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The ‘Shrines phase’ at Phaistos: a summary of the architectural structures

ABSTRACT

The end of the Protopalatial period in Crete (Middle Minoan IIB: 1750-1700 BC) is characterised at some Minoan sites by a destruction horizon. At Phaistos, in south-central Crete, two distinct architectural phases associated with the ultimate stage of the First Palace were identified by V. La Rosa and F. Carinci. These are known as the ‘*Kouloures* phase’ (MM IIB Late) and the ‘*Sacelli* or Shrines phase’ (MM IIB Final) and they were separated by a partial destruction of the Palace. During my PhD project at Ca’ Foscari University in Venice (2018-2022), I studied the pottery deposits from the southern sector of the South-Western palatial Building. Some of these deposits are linked to the architectural ‘Shrines phase’. In this context, I offer an overview of the key features of the ‘Shrines phase’, summarizing the architectural structures that scholars have associated with it. This summary includes their locations, primary interior layouts, and associated findings. Furthermore, I will provide functional interpretations of these structures based on the discovered artefacts and discuss potential research directions.

KEYWORDS: Phaistos, First Palace, MM IIB, architecture, ‘Shrines phase’

The First Palace of Phaistos, located in south-central Crete (Fig. 1), is laid out on three terraces, the upper, the middle and the lower. During the Protopalatial phase (Middle Minoan IB: 19th century BC-Middle Minoan IIB: late 18th century BC), this site was also characterized by a North-Western palatial Building facing the Middle West Court I on the middle terrace; by a South-Western palatial Building with the Lower West Court LXX facing it on the lower terrace; by the Central Court XXXIII/40, and finally some houses to the west of the Middle West Court I

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Fig. 1. Map of Crete (by the author).

(Fig. 2).¹ The North-Western palatial Building was discovered by L. Pernier between 1900 and 1909,² whereas the South-Western palatial Building was unearthed by D. Levi from 1951 to 1957.³

