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The MM IB foundation of the First Palace at Phaistos: between continuity and discontinuity

ABSTRACT

Despite the continuity observed in some aspects of Phaistian material culture (e.g. ceramics), the MM IB foundation of the First Palace, with its monumental orthostat façade, represents a major change in the history not only of Phaistos, but also of its immediate territory, namely the Ieropotamos Valley. Here we observe a new increase in the use and frequentation of nearby settlements (e.g. Agia Triada) and a new investment in the funerary landscape, namely the ex-novo foundation of the Kamilari necropolis and the construction of tholos tomb B at Agia Triada.

In this paper, I will present the elements of both continuity and discontinuity visible in the archaeological evidence from the latest Prepalatial (MM IA) to the beginning of the Protopalatial period (MM IB), thus showing the role/impact of the foundation of the palace in the MM IB Ieropotamos Valley and beyond.

KEYWORDS: Minoan Crete, Phaistos, Messara Plain, Protopalatial period, Minoan palaces, continuity and discontinuity, palace foundation, Middle Minoan IB, regional dynamics

INTRODUCTION

The 13th Cretological Congress (Agios Nikolaos 2022) was dedicated to ruptures and discontinuities in the archaeological evidence. Within a workshop on the Ieropotamos Valley organized by Pietro Militello, I presented a paper dedicated to reviewing one of the major changes in the long history of the Phaistos settlement, namely the foundation of the First Palace. What did this foundation mean in the history of the settlement? And what changes occurred in the wider area of the Ieropotamos Valley?

Recent studies have suggested that the First Minoan palaces are architectural developments with their roots in the previous Early Bronze Age. Thus, the emergence of the first palaces in MM IB cannot be considered a sudden event. Interpreted as complexes developed over a long period of time, they utilized the lines of both earlier structures – sometimes retained within the

masonry of the future palatial walls – and open spaces, such as the central and western courts, which served as stages for communal commensality from the Early Bronze Age, if not earlier.¹

In this paper I want to focus on the changes that occurred at the Phaistos settlement and in its immediate territory at the time the First Palace was founded in MM IB. I will present the elements of continuity and those of discontinuity from the latest Prepalatial (i.e. MM IA) until the beginning of the Protopalatial period (i.e. MM IB), visible in the archaeological evidence: first in the settlement of Phaistos, then in the Ieropotamos Valley, and finally in the Phaistos region.

FROM MM IA TO MM IB: BETWEEN CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY IN THE PHAISTOS SETTLEMENT

Phaistos is a multi-phase site characterized by a long history, going back to the Late Neolithic period (Todaro 2020). It is not anything new to point out that at Phaistos, as at Knossos (Tomkins 2012), the Central Court existed in some manner as early as the Final Neolithic period, and that it was used as a gathering place for communal commensality (Todaro 2012). Another crucial phase in the Prepalatial history of Phaistos is EM III, when large-scale levelling and terracing operations occurred on the site for the creation of new buildings and open courts – both the central and the western courts of the future palace – to serve communal ceremonies, a function that was also to be retained in the succeeding MM IA phase (Todaro 2012, 2020). Continuity between the MM IA and MM IB phases is thus best embodied in the same open courts employed to stage communal ceremonies with the aggregative function that had characterized all the Prepalatial phases. It is, however, more difficult to understand whether the architectural remains of MM IA, such as the red-stucco floor buildings identified by Simona Todaro (Todaro 2012), were positioned exactly in the areas of the future palace.

