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Between ruptures and continuity: the MM IIIA and IIIB evidence at Phaistos

Abstract

Thanks to old and new data from recent excavations, this contribution discusses the passage in the Mesara region from the Protopalatial to the Neopalatial period, with main reference to the Palace of Phaistos. Drawing on data from pottery and architecture, close attention is paid to the vicissitudes of individual site construction phases that may reflect changing political conditions.

Keywords: Phaistos, Crete, Minoan palaces, pottery, Mesara

The problem of MM III in early archaeological research at Phaistos

The existence and character of a palace at Phaistos during MM III has been questioned since the excavations conducted by Luigi Pernier. Even in the early years, identifying and interpreting the MM III period was quite problematic. We can, in fact, distinguish several periods through which Pernier became progressively aware of the importance of MM III as a crucial transitional phase in the local sequence. This theoretical development spans almost the entire first half of the 20th century. It helps us to appreciate how Pernier gradually embraced Evans's chronological ideas on Minoan periodization, and how two major issues had already arisen: MM III as a ceramic phase, and the problem and date of the First Palace destruction.

In his first preliminary report (1900-1901), Pernier distinguished between two different palaces, the earlier named "dell'epoca Kamares", and the later "miceneo" (Pernier 1902, 16-19, 21-23). Confirming this succession, in the second report on the 1902 and 1903 excavation seasons he suggested that the older building was destroyed by fire (Pernier 1904, 427-430). The northeast sector of the Palace was discovered between 1906 and 1909, after the publication of the fundamental *Essai de classification* (Evans 1906); on two occasions in 1912 (at the Third International Congress in Rome and the International Congress of the Orientalists in Athens), this led Italian scholars to express some concerns on Evans's proposed subdivision of the Minoan era into three periods, and especially its applicability at Phaistos (Pernier 1912). The discovery of the northeast sector with the clay disc and the plentiful ceramic deposits led Pernier to

conclude that the archaeological layer in which the Linear A tablet and the clay disc were found "appartiene alla fine del medio periodo minoico" (Pernier 1909, 270). A few years later, he dated the destruction of the First Palace to the MM IIIA period (Pernier 1914), and the construction of the Second Palace "in parte nel periodo medio-minoico III [MM IIIB]". In the following years, as we know, Pernier focused on writing the first volume on the Palace of Phaistos, published in 1935. The reconsideration of the northeast sector within the history of the palace led the Italian scholar to modify the date of the destruction of the First Palace from MM IIIA to MM IIIB (Pernier 1935, 452-453). This last date was confirmed by Luisa Banti in her 1940 contribution dedicated to the ceramic sequence at Phaistos, with particular attention to the history of the First Palace (Banti 1939-40, 35), and in the second volume on the palace (Pernier, Banti 1951, 3, 391-406).

Both scholars considered that MM III belonged to the First Palatial era, as did both Doro Levi and Enrica Fiandra later in the 1950s and 1960s. Levi's definition of Phase III caused considerable confusion among scholars, firstly because the light blue architectural structures indicated by him as MM III are mainly MM IIB (Levi 1976, pl. I), and secondly because Phase III was primarily an architectural phase not entirely supported by the ceramic evidence and considered part of the Protopalatial period (Levi 1964; 1976; Fiandra 1961-62). Until recently, these controversies prolonged the idea that MM III was an indistinguishable period largely belonging to Protopalatial times.

It was not really until the late 1990s that any new developments took place in relation to MM III at Phaistos.[1] The third and the fourth cycle of excavations run by the late Vincenzo La Rosa (1992, 1994, 2000-2004) and then Pietro Militello with Filippo Carinci (2013-2022) have in fact established a new scene for refining the sequence of horizons, and have highlighted crucial aspects of the history of the palace hill between MM I and III, combining architecture, stratigraphy, and ceramic evidence (Carinci 2001; La Rosa 2002; Carinci, La Rosa 2009; Militello 2012; 2014; 2016; Carinci, La Rosa, Militello 2015; Militello, Buscemi 2015). Besides, MM III has benefited from recent research, workshops, and publications (Girella 2010a; 2010b; 2011; 2016; 2018a; Macdonald, Knappett 2013; Knappett, Macdonald, Mathioudaki 2023). This effort has improved our comprehension of the history of palatial sites at the dawn of the Neopalatial era and moved various issues of synchronisation forward.