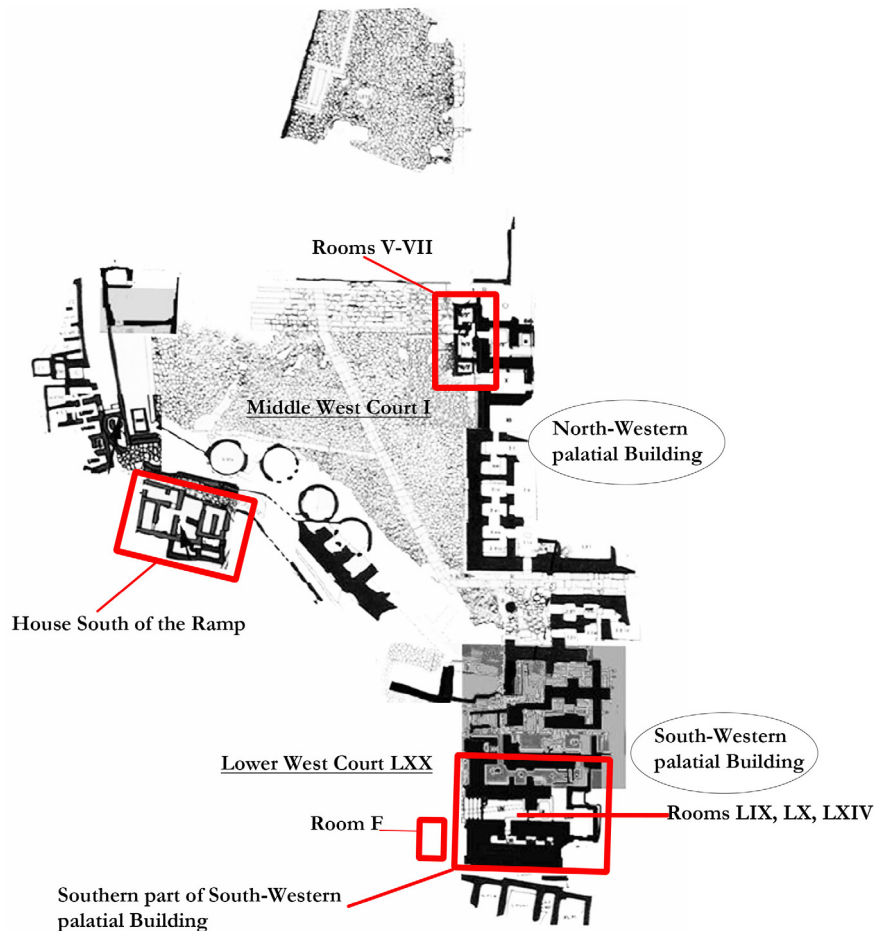


Fig. 2. Plan of Phaistos Palace during the "Shrines phase" showing the architectural structures discussed in the text (modified by the author based on Carinci 2014, fig. 5).

¹ Militello (2012), 237-240.

² Pernier (1935); Levi (1976), 1; La Rosa (2010), 582.

³ Levi (1976), *passim*.



Fig. 3. Rooms V-VII from the northwest (by D. G. Aquini).

On the basis of the chronology, derived from the analysis of ceramic deposits and the interpretation of the superposition of the structures unearthed in the Middle West Court I, F. M. Carinci and V. La Rosa established in an article in 2007 a sequence of four architectural phases that span the entirety of the Protopalatial period: the 'Baetyl phase' (MM IB), the 'Lustral bath (*Vasca XXX*) phase' (MM II Early), the '*Kouloures* phase' (MM IIB Late), and the 'Shrines phase' (MM IIB Final).⁴ The two scholars used the term *Sacelli* (= Shrines) to refer to three rooms (V-VII) built against the orthostat façade of the North-Western palatial Building, near Room VIII (Fig. 3), interpreted by Pernier as a *Sacello*.⁵

According to the two scholars, two of these phases date to MM IIB and were separated by a partial destruction of the Palace: the '*Kouloures* phase' and the 'Shrines phase'.⁶ During the first phase, the *Kouloures* (i.e. large underground structures with a circular plan) and the raised walkways situated to the north of *Kouloures* were constructed on Middle West Court I.⁷

In the subsequent phase, during a brief period of reconstruction between two successive seismic events, some architectural changes were implemented. On Middle West Court I,⁸ three

⁴ Carinci – La Rosa (2007), 46-88.

⁵ Pernier (1935), 196.

⁶ For an overview of the four architectural phases see also Caloi (2018), 21-22, 23-25.

⁷ Carinci – La Rosa (2007), 84-86.

⁸ Carinci – La Rosa (2007), 86.

rooms (V-VII) were constructed against the orthostat façade of the North-Western palatial Building. In the area situated between Middle West Court I and Lower West Court LXX, specifically to the south of the ramp connecting the two courts, the initial layout of a structure known as the House South of the Ramp was arranged.⁹ Scholars have associated additional architectural modifications with the 'Shrines phase', which took place on Lower West Court LXX. This includes the renovation of the southern sector of the South-Western palatial Building¹⁰ and the construction of Room F,¹¹ adjacent to the orthostat façade of the South-Western palatial Building.

Detailed descriptions of the architectural structures associated with the 'Shrines phase' will now be provided, offering concise information about their locations, interior features, and related discoveries. These structures comprise the following: Rooms V-VII, the House South of the Ramp, Room F, and the southern sector of the South-Western palatial Building.

1) ROOMS V-VII

Rooms V-VII (Fig. 2), were discovered, excavated, and published by Pernier.¹² In addition, to the east of these, doorways to two pre-existing rooms (VIII and X) were opened by removing of some orthostats.¹³ Pernier defined only Room VIII as a shrine, whereas Rooms V-VII were described as additional external rooms, and Room IX as a vestibule.¹⁴ Moreover, it was emphasised that to the north-east of Shrine V was a large open hearth, called *Fossa dei Sacrifici*. This is a rectangular-shaped cavity cut into the rock, with a central hemispherical depression.¹⁵ Inside this cavity, in addition to burnt animal bones, ashes, and charcoal, there were pottery vessels, jars, and stone objects.¹⁶ According to some scholars, this arrangement served as an outdoor space for sacrifices, connected to Rooms V and VI and Middle West Court I.¹⁷ However, according to others, it was a hearth used as a source of heat, light, and for cooking activities, without any cultic connotation.¹⁸ Taking into consideration the entirety of the described space, the Shrines Complex is usually interpreted as cult space¹⁹ and was used by small elite groups with refined details, being characterized by alabaster-gypsum slabs and a good number of stone vessels.²⁰

