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First impressions are not always accurate. Disruptions that created a complex stratigraphical sequence in the Pre- and Proto-palatial necropolis at Petras-Kephala (Siteia)

ABSTRACT

Excavations in the Pre- and Protopalatial necropolis of Petras-Kephala (Siteia, eastern Crete) have revealed a complex stratigraphic sequence that challenges initial interpretations of the cemetery's development. This study focuses on a natural depression in the northern sector of the necropolis and examines a series of major interventions dating from MM IA to MM IIB. Early house tombs, probably established between EM II and MM IA, were severely damaged, most likely by an earthquake, and subsequently incorporated into later funerary constructions rather than abandoned.

Especial attention is paid to a large-scale MM IIA programme of redevelopment involving the systematic backfilling of the depression, the construction of new architectural features, and the erection of a substantial retaining/peribolos wall that redefined the cemetery's northwestern boundary. The fill contained a structured secondary deposit of pottery, human skeletal remains, and other materials, including imported vessels from Thera and objects with possible Anatolian and Levantine connections, attesting to Petras' wide-ranging external contacts. Associated features, such as an enigmatic ovoid stone construction incorporating human crania and a separate deposit including a bovine skull, are interpreted as evidence for ritual activities connected with the closure and transformation of earlier funerary spaces.

Analysis of the archaeological and ceramic evidence suggests that these interventions formed part of a planned reorganisation of the necropolis contemporaneous with the construction of the Petras palace and the broader monumentalization of the site. Rather than signalling discontinuity after the destruction of the earliest tombs, the successive rebuilding phases demonstrate deliberate efforts to maintain ancestral connections and social stability while adapting the cemetery to changing social and administrative conditions. The study highlights how repeated episodes of construction, ritual activity, and landscape modification progressively obscured the original topography, creating the anthropogenic form of the plateau that has survived into modern times.

KEYWORDS: Petras (Siteia), Prepalatial Crete, Protopalatial Crete, house tombs, cemetery reorganisation, structured deposits, mortuary rituals, ancestor veneration

INTRODUCTION

The Pre- and Proto-palatial necropolis at Petras-Kephala is situated on a broad, tongue-shaped plateau that extends to the northeast from the northern side of the hill (Fig. 1). In its final phase (MM IIB), the topography of the necropolis was relatively flat with a clearly delineated northwestern edge. Yet this was not the case before the MM IIA period. The explanation for the discrepancy lies in the original topography of the plateau and the subsequent human building activities along the western half of it (Tsipopoulou 2017; *in press a*) (Fig. 2).

Here in the underlying marly limestone bedrock was an irregular, elongated natural depression that extended north–south from at least Trenches A1 to Θ1 (Fig. 3 a). Its eastern limit was approximately the western edge of Ceremonial Area 2 (Tsipopoulou *in press b*). From this line the hollow sloped unevenly downward to the west. In this amphitheatrical topographical feature, house tombs were constructed from at least the MM IA period, and possibly as early as EM II (Fig. 2). It should be noted here that other features of the plateau's original topography were subsequently obscured, as we have already demonstrated around House Tomb 2 (Tsipopoulou and Rupp 2019) (Fig. 2).

The focus of this paper is on the evidence for various human activities in the northern portion of the depression from MM IA through MM IIB. These major interventions significantly altered

the layout and physical appearance of the cemetery at three significant points in its long history of use.

I. ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXTS (SEE TSIPOPOULOU IN PRESS A)

In the EM II and MM IA periods, three small house tombs were built in the depression (Fig. 3 a): MM IA House Tomb 40 was situated under the western portion of the later House Tomb 9; MM IA House Tomb 27 lay under the western portion of the later House Tomb 11; immediately to the north was MM IA House Tomb 69. At the eastern edge was Burial Structure 76 (Fig. 2). At some point these structures were seriously damaged, probably by an earthquake. They were neither cleaned out nor rebuilt afterwards.



Fig. 1. a) Google Earth view of Petras-Kephala hill (Hill II); b) Aerial photograph of Petras-Kephala hill (Hill II) with areas excavated.

Credit: Petras Excavations Archives,
D. W. Rupp.



Fig. 2. Plan of the Petras necropolis with chronological phases (2023).

Credit: Petras Excavations Archives.