Paper aim and survey data

This paper will deal with Phaistos Palace and its surroundings in the western Mesara. There are many different aspects that might conceivably offer purchase on political affiliations, divisions, and change, and which require answers (issues of topography and demography, peak sanctuaries, administrative practices, regional variation in pottery production), but they cannot be discussed here. One promising approach that needs to be emphasised lies in paying close attention to the vicissitudes of individual site construction phases, which might suggest contrasting highs and

[1] See Girella (2010a), 41-45. Attempts at revision, remaining within the framework of Levi's terminology, are in Carinci (1989). Differently, D'Agata 1989. Meanwhile, there was a renewed interest in MM III in general, which has thrown the division made by Evans between MM IIIA and IIIB into doubt: Warren (1991); Stürmer (1992); Walberg (1992). But see Hood (1996) and now Knappett, Macdonald and Mathioudaki (2023).

lows and may well reflect changing political conditions. This is a crucial aspect when developing fine-tuned synchronization with other sites that show similar vicissitudes.[2]

Starting from the end of the First Palace, this is an important point when compared to the north and the Palace of Knossos, where it seems hard to recognize a destruction in MM IIB (Macdonald 2017). Instead, in the south we do have evidence for seismic damage in the palace,[3] which also affected other nearby sites (Agia Triada, Kommos), along with other settlements located to the west, in the Amari Valley (Apodoulou, Monastiraki). Whatever the explanation for this great destruction at Phaistos – whether by earthquake and/or human agency – in terms of power and social change, this episode represented the final stage of the First Palatial period in south-central Crete. Afterwards, the history of the Palace of Phaistos and its region is characterised by significant changes in the territory and power balance (Girella 2016; 2018a).

One good point for feeling the pulse of the main sites is the picture drawn after the Kommos and Mesara surveys (Hope-Simpson et al. 1995; Watrous, Hadzi-Vallianou, Blitzer 2004). These studies have revealed important changes during MM III, namely a general drop in the number of settlements (from 38 to 33) and cemeteries (from 14 to 6), feeble growth of new settlements and a poorly specified, different settlement hierarchy. The latter would have consisted of a reduced size among the big palatial centres, coupled with an increasing number of farms, from which a forced ruralisation of the population is postulated. The Kommos survey has estimated a dimension of 15 ha for the Neopalatial settlement (though without distinguishing MM III from LM I). However, as for MM III, it is possible to decrypt some data: there are, in fact, nine new sites and eight others that continue from MM II; furthermore, there is a general drop in small-size settlements from which one can postulate a stable value of population coupled with a higher concentration towards big-size settlements.

In other words, the data point to a significant decline in occupation, although the implications in terms of population are more limited than the site numbers might suggest. Nonetheless, settlement size distribution is still comparable to that in the Protopalatial period. While the impression that the area around the Palace of Phaistos is much smaller seems to be correct (to judge by the pottery distribution, see Girella 2016, fig. 2), the same cannot be proved for the territory westward. Instead, patterns of stable population strategy seem to emerge from the Kommos survey. What does this mean? Are we facing a nucleation of settlements or forced movement of people? The sudden growth of Kommos in MM IIIA (Wright, McEnroe 1996) has always struck me, to the point where I have already argued (Girella 2016; 2018a) that such relatively rapid urban expansion could be compatible with the idea that groups came to Kommos from elsewhere and were recruited as a task force for the new building project (Shaw, Shaw 2006).

