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A foundation deposit in Building 2 at Gypsades, Knossos

Abstract

Foundation deposits are quite common in Minoan Crete. They are deliberately concealed accumulations of objects, always connected in time and place with the foundation of a new building or phase thereof. Their form varies, as does their content, although complete or fragmented pottery is the main component of their being. The case study presented here is from the Middle Minoan (MM) IIIA Building 2 in the Gypsades neighborhood of Knossos town. Space 109 is a narrow gap between walls, a small cist-like construction packed with fragments of MM IIB pottery. It was formed during the renovation work carried out at the beginning of the building's second architectural phase. It is argued that this was a deliberate action of ritual nature, taking place early on during the process of rebuilding. In recent years different interpretative frameworks have been adopted to explain foundation deposits. In the present paper, however, they are considered as mnemonic records, intended to preserve the memory of past lives in the new building. Preserving the memory of ancestors is inherent in man's desire for protection and longevity.

Keywords: Knossos-Gypsades, Middle Minoan, foundation deposit, selective deposition, mnemonic record, offering ceremony

Introduction

Ritualism is not always associated with religious ceremonies. Consequently, when performed in places other than shrines or tombs, it is challenging to identify a ritual act with certainty. As far as domestic spaces are concerned, we do, however, recognize foundation deposits, usually interpreted as a wish for an auspicious journey through life. Until the 1980s little or nothing at all on this theme was investigated in the Minoan archaeological narrative, although foundation rituals are a very ancient practice observed as early as the first permanent human habitation (Gallis 1985). Detailed studies on the subject had been already published in the 1960s and the

At the conference in October 2022, a brief presentation on the pottery from Building 2 was given, entitled "The MM IIIA pottery assemblage from Building 2 at Knossos, Gypsades". Since then, a detailed publication on the ceramic contexts of MM IIB and MM IIIA periods has been submitted for publication elsewhere (Velegraki 2024 in press). Therefore, the present paper has been adapted by focusing specifically on Space 109 and its proposed interpretation as a foundation deposit. I would like to thank Prof. D. Panagiotopoulos and Dr Th. Eliopoulos for commenting on the text and for fruitful and constructive discussion.

1970s concerning the practice as followed in Mesopotamia (Ellis 1968) and Egypt (Weinstein 1973).

Boulotis (1982; 1985) was the first to thoroughly discuss foundation deposits and their significance in Minoan archaeology, exploring their presence and function in a magico-religious ritual context. The act of deliberately accumulating objects as offerings in the foundations and transitional spaces of buildings (i.e. doors, thresholds, doorjambs, staircases) is an expression of the desire to favorably predispose the forces that will protect buildings (Boulotis 1985, 248).

More recently, Herva (2005), focusing not only on the deposits buried under the building's foundation but also on every sealed assemblage within the building, has developed an ecological perspective in his interpretation. Although he did not altogether deny considering foundation deposits in terms of the 'religious' and the 'social', Herva (2005, 223) proposed: "to pursue the idea that some rituals might better be understood as ecological practices, essentially practical maintenance of the relationship between humans and their lived-in world". Objects, whether artefacts or buildings, would retain the identity of their holders and through them life would continue. Moreover, building deposits, as Herva (2005, 223-224) prefers to call them, are not only put in place on the foundation of a new building, but also during its partial or complete abandonment.

Yet another approach to the subject has been taken by Russell, Martin, and Twiss (2009), concerning collections of objects buried in pits below the floors at Çatalhöyük, where they are interpreted as commemorative deposits. These are concentrations of material probably derived from ceremonies that incorporate the memory of the ceremonial event into the built environment. According to Russell, Martin and Twiss (2009, 120) these objects were deliberately selected from a larger set and were often placed in pits during remodeling, and at the beginning and end of the building's life. The deed is aimed at strengthening the connectivity and continuity between major events in the life cycle of the house.