Concerning pottery production, it is important to point out that the Potters' Quarter (also known as the Artisans' Quarter) identified to the west of the Middle West Court of the First Palace (Todaro 2009) was continuously in use from the Prepalatial through the Protopalatial period. Strong continuity is visible in the use of the same fabrics adopted for pottery production at Phaistos. These fabrics, which are local and typical of the Messara Plain, are fine buff, tempered buff, and semi-coarse buff, as well as red semi-fine/coarse non-calcareous fabrics mainly used for cooking wares (Betancourt 1990, 5-11). Petrographic analyses have also shown that the fine buff tempered fabric used to produce the well-known Fine Painted Ware of EM IIA is the same as that used to produce the famous Kamares Ware (Wilson and Day 1994; Day et al. 2006). The latest Prepalatial period at Phaistos is represented by pottery groups that are kindred to those of the earliest Protopalatial period, both typologically and stylistically. Good examples are offered by the Late MM IA and Early MM IB tumblers with flaring rim and open-spouted jars (Todaro 2005, 43, fig. 8; Caloi 2009, 395, figs. 5-6), as well as by the Early MM IB handleless conical cups (Caloi 2013, figs. 25-26, pls. XXII-XXIII), made using the same manufacturing technique adopted in the previous MM IA phase (Todaro 2017).

¹ For recent works on Knossos: see Tomkins 2012; MacDonald 2012; Knappett, Macdonald and Mathioudaki 2023; for Phaistos, see Todaro 2012; Militello 2012; Caloi 2015; for Malia see: Devolder and Caloi 2019. See also Schoep et al. 2012; Driessen and Letesson 2023.



Fig. 1. The First Palace of Phaistos: the MM IB South-West Building, with its orthostat façade facing the Lower West Court (from the northwest).

Despite these elements of continuity, from MM IA to MM IB there are also several elements of discontinuity visible in the core of Phaistos. This is the only palace on Crete to preserve architectural remains with associated deposits belonging to each phase of the First Palace period (i.e. MM IB, MM IIA, and MM IIB), thus allowing one to understand the layout of the palace in the individual phases of the Protopalatial period (Caloi 2015; 2021).

One strong factor of discontinuity is represented by the foundation of the three-floored South-West Building (Carinci and La Rosa 2007, 82-86) with its well-preserved orthostat façade (Fig. 1), the paving of the Lower West Court (Piazzale LXX) facing the building and the construction of its northern limit (Bastione I).

Together with the foundation of the South-West Building goes the paving of the ramp – still visible today – which connects the lower terrace with the middle terrace at Phaistos (Carinci and La Rosa 2007; Caloi 2021, fig. 4). On the middle terrace, the paving of the Middle West Court was laid down in MM IB. Likewise, the first construction in the court of the North-West Building was hypothesized by Vincenzo La Rosa to have been laid in MM IB on the basis of some foundation blocks found beneath the later LM IB façade of the palace (La Rosa 2004, 626-627). It was only in MM IIA that the construction of the still visible orthostat façade of the North-West Building appeared, now aligned with that of the South-West Building (Caloi 2015; 2021). The use of the Middle West Court as a place for the performance of communal ceremonies is supported by the dumps of ceramic material – mainly cups and spouted jars – found to the west of the Middle West Court (Caloi 2013).