The data presented above support the idea that during MM III the western Mesara region saw a stable urban population, but a drop in the number of settlements. In this context one should

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2 This issue was deeply discussed on the occasion of the Minoan Seminar that took in Athens on April 2017, by Colin Macdonald and Luca Girella ("North and South. Central Crete from the later Protopalatial into the earlier Neopalatial periods").

3 See various contributions in Vincenzo La Rosa (ed.), *I cento anni dello scavo di Festòs*, Roma 2001.

also consider the site of Kamilari and its necropolis (Girella, Caloi 2019), where a significant growth of offerings and depositions is registered in Tholos A. The evidence from Kamilari hints at the persistence of Protopalatial funerary practices (not new in southern Crete) that might have served as an ideological strategy to bond the social groups living in the area, in reaction to the turmoil that undermined the political structure of the region. However, one can also suggest that the MM III occupation of the cemetery may be connected to the movement of people toward the coast (Girella 2018b). Likewise, the drop in offerings and depositions in the necropolis during LM IA coincides with a different settlement strategy in the area.

At any rate, during MM III the region did not undergo a sudden and continued expansion, such as at Knossos (Whitelaw 2012), and it did not develop according to a differentiated settlement system with a palatial centre at the head and second-order centres, except for the still unclear role of Pretoria, which likely dates to the end of MM III (infra). The emergence of houses and farm villas in the surroundings (Kousès, Kannià, Pitsidia, and Selì/Kamilari) at some point in MM IIIB or the very beginning of LM IA was not necessarily an index of differentiation, having Agia Triada as the sole first-order centre in the area in LM IA.

The Palace in the MM IIIA Early period

After MM IIB, the MM IIIA building maintained the layout of the First Palace with a series of additions, alterations, and adaptations: architecture and ceramic considerations have been examined several times and there is broad agreement on several aspects. The picture that emerges in terms of pottery, which has been refined over the last years (Girella 2010a; 2010b; 2018a, table 1), is one characterised by general continuity between MM IIB and MM IIIA pottery production, with the existence of two MM IIIA ceramic phases (early and late), and the absence of MM IIIB pottery deposits from the palace (Fig. 1).[4]

Several MM IIIA Early ceramic contexts can be isolated in the palace and around it. All these deposits are representative of the immediate response after the MM IIB destruction and show strong links with MM IIB pottery production (Girella 2010b). The deposits vary in nature: the foundation deposit below LM I Room 50 (Girella 2010a, 57-58) largely consists of tableware; right to the south, the partition wall between Room 47 and Court XXXV/48 that intrudes onto a Protopalatial courtyard was erected in MM IIIA Early (Carinci, La Rosa 2009). Another floor deposit is the one below LM I level in Room 18 (Girella 2010a, 56). The construction of the West Bastion on the northwest corner of the western courtyard dates to MM IIIA, and proves the use of the courtyard in MM IIIA. The backfill of the bastion contains a large quantity of highly decorated polychrome ware (Girella 2010a, 65-68). We also date the operation of filling the Kouloures (Girella 2010a, 81-82) to the beginning of MM IIA: material from Kouloura II is at latest MM IIB, but in Kouloura III the latest pottery is MM IIIA Early. To the south and touching the MM III paved ramp, we have the eastern side of the House South of the Ramp (henceforth HSR) represented by two rooms (LXXXVI-LXXXVII) (part of a small house built at the end of MM IIB) backfilled in MM IIIA Early (Girella 2010a, 68-71): it is a useful sealed deposit, quite informative about the MM IIIA Early ceramic phase at Phaistos. Finally, according to a recent study (Tomasello 2022),

