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Change and continuity in Prepalatial and Protopalatial funerary practices: the case of the Petras cemetery in Siteia, East Crete

Abstract

This paper investigates aspects of continuity and change in the mortuary record at the Petras cemetery in Siteia, East Crete, in use from EM IB to MM II (ca 2900-1700 BCE). The study focuses on the examination of four variables, ranging from funerary architecture and spatial distribution to the manipulation of the deceased and shifts in ritual practices. Results suggest that burial activity becomes more formalized with the progression of the Early Bronze Age, while burial practices present more elements of continuity than change. A shift in mortuary behaviour is only recognized for a few primary burials excavated in burial structures underneath House Tomb 2. The burials were richly adorned and, in contrast to all other available data, were not disturbed or removed after burial, despite the continuous use of the space for depositions. Changes of this type are often interpreted as a rupture between groups, traditions or beliefs, or as we suggest, should be probably understood as a bonding agent and a place of ancestral worship aiming at the continuity of the community, or that of the group which later constructed House Tomb 2. This continuity of almost 1000 years should not necessarily be interpreted as genetic; rather, it could indicate a claim for illustrious ancestors among the most important of the social groups connected with the palatial administration.

Keywords: change, continuity, mortuary practices, collective representation, house tombs

1. Introduction

The study of change in the Prepalatial and Protopalatial periods in Crete has often been examined in relation to the appearance of "key Protopalatial traits" such as the emergence of state-level organisation and the construction of the first monumental building complexes, known as "palaces" (for a detailed discussion see Schoep, Tomkins and Driessen 2012, 1-31). For many years, Minoan scholars examined the rich Prepalatial funerary record in search of evidence of increasing social complexity, which in turn would support a linear and teleological model of progress from a simple Early Minoan to a more complicated Middle Minoan society (Branigan 1970). The inefficacy, however, of the latter approach did not lie in the search for evidence on

social organisation through the funerary record, but in the perception of change as an abrupt and homogeneous development.

As a result of both recent fieldwork and theoretical advances, over the past two decades it has become clearer on the one hand that the Prepalatial and Protopalatial periods share many more elements of social continuity than differentiation (Haggis 2002, 2007, Relaki 2012, Schoep and Knappett 2004, Tomkins and Schoep 2010), and on the other that archaeologists should strive for a more nuanced and complex understanding of change, which will account for alternate non-anthropocentric ontologies and multiple temporalities (Crellin 2020, 1-23, Lucas 2005). Quoting Crellin (2020, 234), change is constant, messy, complex and relational, since it is produced through the continuous reconfiguration of human and non-human relationships in different places and at different times. Hence, our exploration of change should not be fixed in ascribing a singular moment of change in the past nor in recognizing a single agent.

Bearing this in mind, the present paper discusses both elements of change and continuity in the funerary practices of the Petras cemetery over a period of almost a thousand years, from EM IB to MM II (2900-1700 BCE). The study aims to document changes in mortuary practices and trace possible shifts in the expression of identity and status through the combined and brief analysis of four variables: a) funerary architecture; b) evidence of abandonment or deliberate closure of certain contexts; c) changes in the post-depositional treatment of the deceased; and d) shifts in ritual practices. Material depositions are not included due to space restrictions. This is not by any means an exhaustive study of change, but it complements the existing literature by showing that the community of Petras continued to value collective representation even at the time the palace was founded and beyond, to the end of the Protopalatial period. It should also be stressed that the study is not focused on a straightforward reading of the funerary record, but tries to understand the social strategies that shaped the depositional behaviour, while also recognising temporal complexity and duration.

2. The Petras necropolis

The Petras necropolis lies on the northeast coast of Crete. It was built in proximity to an FN-EM I settlement which was abandoned in EM IB; a new settlement was founded in EM II on the neighbouring hill of Petras (Hill I). The Prepalatial and Protopalatial necropolis and the neighbouring settlement on Hill I remained in use, maintaining inter-visibility, throughout the entire Bronze Age (Tsipopoulou 2017).

The cemetery consists of 29 tombs, either rectangular or of irregular plan (known as House Tombs), a burial rock shelter, a cist tomb, 15 burial structures, and 33 non-burial structures (corridors, large ceremonial areas and periboloi). Despite not being completely excavated, the contexts uncovered thus far clearly demonstrate the existence of idiosyncratic choices in the mortuary arena, since tombs vary considerably in their architecture, depositional pattern and length of use (Tsipopoulou 2017, 2022, forthcoming).