Room V (Fig. 3) is the northernmost of the three so-called Shrines, aligned north-south, and is located to the south of the *Fossa dei Sacrifici*, and to the east of the *Gradinata Teatrale* (i.e. a

⁹ Carinci (2001); Carinci – La Rosa (2001), 523; La Rosa (2002), 660, 743; Carinci – La Rosa (2007), 86; Carinci – La Rosa (2013), 108.

¹⁰ Carinci– La Rosa (2001), 523; Carinci (2006), 25; Carinci (2011), 21, n. 25.

¹¹ Carinci (2013), 247.

¹² Pernier (1935), 195-238, figs. 84, 90, 92.

¹³ Pernier (1935), 195; Banti (1951), 575.

¹⁴ Pernier (1935), 195-199.

¹⁵ Pernier (1935), 207, fig. 90.

¹⁶ Pernier (1935), 207.

¹⁷ Banti (1951), 575-577; Gesell (1987), 124.

¹⁸ Metaxa-Muhly (1984), 110.

¹⁹ Gesell (1985), 9-11.

²⁰ Carinci (2014), 44-47.

large staircase consisting of 9 steps made of limestone slabs), the northern boundary of Middle West Court I. The room can be accessed through an entrance with two limestone slab steps on the southern side, from both Middle West Court I and Room VI. It measures approximately 3 x 3 meters and was constructed partly using stones and partly cut directly into the rock; the floor was made of clay and lime. Inside, along the southern wall, there is a platform (0.60 meters in height), likely used for grinding purposes, and in the northwestern corner remains a portion of a bench, 0.26 meters in height and 0.30 meters wide, again cut from the rock.²¹ In V, only a few vessels were found: two straight-sided cups, a rounded cup, a stamnoid jar, a brazier and two small stone vessels.²²

Room VI (Fig. 3) is located to the south of Room V. The room is open to the northwest and can be accessed from Middle West Court I. From VI it is possible to easily reach Shrine V to the north, and Rooms VIII and IX just to the east. The room is rectangular, measuring 3.5 x 3 meters, and its walls are constructed of stone and earth, covered with plaster. Along the eastern wall there is a platform with three circular concavities (0.25 meters in height), interpreted as a space for accommodating vessels due to their concave base profiles. Adjacent to the bench on the north side there is a rectangular basin made of vertically placed limestone slabs, with a depth of 0.34-0.37 meters. On the western wall there is a bench made of stone and earth, with its upper surface covered by limestone and schist slabs. The floor is made of polygonal limestone and schist slabs, originally plastered, with a drainage channel for the disposal of water in the southwest corner.²³ Within Room VI were four stone vessels – three bowls and a jug – alongside two ceramic vessels, a fruit-stand and a jug.²⁴

Room VII is the smallest of the three ‘Shrines’ and is situated to the south of Room VI, sharing a dividing wall with it, and to the northwest of the adjacent Room X. Accessible from Middle West Court I through a small entrance to the southeast, the Room VII measures 2 x 3 meters, has a trapezoidal shape, and is not connected to the others (Fig. 3). The walls are constructed from roughly shaped small stones covered with plaster, and the floor is made up of layers of lime.²⁵ The room was found to contain a stone palette, a stone mortar with a pestle, a rounded cup, a jug, an amphoriskos, part of a fruit-stand and a tripod cooking pot.²⁶

In summary, Rooms V-VII are located on the northeast side of Middle West Court I, in close proximity to the so-called *Scalinata Teatrale* and the *Fossa dei Sacrifici*, and they are connected to Rooms VIII, IX and X. They share the use of the western orthostat wall of the North-Western palatial Building as their eastern wall, as well as the building technique of using roughly squared small stones arranged in parallel rows with a certain degree of regularity. The interior

²¹ Pernier (1935), 187, 205.

