Antonella Pautasso

Reading social and cultural continuities and discontinuities in the eighth century burials at the Siderospilia necropolis (Prinias)

Abstract

The necropolis of Siderospilia, near Prinias, excavated by Giovanni Rizza between 1969 and 1978, is one of the largest and most important necropoleis of Iron Age Crete, together with those of the Knossos area. At the end of the ninth century BC, the adoption of the new funerary ritual of cremation, with all its social and cultural implications, marks a break in the funerary environment of the Siderospilia necropolis. Examination of the eighth century tombs provides an informative context for the study of mortuary practices during a crucial century in the life of the anonymous settlement on the Patela of Prinias. This article aims to focus on several specific aspects of discontinuity in funerary practices, including changes in the organization of the funerary space and the distribution of tombs, as well as the assertion of social identities in the eighth century BC. These phenomena of change or discontinuity are embedded in a fabric in which the common thread is undoubtedly continuity, and in which continuity as memory plays an important role.

Keywords: Iron Age Crete; Necropoleis; Memory; Identity

Necropoleis, especially those that cover a wide chronological span, are archaeological contexts that allow us to read processes of continuity and discontinuity over time. In the case of the large necropolis at Siderospilia, connected to the settlement on the Patela of Prinias, some aspects related to processes of discontinuity – always to be considered in relation to the contemporary dynamics of continuity – are particularly evident and may sometimes be linked to certain changes in the settlement.

The necropolis of Siderospilia is located about 500 m northwest of the Patela plateau, within the jurisdiction of the modern village of Ano Asites (Fig. 1). The necropolis was discovered and excavated by Giovanni Rizza between 1969 and 1978 (Rizza 1969; 1971; 1978; 1979; 2011a;

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Fig. 1 The position of the Siderospilia necropolis in relation to the settlement on Patela (Google Earth cover).

2011b)[1] (Fig. 2). After the last year of excavation, the area was covered, as the necropolis is located within a private estate that was (and still is) used as agricultural land (Fig. 3).[2] A research project on the study and publication of the entire necropolis is currently underway, and in recent years, preliminary reports and articles on various topics have been published by the researchers involved in the project.[3]

The extent and richness of the Siderospilia necropolis constitute the added value of the anonymous settlement on the Patela of Prinias, since the necropolis area was uninterruptedly occupied over a period diachronically corresponding to the life phases of the settlement from the end of the Bronze Age/beginning of the Iron Age until the early decades of the sixth century BC.

This paper will focus on several specific aspects of discontinuity in the burial practices and the distribution of tombs, as well as the assertion of social identities in the eight century BC. These phenomena of change or discontinuity are embedded in a fabric in which the common thread is undoubtedly continuity, and in which continuity as memory plays an important role.

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1 A general overview of the necropolis of Siderospilia can also be found in Eaby 2007, 104-108, distinguishing three phases according to Giovanni Rizza's first reports. In Rizza 2011a and 2011b, the scholar revised his position and identified two main phases in the necropolis.

2 Almost all the chamber tombs were looted in ancient times, and agricultural work in the area (once a vineyard, now an olive grove) has damaged the upper levels of the necropolis.

3 Among the main contributions: Biondi 2019; 2020; Gigli Patané 2019; 2020; Mallegni 2019; Matthäus 2016; 2018; 2019; Palermo 2019; Pappalardo 2019; Pautasso 2018; 2019; 2020; Perna 2019; 2020; Rizza 2019a; 2019b; 2020. A preliminary report on the work carried out in recent years as part of the Necropolis Publication Project is currently being printed in Pautasso et al. 2023. For a video, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AePJxPdX_Hs&t=249s



Fig. 2. General plan of the necropolis (© Archivio disegni SAIA NIG 8599). Planimetry revised by S. Rizza.



Fig. 3. Orthophoto of the Siderospilia necropolis (© Archivio fotografico SAIA U13466). Photo by S. Rizza.



Fig. 4. A sector of the irregular stone floor that covered large areas of the necropolis and marked the distinction between the two phases (Archive of the Italian Archaeological Mission of Prinias).