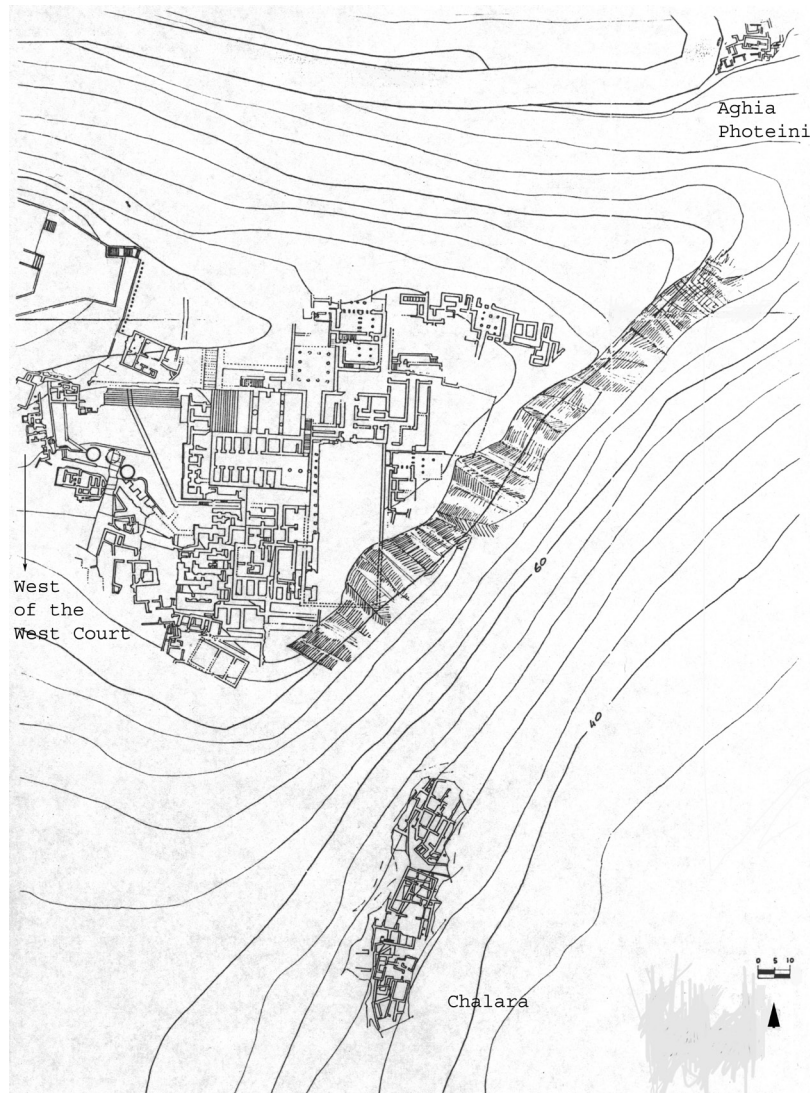


Fig. 2. The quarters built in MM IB to the west of the Palace's West Court, and on the slopes of the palace hill, Chalara and Agia Fotini respectively.

The Central Court was probably paved in MM IB, as testified by the latest fragments found beneath the slabs (Carinci and La Rosa 2007, 19-20). The foundation deposits found beneath the levels of the Neopalatial rooms (Rooms 11 and 13) to the west of the Central Court also date to MM IB Early (La Rosa 2004; see also Caloi 2009). They find a further counterpart in the MM IB foundation deposit of Corridor III/7, which has been interpreted as a building deposit and is one of the numerous bench deposits constructed in the palatial site to contain paraphernalia of feasting events connected to building activities (Todaro 2013, 96; Caloi 2012, 2019).

New constructions dating to MM IB are attested on the slopes of the palace hill too. New houses were built in the terraces located just to the west of the West Court (Rooms C, CIII, CI, IC α and IC β : Caloi 2013), and in more peripheral areas, like Chalara (with Rooms ζ^1 to ζ^5 : Caloi 2011c), on the southeast hillside, and Agia Fotini (with Rooms α and β : Caloi 2005; 2011c), on the northeast slope (Fig. 2).