In MM IB, the first phase of House Tomb 11 was constructed over the remains of House Tomb 27. Contemporaneously, the first phase of House Tomb 9 was erected over the debris of the eastern portion of House Tomb 40 (Fig. 3b). In MM IIA, House Tomb 11 did not undergo any modifications, while House Tomb 9 saw several additions to its plan (Fig. 4a). In MM IIB, House Tomb 9 was modified by the erection of additional walls and the creation of more rooms and spaces. Additional walls projecting from the western side of House Tomb 9 created Spaces 8 and 9 (Fig. 4b). In this period the two house tombs were probably unified into one large building.

What is noteworthy here is that in the areas between House Tombs 11 and 9 and to the west of House Tomb 9, the remains of the MM IA House Tomb 40 appear to have been left open, and the

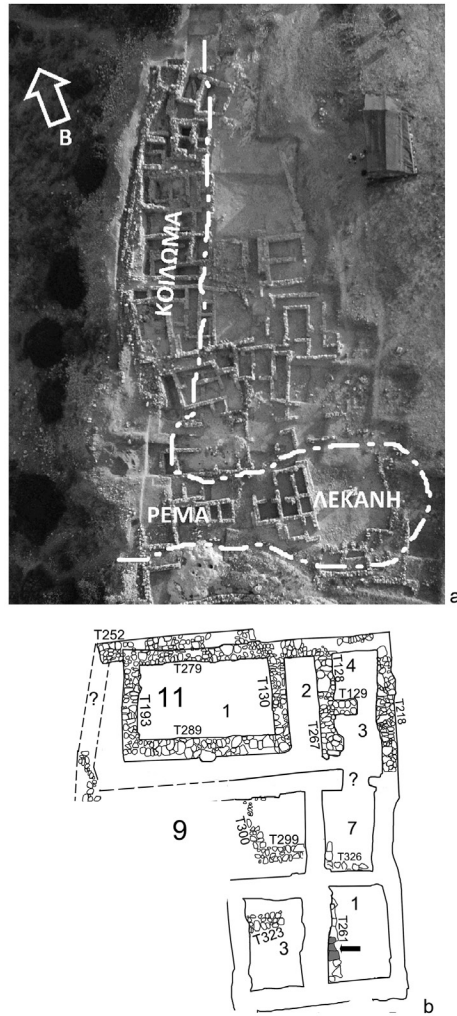


Fig. 3. a) Aerial view of the Petras necropolis indicating the approximate boundaries of the ancient topographical features (Petras Excavations Archives, D.W. Rupp); b) Plan of House Tombs 9 and 11 in the MM IB phase (Petras Excavations Archives, M. Tsiopopoulou and M. Tsimogianni).

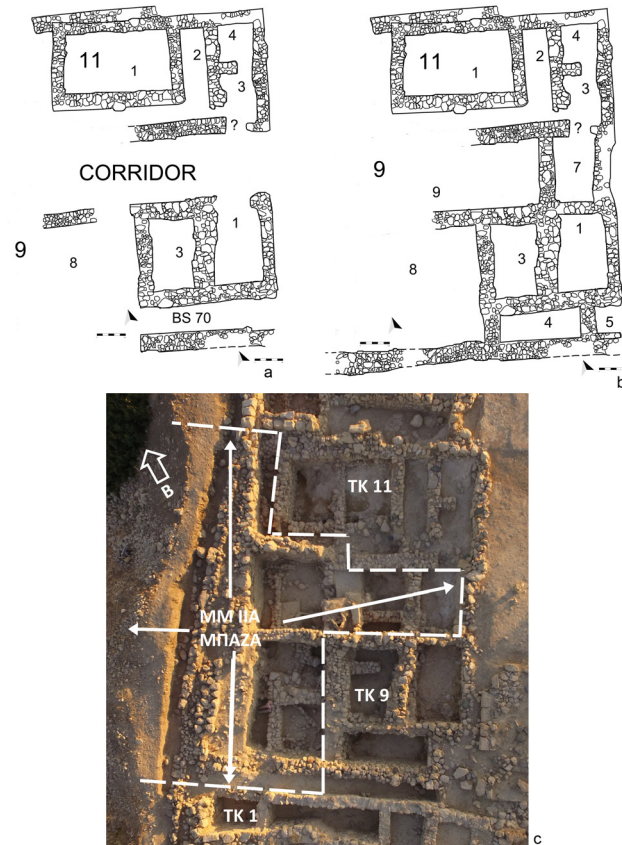


Fig. 4. a) Plan of House Tombs 9 and 11 in the MM IIA phase (Petras Excavations Archives, M. Tsimogianni and M. Tsiopopoulou); b) Plan of House Tombs 9 and 11 in the MM IIB phase (Petras Excavations Archives, M. Tsimogianni and M. Tsiopopoulou); c) Aerial view of west central portion of the Petras necropolis indicating the approximate horizontal extent of the MM IIA fill deposit.