1. Discontinuity in funerary ritual

The first aspect of discontinuity to be considered concerns the transition from an early phase, in which inhumation and cremation coexisted, to the adoption of the single rite of cremation for adults in the late ninth century BC. This aspect, which is perhaps the best-known datum for the necropolis of Siderospilia to date (Rizza 2011a, 23-41; 2011b), involves a radical change in the landscape of the area. The cremation urns and large pithoi for infant or subadult burials are surrounded and covered by stones which, over time, formed a kind of irregular stone floor covering large areas of the necropolis (Fig. 4).

At the same time, in a late phase of the ninth century, the entire settlement of Prinias - or at least the part that has come to light - was affected by levelling and reconstruction, in a prelude to the urban development of the Geometric period.[4]

2. Continuity and discontinuity: the use of the earlier tombs and the construction of new structures

As is often the case in the necropolis, discontinuity in funerary practices, the organization of the funerary space and the method of deposition coexist with continuity. This is evident in the use

[4] Cf. Rizza 2008, 301 (on the so-called northern houses, but without a precise chronology). The results of the excavations carried out in 2005 in the area of Temple A are particularly important for the chronological definition of the changes in the settlement of the central area of the Patela at the PGB/EG: Pautasso 2008 (especially for the area of the later Temple A).



Fig. 5. Tomb F, the largest of the chamber tombs (© Archivio forografico SAIA U13471).

and reuse of earlier tombs, as in the case of the large chamber tombs of the Protogeometric period, located on the eastern side of the necropolis and initially used for inhumations and then from the late ninth century onwards for cremations only (Biondi 2019; 2020; Rizza 2019; 2020) (Fig. 5). Continuity in the use of some collective chamber tombs over the centuries up until the Protoarchaic period is closely linked to memory. The reopening of tombs, and the manipulation of grave goods and bones to make room for later burials, are practices that stimulate memory and feelings of belonging to a group (Chesson 2001; Driessen 2019).

A certain discontinuity in the organization of the cemetery, expressed in the construction of few new structures, seems to characterize the western sector of the necropolis in this century,[5] which is occupied by probably the most ancient structure: the large burial mound (tumulus).[6] The latter, which has been preserved for about a quarter of its extension, had a diameter of around 13 m and a perimeter retaining wall 70/80 cm thick (Fig. 6). It was built near an ancient path or road that crossed the area in a north-south direction and enclosed the two oldest tombs in the necropolis (Tombs K and 207). These have been dated by Katia Perna to the late LM IIIC/SM, on the basis of the stylistic analysis of pottery (stirrup jars) (Perna 2019; 2020).

5 It should be noted that the distinction between the eastern and western parts of the necropolis does not correspond to an ancient division of the burial area, but refers to two sectors of the same complex divided by the modern road linking Prinias to Asites.

6 The interpretation of the large circular structure as a tumulus was proposed by its discoverer, Giovanni Rizza (Rizza 2011a, 26-29, fig. 7), and later taken up by other scholars (Kanta 2001, 19). Also Eaby 2007, 332-333. In 2015 Dario Palermo (Palermo 2015) proposed the hypothesis that it was a Minoan tomb of the Messara type. However, its structure and dimensions, as well as the eloquent comparison, although not so tight, with the tumuli of Anavlochos (Gaignerot Driessen 2018), suggest that the more correct interpretation is that of a burial mound.



Fig. 6. Plan of the area of the tumulus, small enclosures and so-called L-shaped wall (© Archivio disegni SAIA NIG 8599). Detail.

Along its north-eastern edge, the tumulus also included a pit (Tomb 210) with the remains of an inhumation, certainly older than the tumulus and, like other similar burials in the western area, probably dating to the Final Neolithic/Early Bronze Age. This is evidence of a distant past that characterizes other nearby areas, as will be seen later. During the Iron Age, a cremation in an unpainted jar was placed in the tumulus (a more precise dating of the tomb is made difficult by the preservation state of the unpainted cinerary urn, of which only the bottom remains).