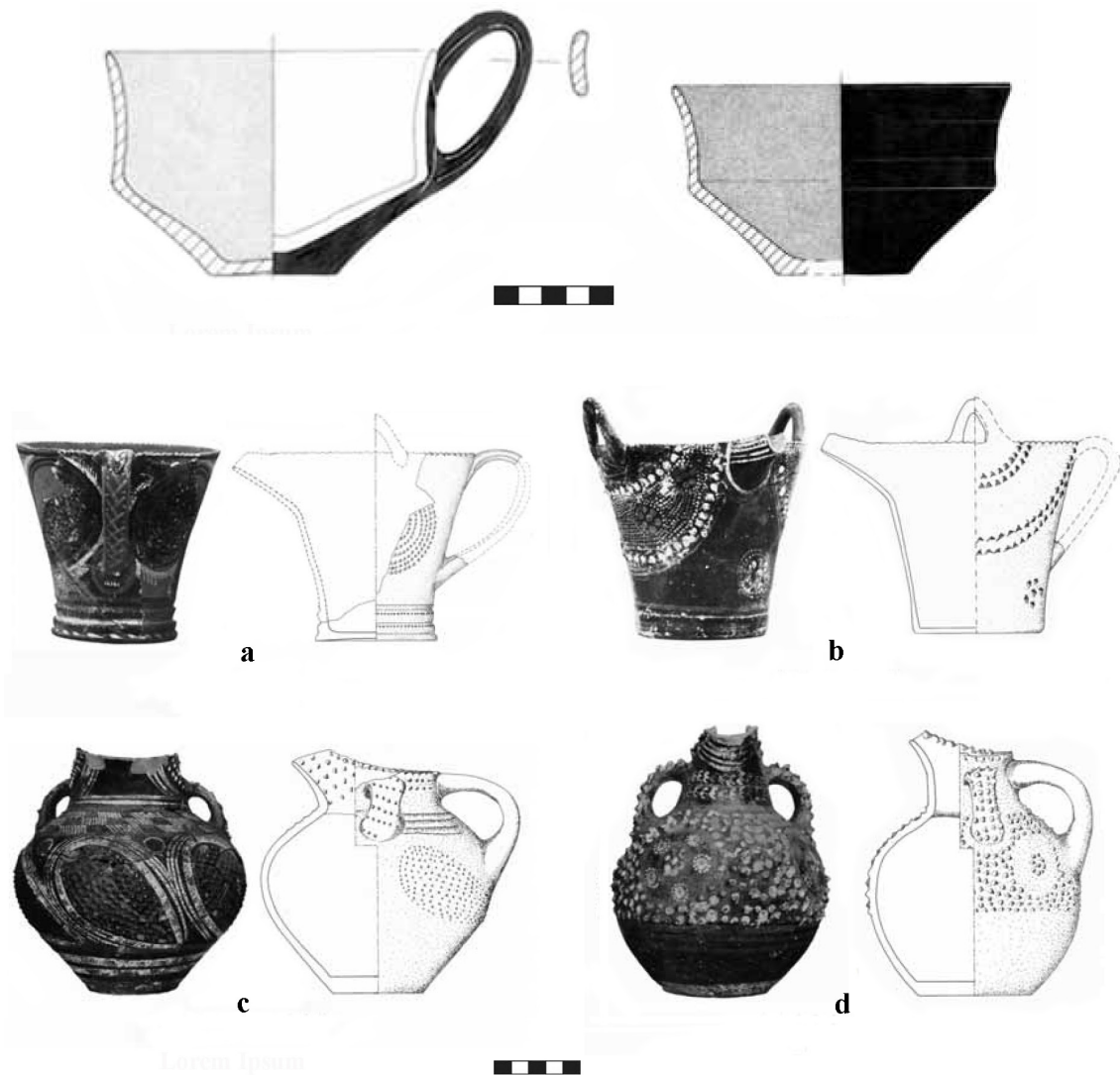


Fig. 3. MM IB pottery from Phaistos: carinated cups in Monochrome Ware from the MM IB dump in the Quarter West of the West Court (Caloi 2013, fig. 14, nn. 77, 80); two-handled bucket jars (a-b) and three-handled jugs (c-d) in Barbotine Ware from the MM IB deposit of the palatial South-West Building (Caloi 2009, fig. 10i-o).

With the construction of the palace, the area surrounding it was occupied by new houses, possibly with a new residential function.

Concerning the pottery, MM IB output is characterized by the adoption of the potter's wheel (Caloi 2011), and the production of Kamares vases with polychrome and barbotine decoration (Caloi 2009; 2023; 2024), most of which imitate metallic prototypes, such as carinated cups with strap handles, two-handled bucket jars, and three-handled jugs (Fig. 3). Moreover, in MM IB a new ceremonial set began to be used in the communal consumptions performed in the palace's western court(s): it was composed of a handleless conical cup and an open-spouted jar (Caloi 2015; 2023).