earlier burial remains lay untouched while these later structures were being built. This situation changed dramatically, however, in MM IIA. In the entire area between the western and southern walls of House Tomb 11 and the western walls of House Tomb 9, a deep fill was dumped (Fig. 4c). This relatively uniform layer of sediment included smaller and larger stones as well as scattered tiny human bones (Fig. 5). In the lower portion of this fill, a series of broken ceramic vessels were discarded among and on top of the wall stumps of MM IA House Tomb 40 (Fig. 5a). Fewer vessels were found in the upper portion. This structured, secondary deposit was approximately 1 m thick.

Near the middle of Space 9, at a level of ca 54 m., the construction of a crude ring of stones with an ovoid plan was started, measuring ca 70 x 130 x 45 cm. It was roughly built from irregular



Fig. 5. a) MM IIA fill deposit on top of the MM IA House Tomb 40 remains in Space 9 of MM IIB House Tomb 9, from the southwest; b) The lower portion of the MM IIA fill deposit with the discarded ceramic vessels indicated in Space 9 of MM IIB House Tomb 9, from the north. Credit: Petras Excavations Archives and D. W. Rupp.

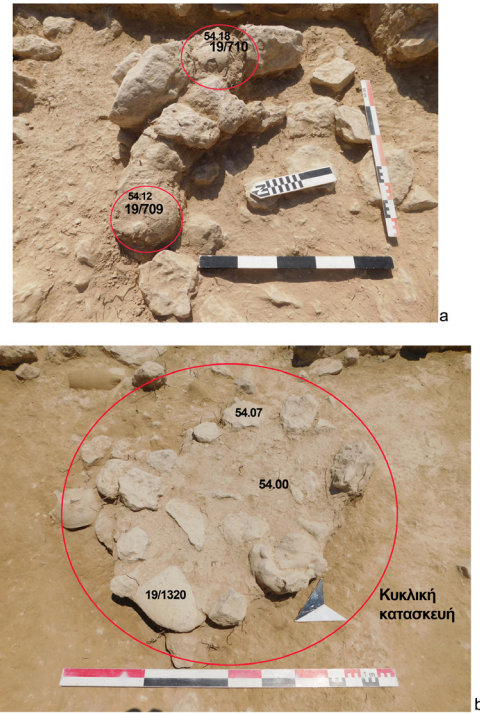


Fig. 6. a) Lower section of the MM IIA “Ovoid Feature” with a broken quern (19/1320) built into its wall, in Space 9 of MM IIB House Tomb 9, from the north; b) Upper section of the MM IIA “Ovoid Feature” with two human crania (19/709 and 19/710) built into its wall, in Space 9 of MM IIB House Tomb 9, from the north. Credit: Petras Excavations Archives and D. W. Rupp.

larger and smaller stones, including two reused quern fragments near its base (Fig. 6); it is noteworthy that two human crania were also used. The interior was packed with smaller stones, but no artifacts were found. Near the upper level, two ceramic vessels were deposited in the vicinity of its exterior surfaces. The upper limit of this feature was at 54.15 m. Its function in the context of the cemetery is not clear. Immediately to the north/northeast of the ovoid feature, starting at a similar level, were the lower edges of a substantial tumble of stones that extended to the northeast and east (Fig. 5b). Over these two features, the backfilling of the area continued for at least 30 cm.

An east–west wall with two courses of stones was built in the fill. This continued to the west under the north–south LM IIIA2 wall, but not further to the east. It served to partially separate the later Space 9 from Space 8 (Fig. 7a).

