

In the Shadow of the Palaces. Honoring the Dead in the Neopalatial Period

Sylviane DÉDERIX

Research Fellow of the National Fund for Scientific Research
(F.R.S.-FNRS – UCLouvain/INCAL/CEMA/AEGIS Research Group
and Laboratory of Geophysical – Satellite Remote Sensing
and Archaeo-environment, I.M.S.-FORTH)

Maud DEVOLDER

Postdoctoral Researcher of the National Fund for Scientific Research
(F.R.S.-FNRS – UCLouvain/INCAL/CEMA/AEGIS Research Group)
and Belgian Member of the French School at Athens

In Crete, the Neopalatial period covers the ceramic phases MM IIIA, MM IIIB, LM IA and LM IB, extending therefore from 1700 to 1430 BC. From the funerary point of view, the Neopalatial is characterized by a severe scarcity of data. The scarcity is actually such that some have cast doubts on the very possibility to reconstruct the social practices that were connected to the funerary realm. Researchers generally agree on a transfer from the funerary to the palatial sphere, but beside this broad statement, the subject is mostly treated marginally, and many questions are left unsolved.

It has been recently suggested that the scarcity of the Neopalatial record was the result of a deliberate wish on the part of the Neopalatial populations to reduce the visibility of the tombs in the landscape. But when the funerary record is considered in a diachronic perspective, the lack of visibility seems rather to be a consequence of the almost complete abandonment of the most outstanding forms of Pre- and Protopalatial tombs. In our opinion, the discretion of the funerary record results less from a deliberate attempt to erase the tombs from the landscape than it is the result of new ritual practices and trajectories that caused the abandonment of formerly privileged gathering places.

Before considering the Neopalatial record, it is necessary to provide for a quick overview of the Pre- and Protopalatial funerary trends (that is from *ca* 3650 until about 1700 BC).

The Pre- and Protopalatial funerary record is characterized by a great diversity that is the result of distinct traditions and socio-economic trajectories. Burials in caves, rock shelters, pits and crevices, larnakes and pithoi, Cycladic-like tombs, and chamber tombs complete a funerary landscape that is dominated by circular and rectangular tombs.

The most distinctive type of Minoan burial structures is the round communal tomb that is often called tholos. Circular tombs are most common in South Central Crete, but they have also been recognized to the North and to the East. It seems that circular tombs were first constructed on the south slope of the Asterousia Mountains at the beginning of EM I. Their number increased gradually to reach a peak in MM I, before dropping abruptly into MM II. The use of circular tombs continued to decrease during MM III and LM I.

As the terminology suggests, rectangular tombs (which are also called house tombs) follow a rectangular plan. Most are small, simply built and single-room structures, but some take

the form of larger, elaborate and multi-chamber buildings. They are more closely associated with the northern and eastern parts of the island, even though some isolated examples are known from South Central Crete.

The earliest examples are EM II in date, but it is not impossible that rectangular tombs developed locally from the small cist-like tombs that were constructed earlier on the islet of Pseira. Just like circular tombs, rectangular tombs increased in number until MM I. Many of them were abandoned before MM II, and the loss of popularity of the burial type accentuated during the Neopalatial.

Similar burial practices took place in circular and rectangular tombs: the corpses were placed in the main chamber, left to decompose, and pushed aside so as to leave space for new interments when it became necessary. In some cases, long bones and skulls were selected, collected, and gathered in a clay container or transferred in another room or another structure. But at the same time, circular and rectangular tombs testify to very different social practices. It is generally (but not always!) accepted that circular tombs were used by kin-groups whose members enjoyed a similar status. At the regional level, the funerary rites that occurred at the circular tombs would have played a crucial role in the creation and maintenance of social networks within the communities of South Central Crete. In contrast, rectangular tombs would have been associated with smaller population units competing through the funerary realm. In both cases, the cemeteries would have functioned as the privileged arena for the negotiation and expression of social identities, but the audience would have been different.

Ritual instruments and structural features discovered in the cemeteries provide clues as to the rituals that took place in and around the tombs. Structural features include enclosures, paved courts, platforms, and altars. Such features made their appearance during EM II and became more common only during the late Prepalatial period. They hosted rituals that were connected to the funerals, such as a final 'toast' to the deceased, but also rites that quickly overpassed the funerary realm to become part of a pan-Cretan religious phenomenon. According to Keith Branigan these rituals – I quote – “would have served the community as a whole rather than the extended family groups to which funerary rituals were most probably directed” – end of quote. In other words, groups larger than the social unit buried in the tomb would have participated in rituals carried out in the cemetery, implying a change in scale and the integration of a larger population.

On the basis of what has been said up to now, it is tempting to suggest that after their role and capacity expanded through the Prepalatial period and into the early Protopalatial period, the cemeteries were abandoned before the beginning of MM II because they did no longer meet the requirements of gatherings that involved a growing number of participants or attendants. This seems to be the main reason that led to the discretion of the funerary sphere during the Neopalatial.