²² Pernier (1935), 219-220, figs. 88, 94, 95:3, 96, 97, pl. XXI:a.

²³ Pernier (1935), 201-203.

²⁴ Pernier (1935), 221-222, figs. 98, 99, 100, pl. XXII:a-b.

²⁵ Pernier (1935), 199.

²⁶ Pernier (1935), 223-225, fig. 101, pls. XXIII, XXIV:a.

arrangements suggest that there were small spaces for food preparation, as indicated by the presence of supporting platforms and low benches, which could serve both as seating and for placing objects on.²⁷ The vessels discovered within these three rooms, which are linked to the phase of their use, specifically denoted as the 'Shrines phase', seem to be related to food processing and beverage consumption. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the interpretation of cult rooms provided by scholars, it is essential to analyse the contexts and material associations of the adjacent rooms as well – in this case Rooms VIII, IX, and X. Objects with potential cultic significance have been discovered in these rooms, such as the large offering table and the triton shell in Shrine VIII,²⁸ as well as the stone bowl adorned with bird-shaped engravings in Room IX.²⁹ The three small adjunct chambers against the orthostats (V-VII) could be interpreted as functional spaces in relation to the three inner chambers (VIII-X).

2) THE HOUSE SOUTH OF THE RAMP

The House South of the Ramp, as the name describes, is located to the south of the ramp connecting Middle West Court I with Lower West Court LXX, and to the southwest of Middle West Court I (Fig. 2). The House was discovered during the 1964-1965 excavations by Levi,³⁰ and further investigations were conducted during the 2000-2002 seasons led by La Rosa.³¹ On the basis of some ceramic fragments dated to MM II found in two foundation trenches, La Rosa dated the first layout of the House to the 'Shrines phase'.³² In all probability the house originally consisted of six rooms (LXXXVI, LXXXVII, LXXXIX, XC, XCI, XCII), which were modified in subsequent phases and had additional ones added (LXXXVIII, XCIII, XCVI).³³ Access to the structure was possible through entrances on the ground floor, and the presence of an upper floor is plausible.³⁴ The House was built using roughly chiselled stones of various dimensions arranged in relatively parallel rows, and the floors were generally made of earth or plastered.³⁵ The structure was interpreted as an aristocratic residence not only due to the presence of a large room (LXXIX, measuring 5.30 x 4.90 meters) but also because of the quality of the pottery found in a test pit beneath the floor of the area of Room XCVI. Nonetheless, no destruction levels dating to the 'Shrines phase' have been detected that would provide insights into the function of the house during this phase.³⁶

²⁷ Baldacci (2015), 100.

²⁸ Pernier (1935), 229 fig. 106, 230, 215.

²⁹ Pernier (1935), fig. 113 a-b.

³⁰ Levi (1976), 490.

³¹ La Rosa (2002), 635-636.

³² La Rosa (2002), 660-661, 669-670; see references at note 9.

³³ La Rosa (2002), 660-661.

³⁴ La Rosa (2002), 660.

³⁵ Levi (1976), 489-505.

³⁶ La Rosa (2002), 660.



Fig. 4. Room F from the northwest (by the author).

3) ROOM F

Room F was identified by Levi and dated to the ‘Proto-Hellenic’ period, similar to other structures located above Lower West Court LXX and the South-Western palatial Building.³⁷ During the 2013 season, Carinci conducted investigations in the area of Room F³⁸ and recognized that it resembled the “Shrines” of the North-Western palatial Building in form, position, and likely function.³⁹ According to Carinci, Room F was built during the ‘Shrines phase’, which involved the construction of a small structure (2.8 x 3.3 m) against the southern sector of the orthostat façade of the South-Western palatial Building. This structure exhibits a rectangular shape and was assembled using rows of irregular small stones bound together with clay mortar, along with large square blocks at the corners (Fig. 4). The structure is situated to the southwest of the access staircase leading to one of the rooms comprising the southern part of the South-Western palatial Building, specifically Room LIX (Fig. 5). It is plausible that this structure, likely comprised of two rooms, could have been accessed from the northeast corner, in proximity to the orthostat façade.⁴⁰