The situation around Space 8 was similar but not identical. Here were the remains of MM IA House Tomb 40. This area had a lower fill layer that reached down to approximately the same level as to the north of the east–west wall, but with far fewer ceramic fragments scattered throughout. In the southern portion of Space 8 there was a distinct surface (Fig. 7b), with a complete bovine cranium along with a few vases and two triton shells deposited upon it

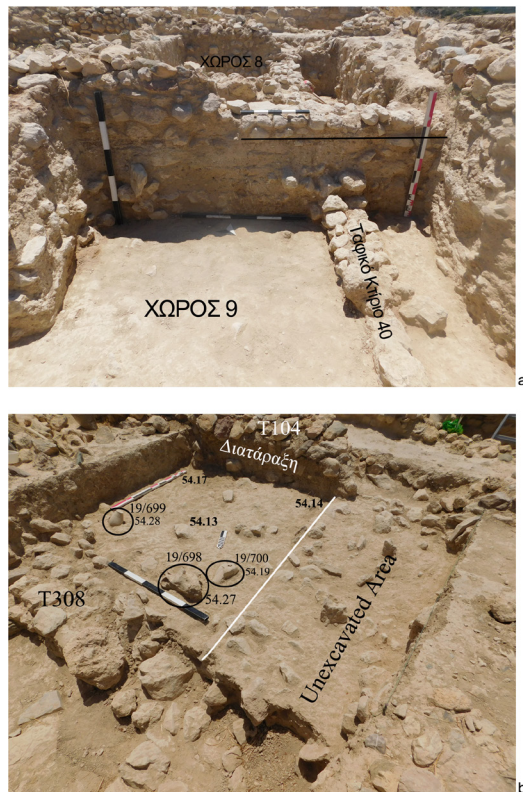


Fig. 7. a) The east–west wall dividing Space 8 from Space 9 in House Tomb 9 from the north; b) Disturbed layer in the area of Space 8 of MM IIB House Tomb 9 with the bovine cranium and ceramic offerings, from the northwest. Credit: Petras Excavations Archives and D. W. Rupp.

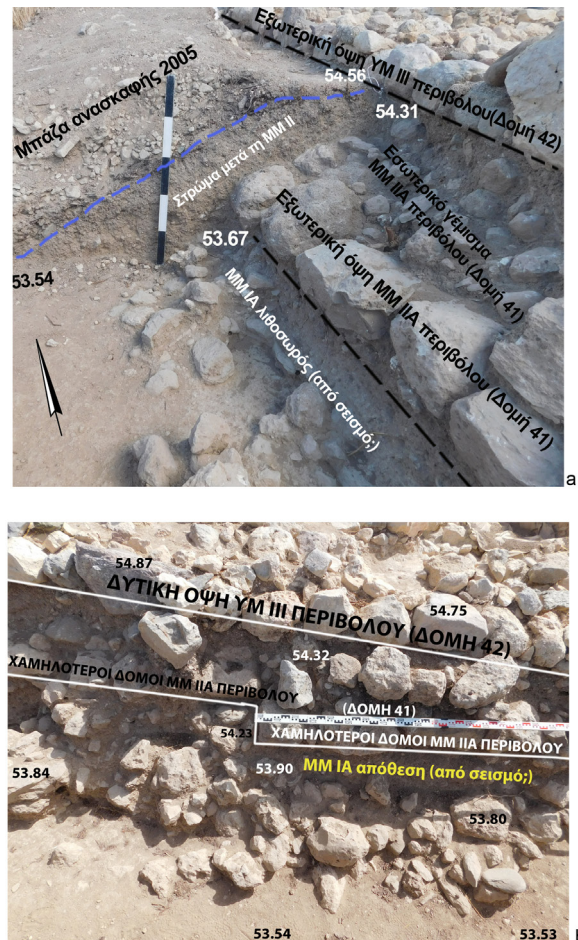


Fig. 8. a) Foundation of a north–south *peribolos* wall near the western edge of the MM IIA fill deposit, of the MM IIA/IIB monumentalization program in the necropolis, from the southwest; b) LM IIIA2 ceremonial center's foundations for a north–south *peribolos* wall, along the western edge of the post-MM IIB stratum covering the necropolis, from the northeast. Credit: Petras Excavations Archives and D. W. Rupp.

(Tsipopoulou et al. this volume). Space 8 was later backfilled with a second layer, as was the case to the north of the east–west wall.