Foundation deposits in Minoan Crete

Foundation deposits in Minoan Crete have been discovered in almost every type of architectural construction – in palaces and palatial buildings, in urban houses and buildings in the countryside, and even in infrastructures and tombs. They are directly related to the architectural planning of a building, designed to be 'invisible', to remain unseen during its lifetime. They are situated beneath the floors, thresholds, doorjambs, along or under walls and foundations, as well as in staircases and courtyards. There can be more than one in a building, and they are always related to the founding of a new construction or reconstruction. They also vary in form, appearing as stone-built cist-like compartments, niches in the walls or pits dug under the floors. Pouring and serving tableware is the pottery usually recovered from within, mainly handleless cups and bowls that are generally inverted or stacked. There may additionally be pottery fragments, traces of burning, animal bones, tools, and loom weights. In rare cases, precious stones, jewelry, seal stones or figurines would also be deposited. Most of the above finds would represent the remnants of a consumption event, a feasting performed as part of the ritual during the construction event (for a thorough and detailed study of foundation

deposits and their interpretation within Minoan archaeological context, see Papadaki 2014; 2022).[1]

Arthur Evans (1928, 373-374) was first to mention a foundation deposit in the South House of Knossos, namely a stone box containing triangular *tesserae* made of semi-precious stones, which he assumed had been set under a wall. But it was not until the late 1970s that Minoan archaeologists became seriously involved with foundation deposits. The trigger for restarting the debate was the discovery of one such at the palace of Zakros, a niche deliberately opened in the west façade of the palace. Inside there was MM IIIB pottery, mostly handleless cups, and animal bones, representing an offering ceremony which, according to the excavator (Platon 1979, 292-293, fig. 2), was to inaugurate the foundation of the palace. Christos Boulotis (1982; 1985) discussed the Zakros find further, making comparisons with similar examples, while evaluating their context in the Minoan milieu. Olivier Pelon (1986) examined the foundation deposit found at the palace of Mallia and later Vincenzo La Rosa (2002) did the same for those from Phaistos and Agia Triada.

At the palace of Mallia, a small, four-sided stone case of the same sort as that in the South House at Knossos was placed by the eastern face of an EM III wall in Room IV7, likely the *sottoscala* of a double staircase (Pelon 1986, 7-8). An almost intact EM III-MM IA teapot of the Patrikies type was placed inside. Of different form was the foundation deposit discovered in 1923 again at the palace of Mallia: at the time of its discovery, the small EM IIB pottery assemblage placed in a gap between two walls was identified by its excavators as being in a 'hidden place'. Olivier Pelon (1986, 16, fig. 12) restudied the area and concluded that this was the result of an EM II building having been incorporated into the palace construction. Two more cases in Mallia were niches in the walls containing earth, and fragments of plaster, charcoal and drinking tableware (Pelon 1986, 18, fig. 13).

A comparable picture emerges through the study of the foundation deposits at the Phaistos palace and Agia Triada dating to the Protopalatial and Neopalatial periods (La Rosa 2002; Todaro 2009). Here too, more than one has been found: set in different places and at different times, they also show different characteristics. Either they are stone containers, like the one in Vano *XIII* at Phaistos and in *Vano 1* at *Edificio di nord-ovest* at Agia Triada*,* or small pits dug under the floor, like those in *Vano LVIII* at Phaistos and in *Vano XCIII* at *Casa a Sud della Rampa* and in *Corridoio 74* at Agia Triada.

At the Knossos palace, the Temple Repositories are the most interesting example of a foundation deposit with exceptional and unique artefacts having been placed into the cists in a structured manner to inaugurate the beginning of a new building phase at the palace (Hatzaki 2009; 2011a). The Vat Room deposit with its 1,639 spherical beads among other precious and exotic artefacts, and the pit in Room 46a behind the Throne Room, in which well over 100 exceptionally long obsidian blades were buried soon after their manufacture, could also be considered within the

[1] The diversity inherent in the form of Minoan foundation deposits can sometimes lead to misidentification (on this problem see the discussion by Papadaki 2022, 103). However, 'foundation deposit' could be a broad term that encompasses several 'moments' in a building's life-history and concepts such as feasting deposits or ritual debris may ultimately signify the beginning, the 'foundation', of a new period.

same interpretational framework (Hatzaki 2011a). Similar patterns of built and then filled in constructions have been recognized in domestic architecture too. A small basement construction, or lustral basin as Hatzaki (2011b, 252) has proposed calling it, in the Acropolis Houses (or House) was found filled with handleless cups and bowls, along with four small stone tools, a fragment of a rectangular stone vessel and a scrap of waste bronze (Catling, Catling and Smyth 1979, 12-13). Another example is the KS178 stone compartment found again in the Acropolis town quarter with more than 80 fairly complete vases of varied forms and fabrics (Hatzaki 2013).