The pottery associated with the use of Room F has only undergone preliminary analysis, resulting in limited information about what this room was used for.⁴¹ Based on current knowledge, one could hypothesize that similar to Rooms V-VII, it might have served as an adjunct space for the innermost room, namely Room LIX, and could possibly have played a similar role or been part of the same sphere of activity as the structures referred to as the “Shrines”.

³⁷ Levi (1958), 265-267.

³⁸ Carinci (2013), 232-238.

³⁹ Carinci (2013), 247.

⁴⁰ Carinci (2013), 233, 237-238.

⁴¹ Aluia (2017).

4) THE SOUTHERN SECTOR OF THE SOUTH-WESTERN PALATIAL BUILDING

As previously mentioned, the South-Western palatial Building in the Palace, located on Lower West Court LXX and approximately 6 meters lower in elevation than Middle West Court I,⁴² was excavated by Levi.⁴³ Starting from the new cycle of investigations initiated in 2000, further studies and in-depth research were conducted.⁴⁴ In a 2011 article, Carinci grouped the rooms of the South-Western palatial Building into three sectors based on the internal walls: the northern sector includes Rooms L, IL, XXVII-XXVIII; the central sector comprises rooms LI, LIII, LIV, LV, and LXII; and the southern sector encompasses rooms LVIIIa, LVIIIb, LVIIIc, LVIIId, LVIIIe, LIX, LX, LXIV, LXI, LXIII, LXV.⁴⁵ According to Carinci, the northern part of the South-Western palatial Building became unusable due to partial destruction after the '*Kouloures* phase', with only the southern sector (Fig. 2) remaining in use during the later '*Shrines* phase' after undergoing a renovation of the spaces.⁴⁶ The rooms in this sector, also referred to as Block C,⁴⁷ are arranged into three west-east groups, from north to south: LVIIIa, LVIIIb, LVIIIc, LVIIId, LVIIIe; LIX, LX, LXIV; and LXI, LXIII, LXV. Focusing on the central sets of rooms, the main architectural modifications concerning these spaces comprise the installation of a staircase in Room LIX, accessible through an opening in the orthostat façade, the renovation of Room LX (3.80 x 2.85 m), and the construction of a storage room known as Room LXIV (3.5 x 3.55 m).⁴⁸

Room LIX (Fig. 5) is accessible from Lower West Court LXX via the aforementioned staircase, connecting with Room LX via two steps on the eastern side, as well as with Room LXI on the southern side. LIX has an elongated rectangular shape (7.65 x 2.75 m) and the floor consists of alabaster slabs and some limestone slabs. Along the north wall, constructed using neatly arranged roughly hewn stone blocks and soil, there is a low bench (height around 0.25 meters) that was likely covered with gypsum slabs and plaster (only one plaster covering slab remains in the northeast corner), which also continues onto the east wall. Above the bench on the north wall, there is a small wall cupboard. The east wall is part of the partition between Room LIX and Room LX, abutting the north wall of LIX and composed of roughly hewn blocks and smaller blocks. The south wall of LIX is constructed from irregularly sized stones mixed with earth and lime, and against the western part there is a stone bench (around 0.20 meters in height).⁴⁹

Two straight-sided cups, two rounded cups, a pyxis with a lid, eight conical cups, seven shallow bowls, a stone palette, and a loom weight were discovered inside the small wall cupboard. On the north bench there was a small cylindrical pyxis, a stone bird's nest bowl, and a stone vessel

⁴² Tomasello (1999), 78, 79 fig. 2.

⁴³ Levi (1976), *passim*.

⁴⁴ La Rosa (2002), 635-636.

⁴⁵ Carinci (2011), 20-22. See also Carinci (2006).

⁴⁶ Carinci (2011), 118-120.

⁴⁷ Carinci (2011), fig. 1.