3. The archaeological data

3.1. Place and burial

The present evidence suggests that the south part of the necropolis was the first area to be used for burials. No structure was dated to EM I, but on the west slope of the hill a rock shelter has been found, the deposits of which date from EM IB to MM IIA (Tsipopoulou 2010, 2012a). The rock shelter was used for the secondary burial of human remains which, according to the osteological study, was a single event (Triantaphyllou 2012). It is therefore possible that the bodies were first deposited inside one or more as yet undiscovered tombs, and were later transferred to the rock shelter.

During the transition from EM I to EM II, the visibility of burial practices increased. In EM IIA the first above-ground rectangular tombs (HT 4, 6, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 26) were built in the south part of the necropolis, where two burial structures also existed (Structures 24 and 25). Thus, the first change in the use of the landscape is attested with the establishment of a specific and organised area for depositions. This shift coincided with the abandonment of the settlement on the top of the hill, and the creation of a new settlement on the west hill (Papadatos 2012, Tsipopoulou 2017a, 58). However, and despite their proximity, this change was still part of a continuing perception of the landscape as comprising two separate zones: the world of the living and that of the dead.

Twelve house tombs were used during the early Prepalatial period, all of which are to be found in the south and central part of the plateau. Towards the end of the Prepalatial period, in EM III, new tombs were built on top of existing ones (Tsipopoulou 2022). The tombs were bigger, exhibited complex plans and were all located in the centre of the cemetery (HT3, 5, 64). EM III contexts continued to be used during the MM IA phase, alongside five house tombs to the north (HT 3, 5, 7, 27, 37, 40, 59, 64, 69) and eight burial structures (23, 28, 29, 30, 36, 62, 75, 76). The picture grew more complicated during the period when six tombs (HT 1, 8, 9, 10, 11, 38) of different size and plan were constructed in the north part of the cemetery, in addition to House Tomb 2 located in the south part, and House Tombs 4 and 7 which were expanded with the addition of new rooms. The south part of the necropolis, where burial structures and House Tomb 2 are found, appears to have had a prominent position in the older FN/EM I settlement (Tsipopoulou and Rupp 2019).

The Petras house tombs experienced phases of continuous use as well as of re-use, either in the form of new rooms added to older tombs or of new tombs built next to or on top of older ones. The tombs that were not in use during the next periods were were left intact, however, forming part of the mnemonic landscape. An exception to this practice was the deliberate abandonment and intensive cleaning of certain assemblages. For example, House Tombs 15, 17 and 12 were used for burials during the EM II period. Later, perhaps at the end of EM IIB, House Tomb 15 was partially cleaned of its material, House Tomb 12 was completely cleaned and filled with stones and House Tomb 17 ceased to be used but was left intact (Tsipopoulou 2017c, 2022). This is a unique case for the Petras necropolis, not seen in any other excavated context; apart from a change in practices, it offers useful insights into the variable trajectories of the EM house tombs and their associated social groups.

TABLE 1. SIZE OF PREPALATIAL TOMBS (HT = HOUSE TOMB, R = ROOM)			
TOMB	DATE	SIZE (m^2)	COMMENTS
HT64, R2	EM III-MM IA	2	
HT26	EM IIA	>4.4	below HT17, R2 & 3
HT6	EM II	9.28	
HT27	MM IA	>10.12	below TK11, R1
HT4, Δ1	EM II-MM IB	12.	
HT13	EM II	15.2	
HT15	EM IIA	17.8	
HT7, R1 & 2	EM III-MM IA	20.9	
HT16	EM IIA	>23.3	below HT3
HT17	EM IIA-IIB	>26.47	below HT5
HT14	EM IIA-IIB	28.9	below HT5
HT12	EM IIA	37	
HT3	EM III-MM IA	61.1	
HT5	EM III-M IA	72.3	
HT22	EM IIB	?	below HT1

Around EM III and during the Protopalatial period, the average size of house tombs increased, often measuring more than 60 m^2 (Tables 1 and 2). The Protopalatial tombs demonstrate variability in size and elaboration, which are not always mutually exclusive. For example, the small House Tomb 10, at only 29 m^2, was one of the richest assemblages in the cemetery (Tsipopoulou 2017a, 91). Yet, a similar picture can be obtained by studying the group size held inside the tombs.