4 A complete discussion of the MM IIIA Early phase at Phaistos is in Girella (2010b).

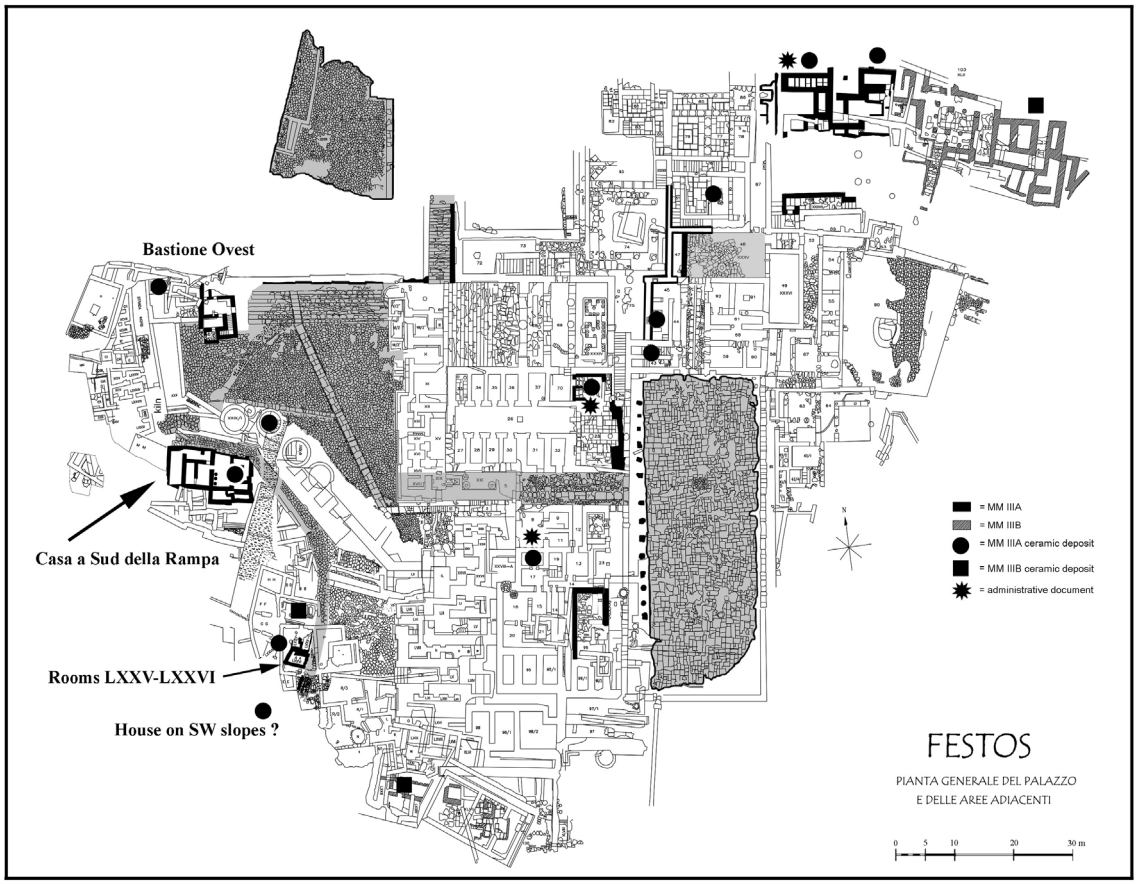


Fig. 1. Plan of the Palace of Phaistos: MM III architectural evidence and ceramic deposits (after Girella 2010b).

the ceramic kiln west of the western courtyard can be dated to this early stage of MM IIIA. The kiln was built on top of the paved 'Northern Street' in MM IIB and was likely in use until MM IIIA.

The Palace in the MM IIIA Late period

There is no clear evidence of destruction between the Earlier and Later stage of MM IIIA at Phaistos, nor at any of the nearby sites, notably Kommos; therefore, almost all the evidence of MM IIIA palace modifications must be assigned to MM IIIA as a whole, as opposed to being divided into two phases. The MM IIIA Late phase is mainly evident in ceramic contexts largely located around the palace, the major one being represented by the last phase of HSR with its rich destruction deposits (LVXXXVIII-XCIII, XCVI) (Girella 2010a, 72-81). This is the sole house at Phaistos through which one can clearly observe the architectonic and ceramic transition from MM IIIA Early to MM IIIA Late, to which the last phase of the house belongs. Other houses and quarters to the southwest, south and east (Chalara) have clear destruction levels belonging to MM IIIA Late (Girella 2010a, 88-132; 2018a, table I) (Fig. 1).