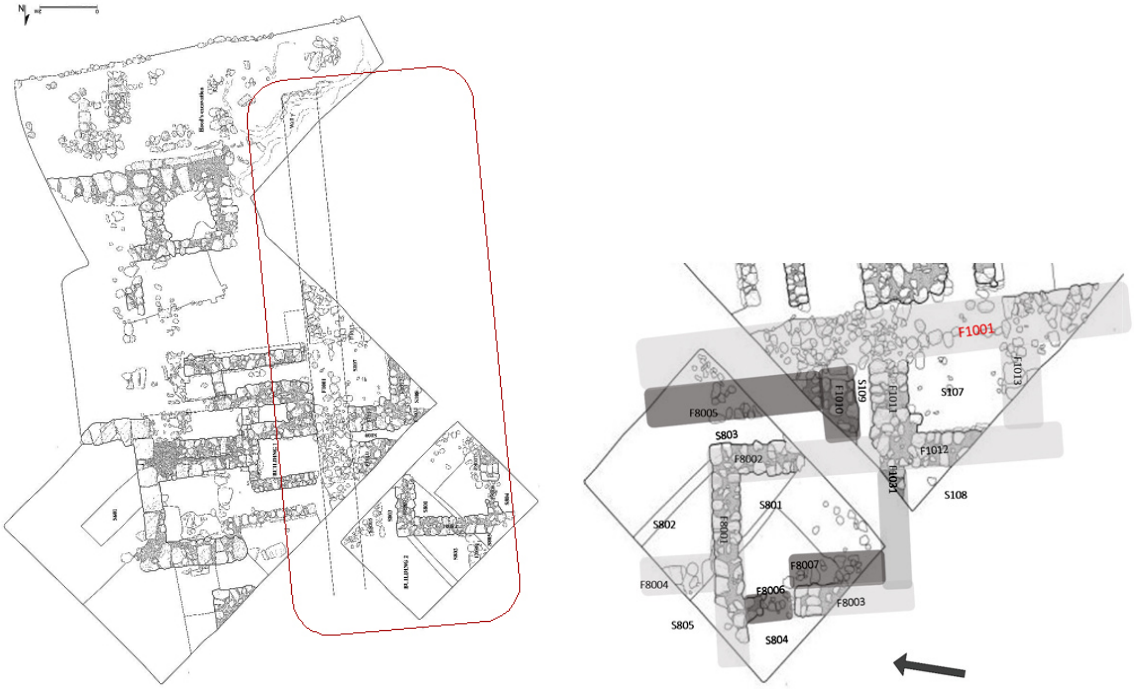
Recently, Caloi (2017) has further explored deposits from the First Palace of Phaistos that resemble ones laid down at foundation events, but these are not buried under floors or in the foundation. Rather they are located as the fillings of benches or platforms that would have remained visible. They are dated to MM IB and considered to be the earliest examples of their kind in Minoan Crete. Levi (1976) was the first to point out these constructions, describing them as "banchine riempite con vasi". Caloi (2017, 39) suggests that "…some of these peculiar filled-in structures are connected with the biography of the palace, marking some events whose mnemonic record is materialized in the expressly constructed benches or platforms". Nine examples from the palace and the quarters at Chalara and Agia Fotini have been identified as such, but four of them were not sealed. Being thus non-structured depositions, it looks as if there was no intention here to preserve the deposit as the remnants of a ritual act. Caloi (2017, 48-50), following Hamilakis (2010, 195), argues that those found sealed are the result of the deliberate deposition and concealment of meaningful objects intended to preserve and commemorate feasting and social events. These would be key features of mnemonic practices that link people with places.