TABLE 2. SIZE OF PROTOPALATIAL TOMBS			
TOMB	DATE	SIZE (m^2)	COMMENTS
HT8	MM II	16	
HT10	MM II	29	
HT1	MM IB	40	
HT11	M II 52		
HT2	MM IB - IIB	64	above EM II & MM I pits
HT9	MM II	72	
HT7	MM II	?	
HT35	?	?	below HT7
HT39	?	?	below HT9
HT40	?	?	below HT9

According to Table 3, the size of the population units using the house tombs exhibits high values for the late Prepalatial tombs, while the picture is more diverse and fragmented for the Protopalatial period, since groups and tombs vary in size. As regards the EM I-II assemblages, estimation size is difficult due to the different trajectories of use and frequent cleanings of the tombs (Kiorpe 2023).

TABLE 3. MINIMUM NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS PER STUDIED ASSEMBLAGE

	EM I-MM IB	EM IIA	EM III-MM IA	EM II-MM IB	MM IB	MM II	MNI total
HT2					16		16
HT3			51				51
HT4				25			25
HT5			56				56
HT10						16	16
HT12		1					1
HT15		3					3
Burial rock shelter	165						165
Total	165	4	107	25	16	16	333

3.2. Body and deposition

House tombs are collective deposits, which means that they housed successive inhumations over a long period of time in the same tomb (Schmitt et al. 2018). Bodies were either placed immediately on the floor of the tombs, wrapped in textiles, or in some cases from EM III onwards, they were placed inside burial containers (Schoep 2018). However, manipulation practices were applied to all contexts, from primary burials to disarticulated remains. Manipulation can take several forms and was practiced within or outside the area of original deposition. Idiosyncratic choices are easy to discern, since there is great variability in the use of rooms and the form of depositions, both between synchronous tombs and also within the rooms of the same tomb (Triantaphyllou 2017, Triantaphyllou et al. 2017). Despite variability in choices regarding the disposal of the dead, the treatment of the body was indistinguishable for all age groups and both sexes. A shift in the treatment of the body is only recognized for a few primary burials in Area 9 of House Tomb 2, placed in pits dug in a rock layer naturally formed by a rockslide from the top of Kephala hill.

In Burial Structure 24, the body of an adult individual was placed in extended position inside a pit dug into the rock layer (Fig. 1). The body indicated signs of post-depositional manipulation which took place long after the original burial; the bones may have been fully or partially dry when re-arranged (Kiorpe and Triantaphyllou 2023).



Fig. 1. Burial Structure 24.
Petras excavation archives.



Fig. 2. Burial structure 25.
Petras excavation archives.



Fig. 3. Burial structure 28.
Petras excavation archives.

Another primary pit burial was found in Burial Structure 25 (Fig. 2). Placed in a stone-lined pit, the body belonged to an adult individual, and was left undisturbed despite the use of the space for burials.

To the east, below Rooms 1 and 3 of House Tomb 2, further burial structures were excavated. The remains of a female, a male and two non-adult individuals were excavated in Burial Structure 28 (Fig. 3). Due to lack of space, the bones of the female were re-arranged and piled up to make room for the male individual. This primary pit burial was particularly rich, and had a bronze dagger with a bone handle, a unique find for Petras, placed on top of the left ribcage. This burial was subsequently left intact, despite the continuous use of the space for burials.

Similar observations were made for a male adult individual c. 45 years old, buried in Burial Structure 23, below Room 3 of House Tomb 2. The burial was left intact although the exact same space was used for another burial, belonging to a male individual over 45 years old (Triantaphyllou forthcoming).

The fact that these burials were left intact despite the continuous use of the space for burials may either indicate a change in the treatment of the dead or the last horizon of use and thus the last depositions in each assemblage. House Tomb 17 offers some evidence to support this hypothesis. In this tomb, a primary contracted burial was found in an otherwise empty room (Room 1), while the other rooms (Rooms 2 and 3) in the tomb accommodated large secondary deposits of bones. The tomb was abandoned in EM II; as already noted, the material was left undisturbed (Kiorpe and Triantaphyllou 2023). Indeed, the primary pit burials in question correspond to the last depositions of the group that buried their dead, but the burials are found

in an area with continuous use, and, in contrast to all other available data, did not indicate any clear evidence of manipulation after burial.

3.3. Ritual and commemoration

In MM IB, activity shifted from the house tombs and their adjacent open spaces to two clearly defined open areas in the north and southeast part of the cemetery (Clinton et al. 2020). The discovery of numerous serving and drinking vessels suggests the conspicuous consumption of liquids and food, which, while practiced in earlier periods, now included a larger group of people (Tsipopoulou 2012b, 2017a, c).