Other important changes are not supported by ceramic evidence, and can be attributed to MM IIIA as a whole. We can isolate at least three areas. As for the lustral basin below Room 70 and the paved area below Room 38 (Girella 2010a, 56-57), it is questionable whether Protopalatial

Magazines XXXIV were part of the same layout or not; according to Joseph Shaw, the architectural features of the Phaistos lustral basin are at home with MM III (Shaw 2015, 174). The pithos found by Pernier and still visible is of the same type and date as the destruction of the HSR (Carinci, La Rosa, 2009, fig. 110) but it does not necessarily date the construction of the room. Interestingly, Filippo Carinci has suggested a connection between the lustral basin and Magazine XXXIV, pushing the architectural program of the lustral basin back to MM II (Carinci 2018, fig. 8) and comparing the layout to the so-called 'Throne Room' at Knossos and the ceremonial area in the Quartier Mu at Malia.

In the area beneath Room 25 (the Archive Room in the First Palace) it is possible to isolate the existence of a wall structure on the east side of the room, oriented differently to the others and overlying them (Carinci, La Rosa 2009, 248, figs. 118-119). Finally, a MM IIIA date has been suggested for Staircase 6, which post-dates the orthostate façade of MM II and pre-dates the monumental staircase (66) built in LM IB (Carinci, La Rosa 2009, 262, figs. 136-138).

The most intriguing MM IIIA nucleus is, however, the group of four buildings located in the northeast sector (Table 01). I have preliminarily dated the first two western buildings after the pottery published by Pernier to MM IIIA, and the other two to MM IIIB (Girella 2010a, 59-62). Recent excavation seasons between 2013 and 2018 have demonstrated that Rooms 101-102 have at least 3 successive building stages, spanning from MM IIB to the end of MM IIIA (Militello 2014; 2016; Militello, Buscemi 2015). At the beginning of MM IIIA, a large building was erected, perhaps as an enlarged version of the industrial workshop already active in MM IIB. However, the area received its final layout as we see it today in MM IIIA Late. The pottery recovered from the new trenches (under my study) confirms the area's function as working spaces with a large amount of transport vessels (mostly oval-mouthed amphoras, Fig. 2), and MM IIIA pottery belonging to the late stage.

Table 1: Chronologies of Rooms 101-104 in the northeast sector of the palace at Phaistos

	Room 101	Room 102	Room 103	Room 104
Pernier 1909; 1935	MM IIB-IIIA	MM IIB-IIIA	MM IIB-IIIA	MM IIB-IIIA
Carinci, La Rosa 2009	MM IIB-IIIA	MM IIIA, LM IA	MM IIIB, LM IA	MM IIIB
Girella 2010a; 2018a	MM IIIA	MM IIIA	MM IIIB (?), LM I	MM IIIB
Militello 2014; 2015	MM IIB Final MM IIIA Early MM IIIA Late	MM IIIA Early MM IIIA Late	MM IIIA Late MM IIIB LM I	MM IIIA ? MM IIIB

The new Linear A tablet (*PH 54*) discovered in 2013 joins the small corpus of administrative documents found in the MM IIIA palace (*PH 1* from Room 101, together with the famous disc