At Sissi, a group of MM IIIB complete or almost complete pottery vases, mostly handleless cups, were found deposited against the southwest façade of the Neopalatial Building E in a box-like structure on the ground floor (Caloi 2018; 2019). This is construed as the result of a feasting event (though no bones were retrieved), which took place when the MM IIIB construction of the court-centered building at Sissi was inaugurated. A globular rhyton and a red-painted figurine in the shape of a snake's head were also deposited. A comparable case has been reported from the Gournia palace (Caloi 2019, 119-120).

The case of Space 109

Space 109 was formed during reconstruction work marking the beginning of the second architectural phase of Building 2 in MM IIIA (Velegraki 2020, 33-34, 44-53, fig. 6, pl. 2; 2024, 185-186, figs 2-3, 11-12). It is an enclosed oblong section of the building, measuring 1.55 x 0.30 m along the E-W axis (Fig. 1a-b), formed on the inner face of the monumental east façade of Building 2 and at the south end of Space 803. The infilling consisted almost exclusively of fragmented and extensively incomplete pottery, while very few stones were found within, mostly small pieces at the bottom; one or two larger specimens at the top had probably fallen there during the dismantling of the eastern façade (Figs 2a-b).[2]

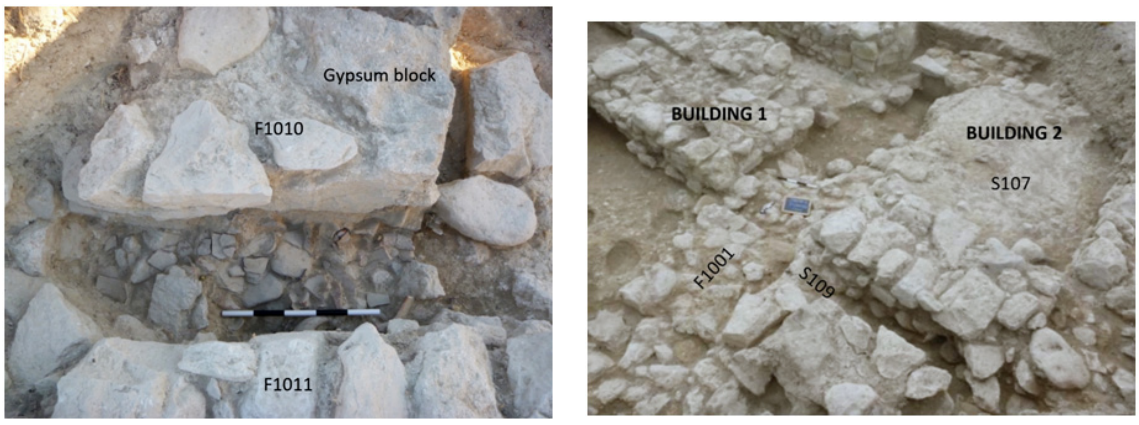
[2] The monumental eastern façade of the building had been completely dismantled since antiquity. Today only the foundation trench (7 m long and 1.20-1.40 m wide) is preserved.



(a) (b)

Fig. 1. (a) Ground plan of the 2014-2015 Gypsades excavation and Hood's excavation (©Knossos-Gypsades Excavation Project). Building 2 is marked with a red line.
(b) Plan of Building 2, with additions to the second architectural phase shaded dark grey (©Knossos-Gypsades Excavation Project, plan edited by the author).

The long and narrow Space 803 would originally have been planned as a storage area along the internal face of the eastern façade, providing a cool, dark space for storing food supplies. Space 109 resulted after the L-shaped buttress in Space 803 (Fig. 1a-b: walls F1010 and F8005) was set in place, leaving a small narrow gap between the preexisting wall F1011 and the newly



(a) (b)

Fig. 2. (a-b) Space 109 during and after excavation (©Gypsades-Knossos Excavation Project). (©Knossos-Gypsades Excavation Project, plan edited by the author).

constructed F1010 (cf. the above-mentioned foundation deposit at Mallia formed between two walls). The addition of retaining walls was intended firstly to strengthen the building (similar interventions were also observed in Space 801). Usually, these kind of adjustments to the original plan of a building are interpreted as being a response to damage caused by some natural or man-made disaster. In the case of Building 2 there is nothing to suggest that there was such damage – although we cannot rule it out completely, as the place was immediately reoccupied. In contrast, the tilted walls in Spaces 801 and 802 marked the end of the second architectural phase in the MM IIIA period.