Despite the shift towards inclusivity, traces of differentiation or distinction between the social groups using the tombs can be detected in regard to the position and architecture of particular tombs. House Tomb 2 was built during MM IB in the southeastern part of the cemetery, exactly on top of earlier remains (Burial Structures 23, 28, cist tomb), and a formalized ceremonial area, Ceremonial Area 1, was constructed in close association with the former. It is probable that the social group which used the tomb exercised some control or played a special role in the rituals enacted in this area. This hypothesis fits well with the finding of two storage rooms filled with ritual equipment (Tsipopoulou 2017b, 112-113). Apart from its prominent position, House Tomb 2 is a unique tomb for the Petras cemetery not only due to its rich deposits (Tsipopoulou 2012), but also due to its elaborate architecture (Betancourt et al. 2017). However, special architectural arrangements and rich deposits are also attested for House Tomb 10 to the north of the cemetery, which could represent an aspiring social group. This tomb was constructed during MM IIA, in close proximity to Ceremonial Area 2. Its north façade was plastered and its roof was decorated with horns of consecration (Tsipopoulou 2017b, Pearce-Chalikias 2019). Regardless of any attempt at differentiation, greater cooperation between the social groups that used the cemetery can be detected during the Protopalatial period. The latter is showcased in the creation of clearly separated and defined corridors leading to the ceremonial areas, an arrangement that suggests an increased degree of planning and consensus between social units (Tsipopoulou 2017a, 68).

Architecturally speaking, there is clear separation between tombs and ceremonial areas, since no tomb entrance faces any of the courtyards. The rituals performed in these spaces could have been of secular, commemorative or funerary character, despite the fact that funerary rituals continued to be performed inside the house tombs (Tsipopoulou 2012, 117131). Such an example is provided by House Tomb 10, where the traces of a concluding ritual act can be identified from a ritual assemblage made up of a kantharos, two stone vessels, a cup and a stone palette, which were deposited next to secondary piles of bones (Kiorpe and Triantaphyllou 2023)**.** This example seems mainly to have been related to the funerary cycle as it follows the manipulation of human remains, whereas other examples of commemorative rituals not linked to any burial act were also attested at the cemetery, such as the offering of a beaked jug and a conical cup at the burial rock shelter during the LM IB period (Tsipopoulou 2012, 126).

4. Discussion

This brief examination of the evidence allows us to trace temporal and spatial shifts in mortuary practices. During all periods, spatial shifts seem to be determined by practical needs, while burial activity becomes more formalized with the progression of the EBA. While the population units using the tombs cannot be securely determined for the EM I-II periods due to variability in patterns of use and disposal, they seem to be larger during EM III and more fragmented during MM IA-MM II. Greater fragmentation appears in conjunction with the organised open spaces for communal rituals, while the creation of corridors indicates the existence of several groups trying to differentiate themselves and compete with each other.

In spite of changes, continuity and communality are continually expressed through the persistent use of the place, creating a landscape of memory. The place of the living and that of the dead were physically distinct, but these two areas were in constant interaction through the manipulation of human bodies and the enactment of rituals. The repertoire of interactions included different forms of manipulation, which in the long term resulted in the dissolution of individuals and the creation of unindividuated masses of bones, acting as metaphors of a "kin body", the ancestors. Ancestral commemoration could take several forms, from marking the end of a funerary cycle, as seen in House Tomb 10, to paying a visit to an out of use but still respected burial precinct, as in the burial rock shelter. The few examples of richly adorned, primary and, most importantly, undisturbed burials in the broader area of House Tomb 2 may suggest the existence of a founder kin group that was respected through the continuous use of this precinct for burials and the enactment of funerary and/or other rituals at Ceremonial Area 1.

At any rate, the elements of continuity and change discussed in this paper are interrelated. The social groups that used the tombs during the Prepalatial period stressed their collective identity through funerary practices, while the Protopalatial groups seem to have invested in competitive display, with at least one group emphasizing its ancestry and special position throughout both periods. However different from the norm the lavish burial structures were, the people linked to House Tomb 2 chose to project their status through the same arena as the rest of the community. It is thus obvious that the mortuary arena was an inclusive field of discourse which, despite instances of differentiation or status protection, emphasized integration and heterarchy. In any case, through constant discourse with the dead, the Petras people attempted to associate present practices with past ones, stress communality and continuity, and negotiate social roles and relationships in their living community (Kiorpe 2023).

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