Even though we stressed the scarcity of data, the dearth of funerary deposits so characteristic of the Neopalatial period is not complete. The prolonged use of immemorial burial places as well as

new types of tombs characterize a scant but heterogeneous funerary record made up of surviving circular and rectangular tombs, newly developed chamber tombs, pithos and larnax burials, child burials in domestic contexts, and disposal in natural cavities.

Except perhaps the tomb of Vorou, no **circular tomb** is built during the Neopalatial period and only few examples continue to be used for funerary purposes, at Kamilari, Knossos, Aghia Triada and Archanes. The use of **rectangular tombs** is even sparser: certain Neopalatial funerary deposits were identified in Prepalatial tombs II, IV and VI at Mochlos, in Building 3 at Archanes, in the tomb at Myrtos-Pyrgos, and in tombs α and γ at Platanos.

The tomb of Myrtos-Pyrgos yielded the skeletal remains of four male individuals placed there during the Neopalatial period. A huge amount of Neopalatial material had collapsed from the first floor where it was stored into the burial chamber. This assemblage consisted in 1050 LM IA vases, mostly drinking cups. The long-lasting use of the tomb, which was used from MM IA onwards, suggests that the Neopalatial population established a deliberate reference to its ancestral character. The presence of a paved road suggests that formal processions took place from the top of the hill to the court in front of the tomb. Communal consumption of food and drink then took place in the court, as indicated by the material stored on the first floor of the funerary chamber. The excavator suggests these processions were visible from those standing in the street, on the western border of the hilltop and also on the adjacent hills, and had therefore a strong impact on the community.

Myrtos-Pyrgos constitutes the most outstanding example of reuse of an early tomb for funerary purposes. Slightly more numerous are those cases where the ancestral cemeteries continue to be used for ritual purposes only. In such cases, it can be suggested that the cemeteries were vested with meanings related to the local identity and the continuous occupation of the settings. As was the case for Myrtos-Pyrgos, we may have there an attempt on the part of the Neopalatial populations to connect with the past and the ancestors at Archanes, Aghia Triada, Mochlos, Gournia, Kamilari and perhaps Apesokari. Even if Neopalatial funerary deposits are few or even inexistent at these sites, the construction or reorganization of edifices, roads or courts for gatherings indicates the organization of ritual activities.

- Building 4 at Archanes was devoted to the crafting of stone vases as well as to wine production and storage. In addition, the discovery of ca 250 conical cups and an offering table in the western wing suggests that ceremonial activities took place in the area.

- At Aghia Triada, the court and the road leading to the Complesso della Mazza di Breccia are reconstructed during Neopalatial, whereas the so-called Tomb 5 (which was apparently only used for burials during the Postpalatial) is constructed in LM IB.

- At Mochlos the discovery of MM III/LM I objects not associated with human remains in some 8 Prepalatial rectangular compartments suggests some kind of veneration of ancient burials (or even ancestors), while a MM III jar discovered in the court in front of tomb IV/V/VI might also indicate that ritual activities took place there. At Gournia, Tombs I and II were abandoned after the MM IB period. However, Jeffrey Soles suggested that the associated courtyard and kernos continued to function until the MM III. We mentioned earlier that the rectangular tombs

at Gournia and Mochlos concerned a privileged part of the population and it is tempting to suggest, as others have done before, that the discovery of Neopalatial material deposits within or near the tombs indicates a desire on the part of the population to connect to the prestigious occupants of these specific tombs.

- Such a connection with the past is even more obvious at Kamilari. Four clay models dated to the LM IB have been discovered in the annex chambers of the large tholos in association with burial remains that were probably cleared out of the main chamber. These clay models represent dancing or treading of grapes, bread making, 'ancestors', and an individual bending in front of a table. These scenes seem to refer to celebrations and preparation of food and offerings and they can perhaps be related to an ancestors' cult. In the same vein, the circular chamber of tholos B at Apesokari yielded four joining fragments of a MM III-LM I jar that does not seem to have been associated with human remains.

Let's consider now turn to other funerary form:

Chamber tombs first appear in Crete in MM II. At least 15 Neopalatial examples have been identified at Knossos and Poros, and perhaps at Episkopi, Malia and Stavromenos. Some of these tombs were used over long periods, making it difficult to isolate Neopalatial deposits. Chamber tombs are composed of a subterranean chamber entered through a stomion, itself accessed via a dromos. The dead were placed on biers, in pithoi or larnakes, or directly on the floor, and their remains were pushed aside or collected in pits to make room for new depositions when necessary. The wealth of the funerary material suggests that chamber tombs were used by privileged members of the population. This is especially striking at Poros, where several tombs yielded an impressive quantity of valuables. More specifically, Tomb II1967 of Poros contained a boar tusks helmet that formed part of an LM IB deposit. On Crete, boar tusks helmets are more characteristic of LM II and LM III phases. This suggests that at least a part of the population of Poros was involved in the diffusion of a new funerary vocabulary. This also makes it tempting to connect the use of such tombs to privileged contacts between this region and the Mycenaean mainland.