Further, this configuration resulted in the narrowing of Space 803, presumably in order to accommodate a single wooden staircase to access the newly designed upper floor. This would mean that there was no damage suffered by the building at the end of MM IIB. Rather, events mark a need to increase the living space. Moreover, there is evidence of a more elaborate construction being sought in the renovation, as evidenced by the use of gypsum block in the corner of walls F8005 and F1010 (Fig. 2a). Apparently, Space 109 was intentionally designed to be sealed and to remain unseen behind the staircase in Space 803.

As mentioned above, the small 'cist' was found filled with pottery sherds. Apart from the pottery, little else was recovered: a fragment of a stone tripod offering table, four bone fragments, one plaster fragment and a ground stone tool.[3] Based on typological and contextual analysis of the pottery, which has been thoroughly studied elsewhere (Velegraki 2020, 82-94, figs 14-18, pls 9-10; 2024, 195-200, figs 14-17 in press), it is concluded that the pottery assemblage from Space 109 dates to MM IIB. It includes tableware, drinking, pouring and serving vessels, vessels for everyday use and vessels for transport and storage in relatively evenly distributed proportions (Fig. 3).[4] Cooking ware was represented by just five fragments, all with traces of burning. The

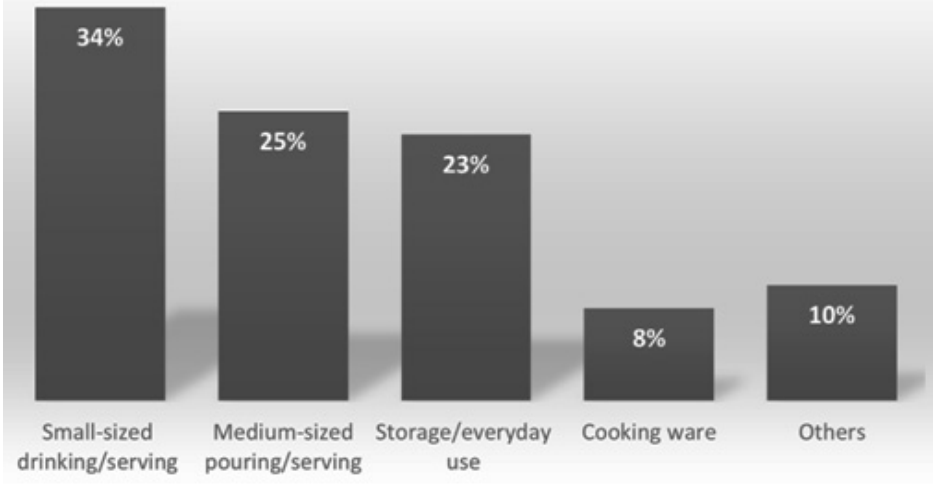


Fig. 3. Distribution percentages in terms of functionality.

3 The infill was 0.32 m thick, laid on the earthen floor.

4 It also has distinct quantitative and qualitative characteristics, which differ from the remaining MM IIIA pottery deposits from Building 2, which almost exclusively derive from backfill contexts (mainly small-sized sherds of fine pottery in percentages ranging from 62 to 83%).