Backfilling of the depression in MM IIA extended north–south, at the very least from the area to the north of the northwest corner of House Tomb 11 to Space 8 in House Tomb 9, or ca 12 m. This deposit terminated, as the aborted brief excavation in 2020 showed, just short of the debris covering the southwestern corner of MM IA House Tomb 40, and probably the western walls of EM II House Tomb 39. Thus, along this axis it probably extended to the west at least 2 m beyond the area excavated in 2019 (Fig. 4c).

To hold the fill in place, a major north–south retaining wall with at least two courses of large stones was constructed near its western edge. The exterior face had at least one shallow indentation (Fig. 8a). A packing of stones supported the outer face of the retaining wall (Fig. 8b).

This construction served as the western *peribolos* wall of the cemetery. It was among the efforts to monumentalize the northern portion of the necropolis in MM IIA, at the time when the Petras palace was constructed, as part of the major works re-arranging the space on the two hills.¹ This *peribolos* wall established the new, higher artificial line of the plateau's northwestern edge in this section, and most likely also to the north and south.

In the LM IIIA2 period, foundations for a substantial north–south wall set slightly to the east were laid on the post- MM IIB stratum covering the necropolis. This broad *peribolos* wall for a ceremonial center (Rupp and Tsiopoulou 2022) reinforced the earlier line (Fig. 8). Thus, the modern anthropogenic topography of the plateau was in place. Finally, in the late Ottoman period, a single-course, narrow “terrace wall” was built approximately along this line on the earlier remains, simply reemphasizing what had been created almost four millennia earlier. Therefore, the “first impression” of the plateau as seen at the beginning of the 21st century was not of its original, pre-Bronze Age topography, but an anthropogenic construction formed over 4000 years.

II. CERAMIC FINDS

Let us now focus on the very interesting pottery found in this structured deposit. Here we will only present a very small selection, given space restrictions. This includes various medium-sized vessels and some large ones, while some conical cups and other drinking shapes also appear. Most large vessels were fragmentary. The deposit can be dated to MM IIA, as it has good parallels from Malia, Mochlos, and Petras itself, both from the necropolis and from the settlement, especially the *Lakkos* deposit.

There were a few vessels for cooking and temporary storage (Fig. 9), namely a large intact pithoid jar (cf. from Malia, Quartier Mu, Poursat and Knappett 2005, pl. 15, no 323; from Phaistos, Caloi 2013, fig. 23, no 282), and three tripod cooking vessels, two of which (c, d) belong to an open, shallow, almost cylindrical spouted type (Alberti 2012, fig. 1; Poursat and Knappett 2005, pl. 17, no 367), and the third (b) to Maria Emanuela Alberti's so-called *Bricco* type (Alberti 2012, fig. 2a).

The deposit included at least two large amphorae (Fig. 10). The complete one is especially interesting, as a product of a well-known workshop in the Mirabello area, probably from Gournia itself (Betancourt 1977; cf. from Malia, Quartier Mu Poursat and Knappett 2005, pl. 3, esp. no 42 for the shape and 31 for the decoration). Another interesting feature was a cluster of plain closed vessels (probably large jugs), only the lower part of which is preserved (Fig. 11).

Smaller vases included several juglets, one of which was dark-on-light with two conical protrusions on the upper body (Fig. 12b) (cf. for a similar shape a small hydria from Kommos, Betancourt 1990, fig. 18, no 214). There were also a few conical bowls (Fig. 12d, e) (cf Poursat and Knappett 2005, pl. 46, no 260), several conical cups (Fig. 12c), and a carinated cup (Fig. 12a).

¹ This re-arrangement includes the flattening of the plateau of the palace, and the construction of the large cyclopean-like retaining wall to its northeastern edge, as well as the construction of an even more massive wall, at the lower end of the west slope of Hill I, which probably served a defensive function (Tsiopoulou 2012).