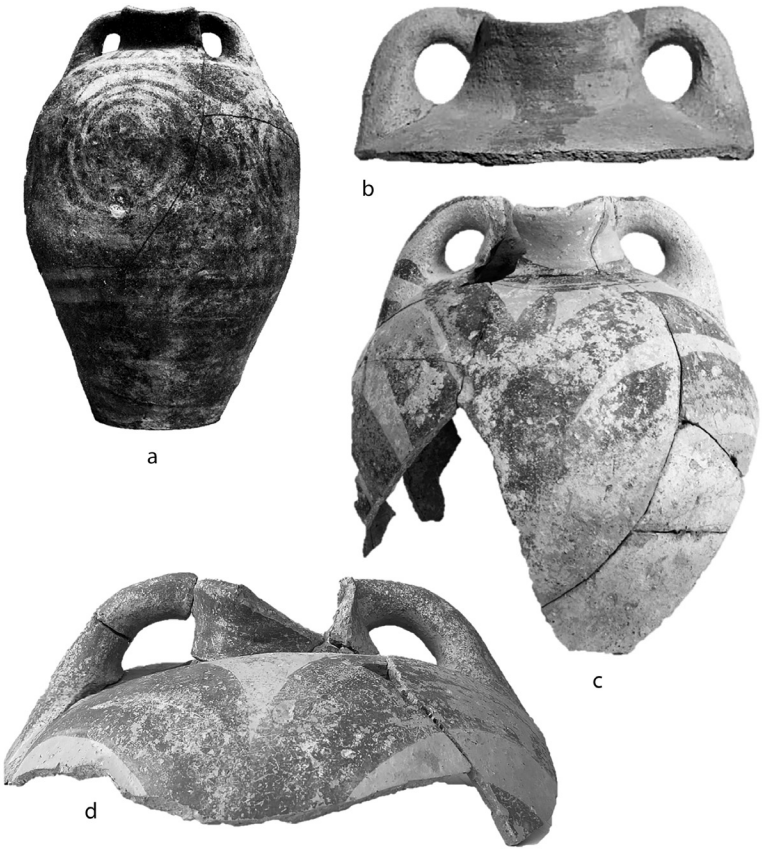


Fig. 2. MM IIIA oval-mouthed amphoras from Room 101 (a-b) and Room 102 (c-d)
(a: Pernier 1909, 261, fig. 3; b: Militello 2014, fig. 6; c-d: unpublished, courtesy P. Militello).

(Pernier 1909), *PH 3* from Room 38 and the nodule from Room 10). Of great interest is Militello's (2014) observation that from a palaeographic point of view, this tablet is much closer to the following LM IB documentation at Agia Triada than to the preceding archive documents of Room 25 (about 50 years older), hinting, therefore, at "a rapid alignment of the scribal tradition to the Neopalatial Cretan standards".

What kind of palace was the one in MM IIIA? It probably did not have an organic form compared to its MM II predecessor; however, many areas were still in function and, again like its predecessor (Militello 2012), helped by ancillary houses around it (namely on the western, southwestern, and eastern slopes of the palace hill) (Girella 2011). By combining architectural and ceramic evidence it appears that the Western Courtyard (with a bastion erected in MM IIIA, see Carinci, La Rosa 2009), with its western entrance (Corridor III/7) (Carinci 1989) leading to the Central Courtyard were still in function. On the other hand, we can date the sealing of the Kouloures to MM IIIA Early. Storage activity was apparently absent or considerably curbed in the palace, and the administrative aspect was seriously reduced. The art of wall painting and plaster decoration illustrated signs of innovation; stone vessel production, though seriously reduced, was situated in the houses outside the palace (for the whole discussion see Girella 2010b).

A second relevant destruction at Phaistos happened in MM IIIA Late, with contemporary damage both at Agia Triada and Kommos. For this horizon we have clear and widespread evidence

all over the three sites. Ceramic deposits are quite homogeneous and lead a solid synchronisation in the south (Girella 2018a, synchronization of deposits in tables 2-3). Although a seismic destruction has been considered plausible for MM IIIA Late, this is an attractive assumption rather than an archaeologically proven fact. Whatever the cause of this widespread destruction (if it is indeed a single event), one should also consider the response after it. Major repair activities, as well as clearance of buildings and reconstructions are attested at Agia Triada and less so at Kommos (some houses were in fact not occupied afterwards). By contrast, the lack of such responses is clearly documented at Phaistos, primarily as regards the houses around the palace, which were not repaired, replaced, or even cleared out after their destruction in MM IIIA Late. This can tell us about the size of the destruction (if an earthquake was the explanation), highlighting a crucial shift and power fragmentation.