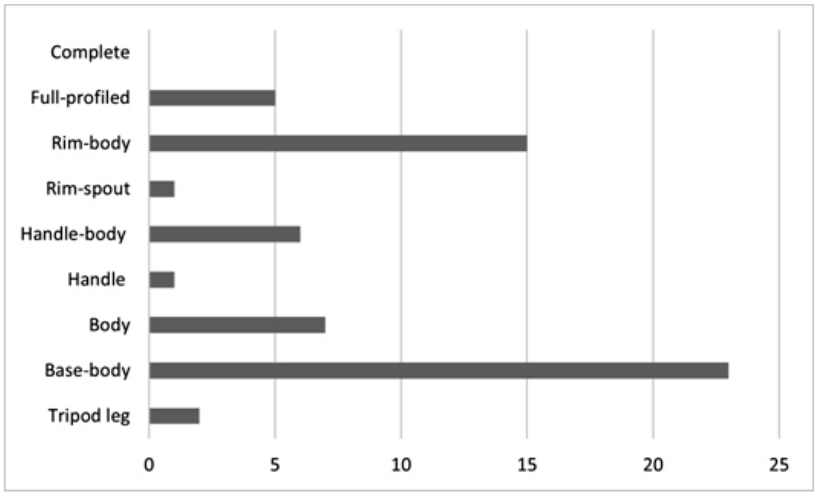


Fig. 4. State of preservation of the catalogued pottery.

above description suggests that all the pottery from Space 109 was secondarily deposited after the cleaning of a complete set of household equipment or room furnishings. Also, quantitative analysis suggests that it concerned only a small group of people. Finally, its finding spot indicates that the pottery must have originated from Building 2 itself, therefore dating its first architectural phase in MM IIB.

All the pottery collected from Space 109 is fragmentary – the catalogued pieces represent 31% of the assemblage (Fig. 4), while the remaining uncatalogued ones are all small to medium body fragments, largely unidentifiable. This is evidence enough to confirm that the sherds were randomly collected and placed in Space 109 as a backfill. But, apart from their functionality percentages outlined above, there are some additional features that may indicate there is more than immediately meets the eye. First, the vessels included in the 'others' category represent a relatively high proportion when compared to the remaining pottery from Space 109 (Fig. 3), as well as the pottery deposits from the rest of the building, where the 'others' category ranges between 1% and 7%. Here they comprise a conical rhyton, a 'libation jug', a *pitharaki*, and a tripod *pyxis* that was intensely burnished on its surface, suggesting that it was a polishing tool in second use, a disk or a plate, a flat four-sided lid or cover, and a pedestalled lamp (Figs 5a-f and 6c). Their types and functions suggest that these vessels would have been used to furnish a room with a special function, a space with ritual connotations. The presence of the stone tripod offering table is particularly supportive of the proposal.

Most of the fragments are from functional and/or distinctive parts of the vessel. There are the spouts and handles of four different bridge-spout jars, the rim-handle of an oval-mouthed amphora, the rim-neck of a belly-handled amphora (*stamnos*) (Fig. 6d), the rim-body of a conical pithos, the three rim-body fragments of medium-sized bowls with wide and flat rim (*lopades*) (Fig. 6e). The same is true of the vessels with a special function: the tip of the conical rhyton (Fig. 5e), the rim-neck of the 'libation jug' (Fig. 6c), the rim-body of the *pitharaki*, (Fig. 5a) the upper part of the pedestalled lamp (Fig. 5d), as well as part of a stand (or a second pedestalled lamp).

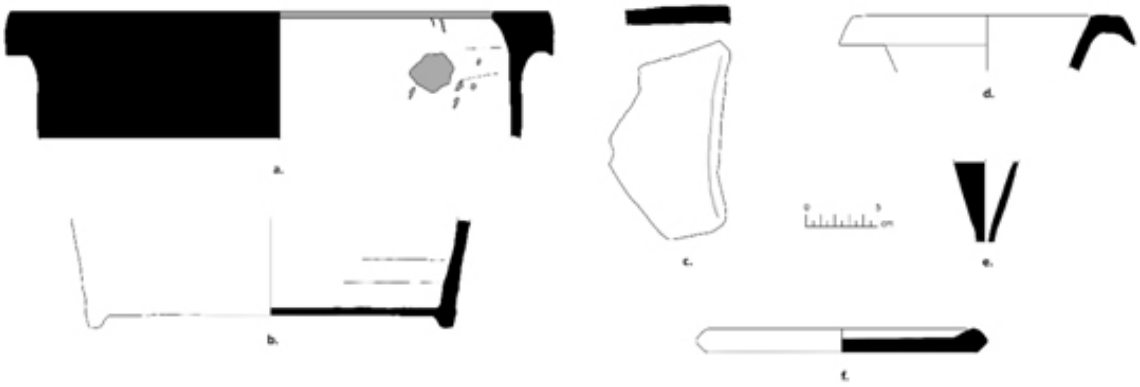


Fig. 5: a. *Pitharaki*, b. tripod *pyxis*, c. lid/cover, d. pedestalled lamp, e. conical rhyton and f. disc/plate (drawings by the author).