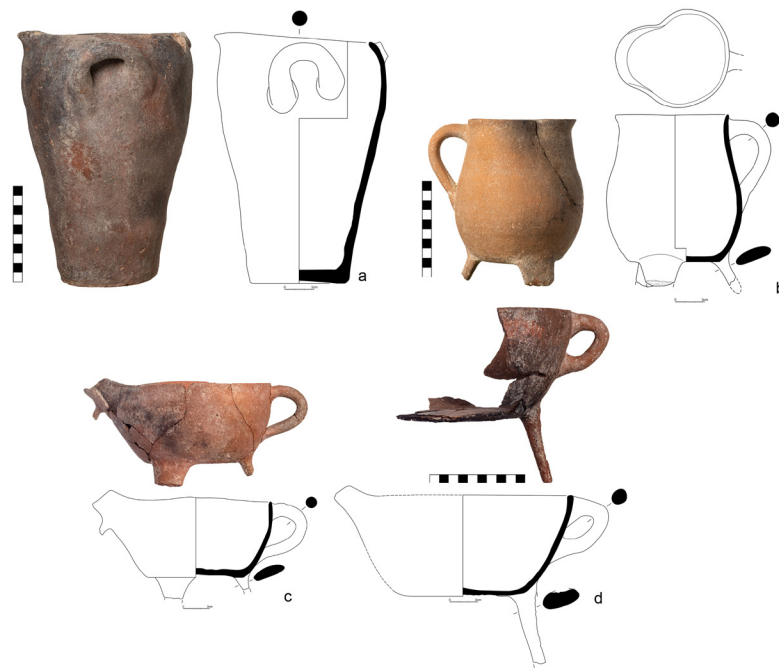


Fig. 9. Pottery from House Tomb 9, Space 9: a) Pithoid jar; b-d) Cooking vessels.

Of particular interest are several imported specimens, proving the wide range of external relations with Petras in the Pre- and the Proto-palatial periods (cf. Tsipopoulou in press c). First is a fragmentary side-spouted jug from Thera, in bichrome matte painted black and red ware (Fig. 13), indicating relations between the Cycladic island and Petras in the Middle Bronze Age, before the eruption.² Although no exact parallel for the decoration has been published, cf. for the base



Fig. 10. Pottery from House Tomb 9, Space 9: Amphorae.



Fig. 11. Pottery from House Tomb 9, Space 9: Fragmentary jugs.

² Sided spouted jug, Thera import, 14/3663. Body fragment, mended from 45 sherds; another 10 sherds, including one, neck/rim, in the same fabric, probably from a different vessel. Pres. height: 15; upper d. 11.4, lower d. 18. Conical base, flat underneath. Conical body, as preserved. Clay 10YR 8/2, light gray, fine, with many black volcanic inclusions. Self-slip. Black and dark red matt paint; zigzag on the base; wide, red band between two black bands and a zone defined by two black bands with schematized lilies.

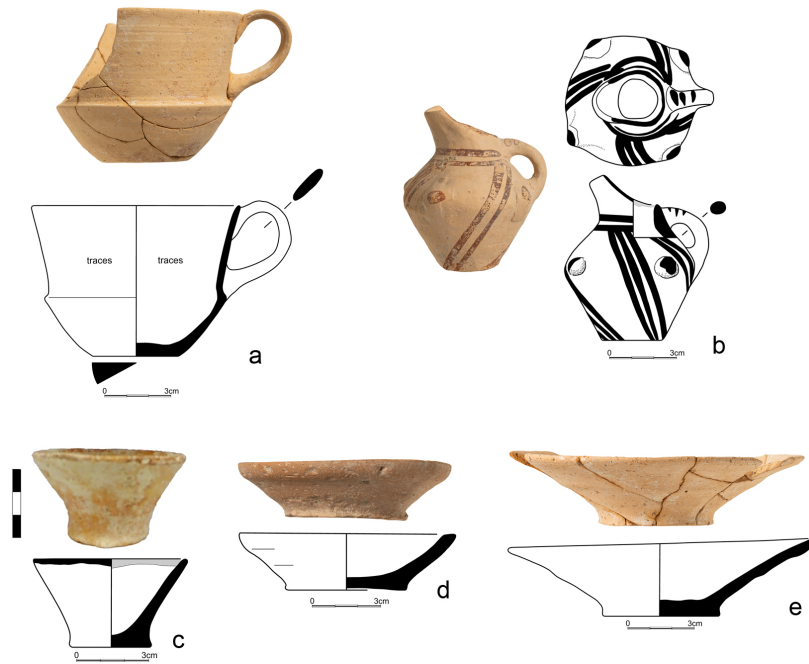


Fig. 12. Pottery from House Tomb 9, Space 9: a) Carinated cup; b) Juglet; c) Handleless conical cup; d-e) Bowls.