⁴⁸ Carinci (2011), n. 25; Antonello (2018).

⁴⁹ Antonello (2022), 40-41.



Fig. 5. Room LIX from the west (by the author).

in the process of being crafted; a side-spouted jug, a brazier, an oval-mouthed brazier, a jug, and a low cylindrical spouted basin were found on the floor.⁵⁰

Room LX (Fig. 6) is located to the east of Room LIX and to the west of Room LXIV. Access to both rooms can be gained from Room LX via two steps. In comparison to Room LIX, it presents a more enclosed and inward-looking space. This effect is primarily due to the presence of a west partition wall, which partially obstructs the view from Lower West Court LXX and Room LIX, thus



Fig. 6. Room LX and LIX from the east (by the author).

⁵⁰ Antonello (2022), 423, nos. 568-594, 598, 600-601, pls 29, 30, 31.

limiting visibility into Room LX. This room, smaller in size than LIX, measures 3.30 x 2.85 meters. It is preceded by a short, narrow corridor on the west side and features benches on all four sides. The western bench, being the shortest of all, forms a right angle on the north side (height approximately 28 cm) and is covered with alabaster-gypsum slabs and plaster. The southern bench continues from the southern wall of Room LIX, extending beyond the two dividing steps between the two spaces. The eastern bench (height around 30 cm) acts as a step into the passage to Room LXIV. The western wall is part of the partition wall and exhibits small, roughly hewn stones in the lower portion and larger slabs in the upper section. The northern wall also features stones in the lower part and roughly hewn blocks and slabs in the upper portion. The southern wall continues from the southern wall of LIX and employs the same technique with mixed stones and earth.⁵¹ At the time of excavation, some remnants of white plaster flooring were still preserved.⁵²

The southern bench is where the highest concentration of vessels was found. These included nine straight-sided cups, one rounded cup, three spouted-jars, one pyxis, three juglets, one bowl, a so-called bird's nest, two basins, one grater, four cooking pots, and two lamps. Additionally, two loom weights and a whetstone were among the discovered artefacts.⁵³

LXIV (Fig. 7) is the easternmost room of the architectural unit comprising LIX, LX, and LXIV. It is approximately square in shape (3.5 x 3.55 meters) and is not aligned with LIX and LX, but is slightly shifted to the south. Access to the room is gained from LX by ascending a step and a wide platform (width 2.40 meters), constructed from four monumental slabs. To the south of this platform, the corridor between LX and LXIV is closed off by a wall made of irregularly arranged stones mixed with earth built above the slabs. To the north, LXIV is delimited by a thick

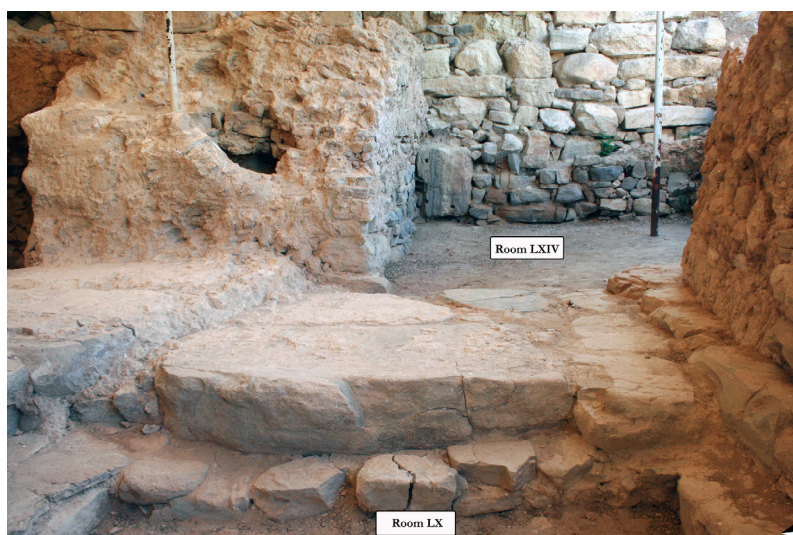


Fig. 7. Room LXIV from the west (by the author).