Regarding cooking ware, two oval tripod legs from two different cooking pots have been found, as well as the base of a third one in which all three lost leg-attachments scars are preserved. There was also the rim-spout fragment of a medium-sized bowl, again part of the cooking ware. Finally comes the half-preserved lower body and base of a non-Knossian imported jar (Fig. 6g).

Some of the fragments seem to have been selected for their prominent decoration. These comprise the rim-body fragment of a hemispherical bowl with a plastic knob under the rim and the rim-body fragment from a large, fine, thin-walled s-profile cup with white-on-dark running spiral on the body and a thin orange band under the rim. Similarly, there is the rim-body fragment of hole-mouthed jar with black splashes in a row on the shoulder and their trickles at an angle (Fig. 6f) and two small body fragments of two different pithoi, one with disc-shaped relief decoration (perhaps a medallion, but of quick and simple rendering), and the other with a knobbed decoration.



Fig. 6: a. Bell-shaped cup, b. straight-sided cup, c. 'libation jug', d. *stamnos*, e. *lopas*, f. hole-mouthed jar, g. southeastern Aegean jar (photographs by the author).

None of the drinking cups or bowls were found intact or complete. Most are rim-body or base-body fragments, and only three examples have a full profile (Figs 6a-b). These are two small broad handleless cups (or saucers) and a black monochrome ledged-rim bowl of the same type. A tall handleless cup and four bell-shaped cups were found too. The seven straight-sided cups exhibit the same state of fragmentation, as do the four s-profiled cups. It should also be pointed out that despite exhaustive sorting, none of the unrecorded body fragments from the deposit could be associated with the abovementioned pottery.

Concluding remarks

The formation of narrow Space 109 at the southern end of a long corridor was part of the restoration that took place at the beginning of the second architectural phase of Building 2 in MM IIIA. This narrow gap deliberately left between the old wall and the newly constructed one was filled with non-mendable pottery fragments, most probably collected from a room dating to the first occupational phase of the building in MM IIB. There were also a few animal bones, stone tools and building materials. This MM IIB assemblage is best interpreted as a secondary fill, deposited as a single event.

It is not obvious whether the vessels within were deliberately broken, as there is no evidence of intentional fragmentation (Chapman and Gaydarska 2007). The characteristics of most of the fragments, however, suggest that they were selected for their features that were representative of the vases' type or decoration. Furthermore, some of the deposited items, such as the rhyton and the stone offering table, suggest that they were gathered from a room with ritual connotations, a space that could have been used for religious purposes. Ritual objects from the old building were thus incorporated into the new one and were intended to remain unseen behind a staircase. Additionally, several drinking cups and bowls had also been placed within, but these were also broken and could not be restored. Nevertheless, they could represent a feasting ceremony of a small group of attendees that took place elsewhere – perhaps in the same room where the rhyton and offering table came from – and they too were gathered up and redeposited.

The case of Space 109, interpreted as a foundation deposit, presents certain characteristics that differ from the typical form. It is above ground and filled with pottery fragments. Faunal remains and building materials are few, suggesting their rather accidental presence. Although the fragmented state of the preserved pottery could be an argument against intentional deposition, it is proposed here that the assemblage in Space 109 represents a deliberate action undertaken to seal a collection of fragments probably derived from a room of ritual significance, together with the remnants of an eating and drinking event. According to Chapman (2015, 33-34) fragmentary objects which are carefully preserved are intended to produce an enchainment as heirlooms, relics, commemorative items or as tokens. The 'embodiment' of the old into the newly constructed building was intended to enhance and communicate memories, thus creating the building's biography.

In closing, foundation deposits ultimately constitute offering ceremonies seeking longevity and protection of the buildings. They are the act of materializing the primordial need to appease those chthonic forces that man cannot control.

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