Nikolakopoulou et al. 2029, pl. LXXXV, no 1741, p. 290, nos. 1703 and 1740, pp. 282, 283, 285, Middle Cycladic phase C (MM III). This ware appears early in phase A and continues to C (MM II-III). Beak spouted jugs in this ware were found together with MM II Cretan imports (supra, 53).

Another unexpected find revealing important evidence for relations between Petras and areas beyond the Aegean, and Asia Minor in particular, is a small fragment from a small, globular, burnished handmade vessel with incised decoration, filled with a white paste³ (Fig. 14a). A convincing parallel comes from the Hetty Goldman Tarsus excavation archive stored at Bryn



Fig. 13. Pottery from House Tomb 9, Space 9:
a) Side-spouted jug imported from Thera.

³ Jug fragment, HT9, Space 9, 19/2261. Neck and shoulder fragment, mended from two sherds; max. dim. 3.7 X 4.2 X 0.3. Low, wide cylindrical neck, shoulder of curved profile. Clay 5YR 5/3 dull red brown, fine, with a gray-blueish core, burnished brown surface, incised decoration, on neck zone of incised triangles with double contour filled with dots; incisions are filled with white paste.

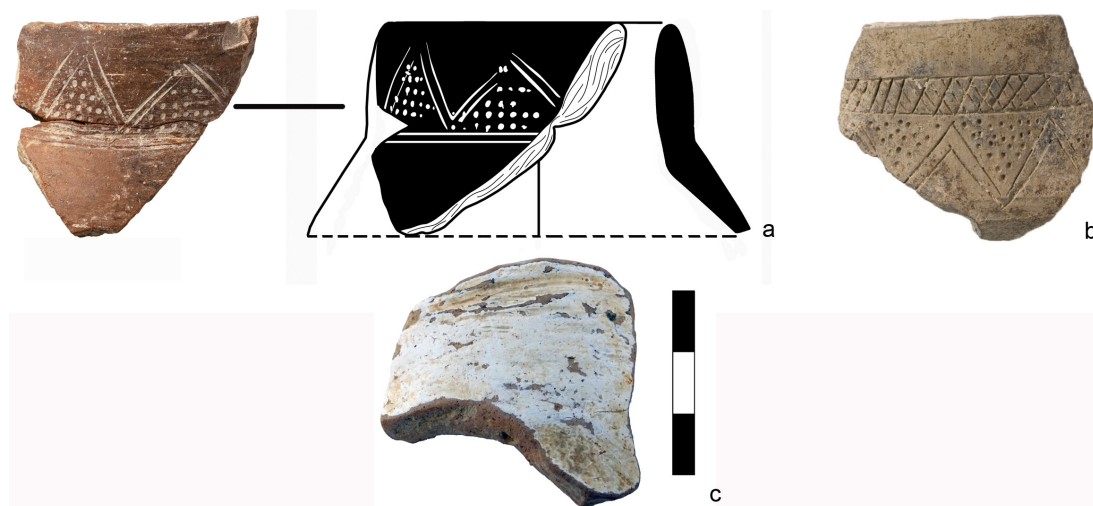


Fig. 14. Pottery from House Tomb 9, Space 9: a) Juglet imported from Tarsus; b) Tarsus parallel; c) Jug neck fragment imported from the Levant.

Mawr College, in the form of white-filled incised and impressed gray ware (Fig. 14b). The Cilician sherd is dated to ca 2000-1200 BCE⁴ and may well be contemporary with a MM IIA date.

A third imported specimen,⁵ probably dated to the Early Bronze Age and thus certainly older than the MM IIA context, probably comes from the Eastern Mediterranean and belongs to a class of pottery known in the Levant (Eliyahu-Behar et al. 2016), dated ca 2900-2500 BCE) (Fig. 14 c).

DISCUSSION OF THE MM IIA ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS

The backfilling of the areas described above was not the result of a series of minor *ad hoc* acts, but a planned redevelopment of this central part of the cemetery. To mark this significant intervention, more or less contemporary with the construction of the Petras palace and the monumentalization of the necropolis, at least two ceremonies were involved: one for the closure of the earlier remains and the other for the construction of the new architectural features, both burial and non-burial features.