The Palace in the MM IIIB period

The role of the palatial building at Phaistos and the activity within it during MM IIIB, as already stressed, is tricky (Girella 2011; 2018a; 2018b) (Fig. 1). The evidence is in fact limited to the northeast sector of the hill, where the modification of two rooms (103-104) followed the previous complex after the destruction in MM IIIA Late (Pernier 1935, 369-370; Girella 2010a, 63-64, pl. III). Then we have a scattered occupation of houses on the southern part of the palace hill, even if seriously compromised by LM I and Geometric occupations (Girella 2010a, 82-87). Although damaged, it may well be that the palace could have functioned on a certain level during MM IIIB, but there is no clear proof to that effect (Girella 2011; 2018a). Deposits from the houses belong to an abandoned level; they are quite homogeneous and not occupied afterwards. Clear evidence of a major destruction at the palace in MM IIIB remains to be confirmed. It thus seems that the site was progressively abandoned after MM IIIA Late, and houses were not cleared out. This time of crisis was prolonged at Phaistos, lasting from LM IA until LM IB.

Signs of change in the area are identified at Agia Triada, where a wide range of depositional processes hints at intense activity at the site during and after MM IIIB (Mathioudaki, Girella 2022). I have already defined the site during this period as a ‘centre under transformation’, for it moved from being a Phaistos satellite to an independent site (Girella 2013).

Conclusions

In conclusion, while after the turmoil at the end of MM IIB one can conveniently suggest a model of dispersed and constantly re-negotiated power, it may be more justified and productive to view this process as having lasted for all of MM III in south-central Crete.

MM IIIA was beyond doubt a time of investment in terms of architectural programs at Phaistos and Kommos. At the latter, one can observe a considerable reorganization of settlement with intense occupation on the central hillside, which achieved a clear spatial organization and, as early as MM IIIA, the construction of the massive Building T whose orthostat blocks layout is so far unique in Crete in terms of height and length (Wright, McEnroe 1996; Shaw, Shaw 2006). Whatever the project and the reconfiguration of power, this process ended with an MM IIIA Late destruction. Whether human agency and/or earthquake were responsible for this destruction is of great interest, not least because of the possibility of internal unrest.

Signs of changes also come from the Kamares cave, where a considerable drop in vessel depositions after MM IIB has been pointed out (Van de Moortel 2011). In the same period, we should consider the commencement of intense ritual activity at the peak sanctuary on Mt Kophinas (two km east of the mountain village of Kapetaniana): ongoing study of the pottery is in fact showing that the sanctuary was established in the MM IIIA period (Karetsou 2014; Spiliotopoulou 2014).

MM IIIB can therefore be considered a time of crisis for the central-south region, with a shift in the power balance. The role of Knossos in this watershed period is possible, but it needs to be proved. Important signs of changes are to be found in the role of Agia Triada, and the establishment of a new, potentially palatial, building at Protoria/Damandri, apparently incorporating ashlar masonry blocks, magazines, and mason's marks.[5] Likewise, the emergence, at some point in MM IIIB or at the very beginning of LM IA, of houses and farm villas in the surroundings (Kousès, Kannià, Pitsidia, Selì/Kamilari) hints at different territorial and storage strategies. Architecture and pottery speak differently about innovation, change, and transformation, but after MM IIIA they clearly speak of fragile societies, and of a vacuum into which power was dispersed and constantly re-negotiated and let others move in. This process ended with the re-configuration of power around one main centre, Agia Triada, but signs of changes in this direction must be placed as early as MM IIIB. The whole MM IIIB was then shorter than MM IIIA, but crucial, for it presented the threshold to the Neopalatial era in south-central Crete.

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