FROM MM IA TO MM IB: BETWEEN CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY IN THE IEROPOTAMOS VALLEY

Outside the settlement of Phaistos, it appears that the landscape changed in MM IB. Together with the gradual development of the Agia Triada settlement, we observe the extension of the Agia Triada necropolis, and the ex-novo foundation of the tholos tomb cemetery at Kamilari.

The first habitation to be considered here is that of Agia Triada, where La Rosa's excavations (La Rosa 1977; 1979-1980) revealed the existence of Protopalatial structures and fills beneath the Late Bronze Age structures. According to Filippo Carinci (Carinci 1999, 123; 2003), the first nucleus of the Protopalatial settlement was on the western slopes of the Agia Triada hill, between the Sacello and the Bastione. The study by Giorgia Baldacci has now confirmed what was already proposed by Carinci (Carinci 2003), namely that at Agia Triada the Protopalatial settlement gradually developed from MM IB through MM IIB (Baldacci forthcoming). In MM IB, in particular, the construction of new habitation units is noted beneath the LM III Sacello and the LM I Bastione; furthermore, a dramatic rise in the quantities of MM IB pottery fills is observed (Baldacci forthcoming). A stratified MM IB deposit with decorated handleless conical cups and pouring vases, accompanied by deliberately fragmented bull figurines (La Rosa 1979-1980, 60-67; Caloi 2009), has recently been interpreted as a foundation deposit of one of the MM IB houses of Agia Triada (Baldacci 2014). This deposit, among others, shows that the pottery consumed in the settlement in MM IB is very similar in typology and decorative systems to that of contemporary Phaistos (Baldacci 2024).

Likewise, the nearby necropolis of Agia Triada underwent some modifications in MM IB, such as the foundation of a second tholos tomb (tholos B), the continued use of tholos tomb A, founded in EM II, and a marked increase in the use of some annexes to the south of tholos tomb A, known as the Camerette (Cultraro 2000, 2003; Carinci 2004). These annexes, in use from MM IA, were found full of MM IB elaborate jugs with relief decoration (barbotine jugs), which are of the same type as those retrieved from the settlement of Phaistos (Caloi 2011b).

Together with the construction of the second tholos tomb at Agia Triada, there is the ex-novo foundation of the Kamilari cemetery, with the construction of the first and larger tholos tomb among the three built in the Protopalatial period (Girella and Caloi 2019). Both the new constructions at Agia Triada and Kamilari in MM IB again testify to a long and persistent funerary tradition in the Messara Plain: in this same phase, however, most tholos tombs ceased to be built and many of them stopped being used as well (Caloi 2011b). I have already observed elsewhere that the tholos tomb cemeteries of Kamilari and Agia Triada show strong similarities in their foundation date, in the architectural technique used in MM IB, and in the rituals performed – libations rather than drink consumption (Caloi 2011b; 2018).

BEYOND THE IEROPOTAMOS VALLEY...

If we move outside the Ieropotamos Valley, the wider territory underwent changes in MM IB as well. Together with Agia Triada, the settlement of Kommos increased in size and in pottery

depositions in MM IB. The earliest architectural remains of Kommos, scattered on the Central Hillside, dated to MM IB (Wright 1996, 140-141), while it seems that in Prepalatial times the site was at best sporadically inhabited (Betancourt 1990, 25-28, 57-64). The MM IB pottery from the Central Hillside and from the construction fills of Building AA in the Southern Area of the site shares the same typological and stylistic characteristics as that from Phaistos (Van de Moortel 2006b).

Both Agia Triada and Kommos gradually developed throughout MM IIB, when the latter became an important harbor, as testified by the first imports from the Eastern Mediterranean.