The tumulus marked a space in the necropolis; its silhouette could be seen from the northern side of the settlement plateau, and its function as an aggregating element within the necropolis space persisted throughout the centuries after its construction.[7] A group of small chambers or

[7] On the role of the tumulus as landmark, see Alcock 2016; McGowan 2016. For the case of Prinias, Pautasso 2023.



Fig. 7. Zenithal drone photo of the tumulus and small enclosures
(© Archivio fotografico SAIA U13962, photo S. Rizza).

enclosures leaning against the outer perimeter of the tumulus is the result of additions made over time (Fig. 6-7).[8] On the basis of his observations during the excavations,[9] Giovanni Rizza distinguished two phases in the construction of the chambers. In the first phase, structures μ-ο-π, κ-λ, ι-ν (Fig. 6), which seem to form a single group, are attached to the mound. These did not reveal any burials, but in some cases only a burnt layer. Subsequently, structures α-β-ε, γ-δ-ζ, η-θ (Fig. 6), were placed against the former. This later group of enclosures yielded cremations in *pithoi* or urns, and in some cases, deposits of burnt material from ceremonial or funerary rituals or from the pyra. The dating of the tombs and burnt deposits within these enclosures is between the PGB/EG and the LG/EO periods.

A long, so-called L-shaped wall (Fig. 6) is architecturally connected to the small chamber β, where three cremations of the full Geometric period (Tombs 80, 84 and 85) were found (Rizza 2011a, 36-37, fig. 23a). The wall, which extended for 12.73 m with a north-south orientation, was built in the eight century – probably in an advanced phase of the Geometric period – and enclosed a space that was found to be open on the eastern side. We cannot rule out the possibility that the so-called L-shaped wall is in fact the remains of a closed structure with a rectangular or trapezoidal plan, part of which has been lost. At least six painted cinerary urns, both straight-sided and ovoid pithoi, mostly from the LG/EO phase (Fig. 8), with their lids, were found in a narrow space. The vessels, collected in fragments, crushed and mixed with abundant

8 A similar association between a tumulus and a group of small enclosures in the Iron Age is attested, for example, on Naxos in the necropolis of Tsikalario, see Charalambidou 2018, 155-165, fig. 6 (Tumulus A and so-called Enclosure 2 and Building C), with bibliography. For burial enclosures in Crete, in general, see Eaby 2007, 325-329, in particular 327 for Prinias.

9 G. Rizza, excavation notebook for the year 1971.2, 43.



Fig. 8. One of the pithoi found inside the L-shaped wall (P 1767) (Archive of the Italian Archaeological Mission of Prinias).

burnt bones, were found in association with a pavement of slabs and a large burnt deposit nearby, containing metal and gold objects.[10] Only further study of the necropolis will provide more reliable data for a correct interpretation of the structure and a better definition of the date of the various cinerary urns.

Within this framework of continuity in the use of earlier structures, as in the case of the chamber tombs, or in the search for a link with an older and more significant structure, as in the case of the enclosures around the tumulus, continuity as memory seems to play a fundamental role. At the same time, an element of discontinuity can be detected both in the organization of the funerary space and in the construction of new funerary structures. In this respect, in addition to the example of the small chambers and the so-called L-shaped wall, attention should be drawn to another area not far away.

To the west of the ancient tumulus, the rocky bank rises in a low hill, the so-called south-western hill, where three large piles of stones were found and excavated in 1970, 1977 and 1978 (Fig. 9-10). The stones covered three structures (A, B, D) which, although close to each other and with the same orientation (more or less north-east/south-west), seem to be different in plan,



Fig. 9. Zenithal drone photo of the southwestern hill with the periboli (S. Rizza).

10 Among the gold objects, a gold sheet in the shape of a six-pointed star inscribed in a circle, see Gigli Patané 2019, 7, fig. 9; 2020, 296, fig. 9a.