The first ceremony involved token offerings of food and of liquids. What stands out about this assemblage in the context of the cemetery are five observations:

1. The Mirabello amphora is unique as far as the house tombs and the ceremonial areas are concerned both for its size and its provenance.
2. Also unique in the whole cemetery is the Theran side-spouted jug from Thera. Both the amphora and the sided spouted jar were broken before being discarded.

⁴ Warm thanks to our colleague Prof. Jennifer Webb for this information, (accessed 1-12-2023) <https://triarte.bryn-mawr.edu/objects-1/info?query=mfs%2520any%2520%2522tarsus%2522&sort=&page=1311>

⁵ Jug fragment. 14/37922, HT 9, Space 9 max dims. 3,4 X 3,7 X 0,4. Neck fragment, cylindrical, broken below the rim. Clay, 5YR 8/4, fine, light gray, handmade, small brown inclusions. Externally on the upper part internally is coated with white lime plaster. I thank my colleague Dr Eleni Nodarou who drew my attention to this class of pottery.

3. The deposit included only the lower portion of a series of large unpainted jugs, while the jugs offered in the tombs were in most cases complete or at least restorable.
4. There is no evidence that the tripod cooking vessels were used for cooking food *in situ*; rather, they served for the transport of already cooked food to the necropolis from another area, presumably the settlement of Hill 1 to the west of the necropolis.
5. The deposit included various miniature vessels, very rare in the tombs and more common in the ceremonial areas.

The function of the ovoid feature in these activities is not obvious. We believe that it might symbolize a ritual act marking closure of this curated deposit of fill in the hollow. The fact that two human crania were used together with the stones in its construction is significant. For the manipulation of the human bones as an important part of the rituals in the Petras necropolis, see Kiorpe, Triantaphyllou and Tsiopoulou in this volume. Also, it is well evidenced that not all dead individuals were elevated to the status of the “ancestors”. The question that then arises is whether these remains were considered so important that they symbolized the ancestors and thus presumably protection for their descendants, or whether they were rather regarded as unimportant, and consequently merely used as simple substitute stones.

The second ceremony involved offerings of the cranium from a sacrificed bovine and the consumption of some liquids. The materials used in this ceremony were purposely discarded adjacent to where it took place (Tsiopoulou and Isaakidou in this volume). The source of the large volume of sediment used in the fill layer is not clear. The presence of fragmentary human bones scattered throughout this sediment, together with numerous stones, may indicate that the sediment came from the cleaning out of one or more abandoned older tombs. However, the absence of MM IA and earlier pottery, with the sole exception of the Early Bronze sherd from the Levant – clearly an intruder in this deposit – is significant.

In the 1000+ year long use of the cemetery, there were several disruptions that resulted in shifts and radical changes to its layout. They probably reflected social and administrative changes in the Petras community, different in the Prepalatial than in the Protopalatial period. Thus, the interventions in the “hollow” suggest to us that a serious disruption, the destruction of the MM IA house tombs, did not result in abandonment, but in a series of subsequent activities that reinforced continuity and stability, despite evident social competition. These were:

1. The erection of new house tombs in MM IB/MM IIA.
2. The systematic backfilling in MM IA over the EM II remains.
3. The construction of a monumental western peribolos wall in MM IIA, as well as of an eastern peribolos at the same time.
4. The final phase in MM IIB of the Protopalatial House Tombs 9 and 11.

The complex stratigraphical sequences revealed in the “hollow” were obscured by the last building activities in the Protopalatial period as well in LM IIIA. At the beginning of the excavation, the necropolis’ history looked so straightforward.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANKS

We thank the Hellenic Ministry of Culture for granting the excavation permit; the Institute for Aegean Prehistory (INSTAP) and its General Directors Philip Betancourt and Thomas Brogan for continuous support of the excavations and the studies; the personnel at the INSTAP Study Center for Eastern Crete, in Pacheia Ammos, Ierapetra, for precious support; Kathy Hall and Matina Tzari for conservation, Lily Bonga and Gabriella Lazoura for the drawings, Jeff Vanderpool for the photographs and Matina Papadaki for processing the flotation sediment; Eleni Nodarou and Jennifer Webb for useful suggestions; Mina Tsimogianni for processing the photos and drawings used in the present paper.

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