In the publication of the survey around Phaistos, Vance Watrous counts the ex-novo foundation of a few hamlets in MM IB (Watrous et al. 2004). The same period sees the first systematic use of the Kamares Cave, located on the southern slopes of Mount Ida and clearly visible from the Central Court in the palace at Phaistos. A study conducted by Aleydis Van de Moortel (2006a) has shown a strong increase in the number of vases deposited in the Kamares Cave from MM IA to MM IB: from a minimum number of 10 vases in MM IA we pass to a minimum number of 150 vases in MM IB (Van de Moortel 2011). This exponential increase in pottery depositions reveals that the use of the cave was closely connected with the foundation of the palace (Van de Moortel 2011). In fact, it is the only place that shows vase types otherwise attested only at MM IB Phaistos, such as the globular open-spouted jars (Caloi 2007, 2015; see also Van de Moortel 2024).

Unlike other areas in Crete, where funerary contexts were more or less abandoned with the foundation of the First Palaces, in the immediate surroundings of Phaistos in MM IB we observe a new investment in funerary contexts – with the ex-novo foundation of Kamilari and the extension of Agia Triada – and a continuous use of tholos tomb cemeteries apparently sharing both the ceramic developments and ritual performances attested at Phaistos, such as Apesokari (Vavouranakis et al. 2024; Flouda 2023) and Porti (Flouda 2024).

A new investment in the Amari Valley, which connects the Messara Plain to the northern part of the island, is visible in MM IB. We observe the new foundation of the settlements of Monastiraki and Apodoulou along one of the communication routes between the southern and northern parts of the island. Both sites were founded in MM I and collapsed at the end of MM IIB (Kanta 1999; 2012; Civitillo and Greco 2003) and both show strong connections with Phaistos, as if they were satellite settlements of the palatial site.

That the First Palace of Phaistos was founded in MM IB and continued to grow and develop until the end of the Protopalatial period – with a marked change in MM IIA (Caloi 2021) and then monumentalisation in MM IIB (Caloi 2018) – is no new discovery. This gradual development does not diminish the importance of the construction of something new, monumental, and innovative like the MM IB orthostat façade of the South-West Building with its associated court. The new paving of all the courts in the MM IB palace, together with the increase in pottery depositions, seems to hint at an increasing use of open areas to serve communal consumption, which involved the above-mentioned set of plain handleless cup and decorated open-spouted jar.

Outside the palatial core, the increasing number of houses built on the palace hillsides (e.g. Chalara and Agia Fotini) finds a counterpart in the new settlement pattern in the immediate

surroundings of Phaistos, where in MM IB we observe: (1) the ex-novo foundation and/or new frequentation of sites, whether settlements (e.g. small hamlets: see Watrous et al. 2004), funerary complexes (Kamilari) and cult places (Kamares Cave); (2) the extension and change in the occupation pattern of villages, such as Agia Triada and Kommos; (3) the foundation of new villages along the connection route of the Messara Plain with the northern part of the island (Monastiraki and Apodoulou in the Amari Valley).

It is likely that with the foundation of the First Palace in MM IB, the communities living nearby or in its immediate region were integrated into a more formalized and institutionalized system than in previous Prepalatial times. This involved the appropriation of specific features (e.g. bench deposits: Caloi 2019) and ritual practices, which began to be imitated and emulated by the nearby sites (see Caloi 2019; 2023). This process of emulation of palatial practices/rituals started in MM IB, but then gradually increased in MM IIA and in MM IIB. For example, the above-mentioned new ceremonial set used in the palatial consumption activities began to be adopted in several sites, such as Kommos, Kamilari, and also Apesokari (Caloi 2023; Vavouranakis et al. 2024).

In the Protopalatial period Phaistos is the catalyst, lying at the center of a regional, integrated system (Militello 2012; Caloi 2015), which arose in MM IB with the emergence of the First Palace and disintegrated at the end of MM IIB with the palace's collapse. This likely explains why many above-mentioned sites in the Messara Plain and the Amari Valley went out of use with the collapse of the Phaistos Palace at the end of MM IIB. Likewise, it is no coincidence that the great watershed in the western Messara Plain occurred immediately afterwards, in MM III, when no functioning palace was present in the territory until at least LM IB.

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