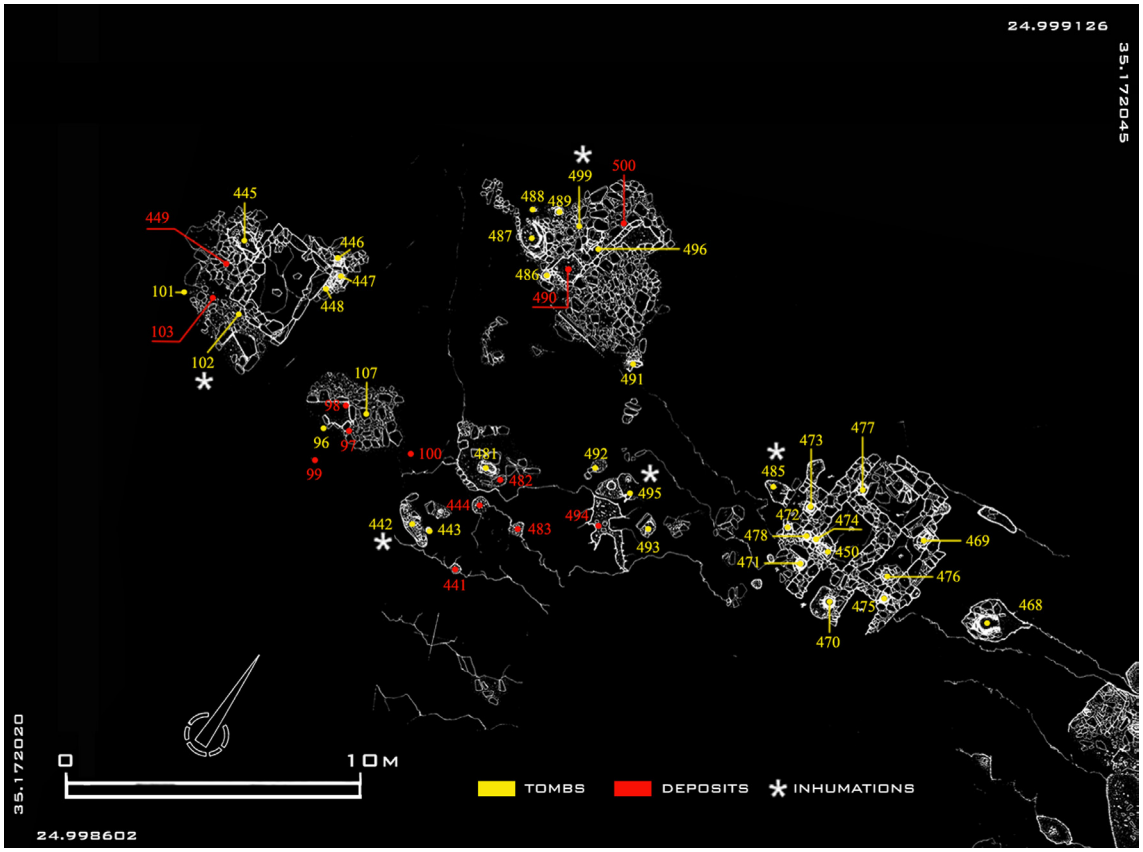


Fig. 10. Georeferenced planimetry with tombs, deposits and the earlier inhumations (© Archivio disegni SAIA NIG 8611).

construction technique and perhaps function. At the time of their discovery, they were called 'enclosures' or periboloi (Pautasso, Rizza forthcoming; Pautasso 2023a, 553-555). However, apart from enclosure B (6.50 x 6.50 m), which can be considered a group of small enclosures attached to an older one, the other two seem to have had a different function. Enclosure D (3.20 x 2.40 m) was built on a large burnt layer (deposit 449 in Fig. 10). No tomb was found inside it, but a group of pottery fragments and an iron spearhead were recovered.[11] Structure A, only partially preserved[12] and characterized by a more precise masonry technique, yielded a small foundation deposit containing an aryballos dated PGB-EG (deposit 500 in Fig. 10). The care taken in the construction and the presence of the foundation deposits suggest that Structure A was designed as a small funerary monument.