⁵¹ Antonello (2022), 41-42.

⁵² Levi (1976), 131.

⁵³ Antonello (2022), 424, nos. 630-645, 647-662, pls 32-34.

wall which consists of five rows of roughly hewn slabs of regular shape, with a layer of stones of various sizes mixed with earth above them. The eastern wall is only preserved in its lower part. Of the southern wall, only the western section remains, composed of three rows of roughly hewn slabs. The western wall coincides with the eastern boundary of the southern wall of the passageway between LX and LXIV.⁵⁴ A red plaster floor is mainly preserved on the south side of the room, covering the surface up to the slabs in the passageway.⁵⁵

The presence of pithoi in LXIV provides the key to understanding this space. Near the north wall, two pithoi and four pitharakia were found, while on the east side there were two pithoi and one pitharaki. Another two pitharakia were discovered on the floor. In addition to these containers, a straight-sided cup, nine conical cups, a bowl, a jug, two tripod plates, and three lamps were also uncovered.⁵⁶

Through my typological and stylistic analysis, I have dated the floor assemblages from the three rooms to the MM IIB Final, shedding light on the function of these spaces during their ultimate phase in the 'Shrines phase'.⁵⁷ Room LIX, with its bench and direct access to the Lower West Court LXX, can be interpreted as a meeting space. The vessels found in Room LIX indicate that the bench was a focal point in the environment, being furnished with the small wall cupboard, where small containers for consumption of goods were stored, along with a brazier for providing illumination and heating. A stone bird's nest bowl and a part-made stone vessel were also found on the bench. However, there were no remains of stone-working or tools discovered in the room. The large vessels found on the floor, suitable for storing and pouring liquids, along with the cooking pot, suggest that activities related to the preparation, storage, and likely consumption of liquids took place in the environment. Similarly, food was prepared in Room LX, as indicated by the presence of a grater and a large basin. Cooking was done with the four tripod cooking pots, and liquids were consumed using cups, a side-spouted jug, and juglets. The room was illuminated by two lamps. Four pithoi and seven pitharakia were found in Room LXIV, which was undoubtedly a storage area, further equipped with two tripod cooking trays suitable for cooking, and three lamps.

FINAL REMARKS

Based on the current understanding, it is possible to state that the construction activities during the 'Shrines phase' mainly focused on areas adjacent to the orthostat façades of both the North-Western and South-Western palatial Buildings. As pointed out by Carinci earlier,⁵⁸ it appears that during this phase of recovery, temporary structures (Rooms V-VII, F) were erected to compensate for the lack of other buildings that had been destroyed during the first earthquake, such as the northern part of the South-Western palatial Building. These temporary structures

⁵⁴ Antonello (2022), 42.

⁵⁵ Levi (1976), 135-137.

⁵⁶ Antonello (2022), 424, nos. 698-718, 721-725, pls 35-37.

⁵⁷ Antonello (2022).

⁵⁸ Carinci (2011); Carinci (2014).

seem to have served as supporting adjuncts for other interior areas. To reach these interior spaces (Rooms VIII-X, and LIX, LX and LXIV) the orthostats of the façade had to be removed. Since these temporary structures were constructed directly on the Courts, they were easily accessible and connected to various activities taking place in these areas. Additionally, it is worth noting that the architectural efforts encompassed a vast space within the palace complex, extending from Middle West Court I down to Lower West Court LXX, involving at least three different zones.

From this summary, several key points naturally arise, emphasizing the significance of future investigations for gaining a deeper understanding of the 'Shrines phase'. It would be valuable to conduct a comprehensive updated study of the Shrines Complex as a whole, encompassing Rooms V-X and their surroundings, which should include both their internal layouts and the artefacts associated with them. Additionally, a re-evaluation of the ceramic fragments discovered in the foundation trenches of the House South of the Ramp could help substantiate the excavator's statements. Finally, detailed analysis of the pottery linked to the usage phase of Room F could potentially provide valuable insights into the room's function, its chronological context, and its resemblances to Rooms V-VII.

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