All three were built between the late ninth and early eight century BC. Over time, up until the 7th century BC, several tombs were added to the exterior of the main building, often leaning against the perimeter walls or, in the case of enclosure B, in small chambers that were gradually added to the oldest one. All three structures were built over older inhumations, probably dating

11 Among the pottery fragments collected in the peribolos and dating back to an early phase of the Geometric period, a large piece of the so-called krater of the Master of Lions was found (Pautasso 2018, passim).

12 Structure A was investigated at the end of the last excavation year (1978). There is no information on the interior of the building, only on the exterior in relation to the preserved wall sections.



Fig. 11. Particular of the two skulls (a man and a woman) in Tomb 102 (enclosure D) (© Archivio fotografic SAIA U13590).

from the Final Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age (Tombs 102, 499, 485 on Fig. 10; Fig. 11).[13] In all three cases, these older inhumations were incorporated and preserved by the Iron Age structures, as in the case of inhumation 210 found inside the tumulus. In all three cases the earliest tombs seem to be enchytrismoi, that is tombs of children or subadults (Tombs 495, 496, 450, Fig. 10).

The use of the funerary enclosures or groups of small chambers, such as B, and also groups of tombs attached to buildings acting as focal points, such as A and D, is linked to the concept of family or kinship and kinship lineage. Although the three small buildings represent an element of discontinuity and radical change within the necropolis, they are also in a line of continuity with the area's past. Indeed, in this case, in fact, the concept of memory seems to go beyond the family or kinship context towards an assertion of ancestral links to the place (a "genealogy of place") (Hill, Hageman 2016, 45), through the preservation of ancient inhumations. The observation that the earliest tombs of the three structures correspond to burials of children or subadults prompts reflection on the degree of inclusion of children in the Iron Age community of Prinias, as well as on the role of these early deaths in the identity dynamics and claims of particular social groups or families.[14]

13 These were only found on the western side of the necropolis. They might be related to a small Final Neolithic/Early Bronze Age settlement identified during excavation of the eastern side (Cultraro 2008).

14 For general remarks (albeit with a focus on Thera) on the treatment of children in Iron Age necropoleis see Kalamani 2020, esp. 97, with updated bibliography.

Discontinuities and differences in the spatial organization of the eighth-century necropolis can be seen by comparing its western side with the area at the foot of the eastern hill, where the chamber tombs are located (Fig. 2).[15]

The image of the eastern side of the necropolis allows us to make some observations firstly on the absence of small chamber or monumental structures such as the large so-called L-shaped wall or the "enclosures" or funerary monuments. The area is dominated by the presence of Protogeometric chamber tombs, some of which were reused until the Protoarchaic period, and a large area of cremations and burials in pithoi (enchytrismoi) extending to the south and largely dating back to the second phase of the necropolis. Small groupings or clusters of cremations or isolated depositions predominate in this area; boundaries of burial spaces with short sections of wall are present, but rare. Although this aspect is still under study and therefore needs to be verified and discussed, in this sector cremations in simple unpainted necked jars or tripod cooking pots seem to predominate, often accompanied by a lekythos, as well as a number of enchytrismoi. At the present stage of the research, it is impossible to say whether these tombs were in any way linked to continuity in the of use of the large chamber tombs (where the cinerary urns of the Geometric period are generally painted).

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, this preliminary overview of the eighth century phase of the necropolis, between continuity and discontinuity, shows a great variety in the solutions adopted, in the reuse of older structures, in the occupation of the funerary space with new buildings or structures bordering groups of tombs, and in simple cinerary urns and enchytrismoi. Such differentiations create internal clusters in the cemetery, reflecting an increase in the social complexity and the growth of some influential groups within the eighth-century community. These social groups often assert their identity in the funerary space by claiming a link with the past. This complexity can be seen in the contemporary development of the settlement on the Patela, in the organization of a central area in which communal spaces were created within the residences of the elite groups, and in which the construction of the large monumental building VA-VD – perhaps a communal/public building – marks a turning point at the end of the century.[16]

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15 For the conventional distinction between the two sectors (western and eastern) of the necropolis, see note 5 above.

16 On the large VA-VD building, see Palermo 2017; Pappalardo 2021.

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