Inhumations in pithoi and to a lesser extent in larnakes are the most numerous in the Neopalatial funerary landscape. Large cemeteries were excavated at Pachyammos and Gournia-Sphoungaras. In addition, examples that belonged perhaps to large cemeteries were also found at Gazi, Pyrgos, Ammoutsos and maybe Aghios Georghios. Some of these cemeteries were already used during the late Prepalatial or the Protopalatial period, but most of the funerary vases they yielded are Neopalatial in date. Burials in clay containers are sometimes interpreted as the evidence of growing individualism during the Neopalatial period, or even as the mark of the degradation of social relations. But pithos and larnax burials are not new. Clay containers are known from a little more than 100 Pre-, Proto- and Neopalatial cemeteries. In about 60 of these cemeteries, the vessels had been placed inside circular tombs, rectangular tombs, chamber tombs and burial caves. But in the remaining ca. 40 sites, the containers had been simply inserted into

small pits dug in the bedrock, the soil or a sandy beach, thereby forming independent tombs. Such independent tombs are most frequent during the MM III period, less in LM I.

In many instances objects found in association with the deceased have been identified as personal belongings, or as offerings. The discovery near the pithoi of cups, sometimes inverted, are generally interpreted as the remains of a toast dedicated to the deceased.

Despite the variety of cases we've been describing, confronted with the meager funerary record, archaeologists started to wonder what happened to the bodies. Relying on LM III larnakes decorated with painted boats, fishes and octopuses, several archaeologists suggested that the deceased were thrown at sea. However, others claimed that this maritime iconography refers to eschatological conceptions regarding the journey of the dead towards the afterworld rather than to the actual mode of disposal of the corpse.

Actually, it seems that disposal of the corpses in caves, rock shelters or rocky crevices form a better alternative. Crete has many natural anfractuositities and many of them yielded traces of human activities. Unfortunately, natural rock cavities have sparked less interest than built tombs. Many of them were excavated in the first half of the 20th century, and most were only hastily published, when published at all. The dating and even the identification of burial contexts remain therefore uncertain. The funerary rock cavities indicated on the map are certainly a tiny portion of those that were used during the Pre-, Proto- and Neopalatial periods. The number of cavities that yielded burial remains dated with certainty drops after the MM I period. But if one takes into account the possible examples as well, the trend appears roughly constant from the EM I until the MM III phase included, with a peak of use in MM I. It then seems the funerary use of natural cavities constitute a more common and 'natural' way of getting rid of the corpses, well rooted in the practices of the island since the Neolithic.

The decrease in use of the cemeteries at the beginning of the Protopalatial, which we have demonstrated here by means of a series of maps and graphs, was paralleled by the development of alternative places of social and ritual gatherings, which also started at the beginning of the Protopalatial. We already suggested the cemeteries would have become too restricted, inasmuch as they responded to local and regional preoccupations and traditions. The transfer from funerary to non-funerary rites is suggested by an increasing homogeneity among cult implements discovered in tombs, domestic and palatial shrines, cave sanctuaries, and peak sanctuaries from MM I onwards. These implements include double-axes, triton shells that were used as trumpets or rhyta; vessels designed for pouring libations, altars, stone kernoi and portable offering tables, as well as miniature vases whose size probably enhanced the symbolic meaning of the object. Such a development is related to the widespread religious fervor rooted in the political changes that took place at the transition from the Pre- to the Protopalatial period and reached an acme during the Neopalatial, when the palatial sphere expanded to include areas previously devoted to the expression of regional cults and identities.

Peak sanctuaries illustrate very well the phenomenon. Several were founded during the late Prepalatial period and 25 Protopalatial examples are known so far. These sanctuaries situated near or on top of mountains yielded human and animal figurines, pebbles, ceramics and representation of votive limbs, deposits which are most probably related to a rural population. The number of peak sanctuaries dropped sharply after the destruction of the first palaces, so that only those that were associated with major centers remained in use during the Neopalatial. These Neopalatial sanctuaries were provided with much wealthier artifacts than during the Protopalatial period. We can mention artifacts inscribed with Linear A libation formulas, stone vessels, metal double-axes, clay and metal figurines. All of these find parallels in the cult implements that have been discovered in palatial shrines, in urban and extra-urban sanctuaries, and in cult caves. In fact, it seems that ritual implements and installations were standardized during the Neopalatial period, which reflects in turn a general process of institutionalization of the rites. This religious standardization formed part of a larger trend that saw the transition from a regional to an island-wide pattern of influence from the Protopalatial to the Neopalatial period.

In this context, rites ‘melted’ into the ambient homogenization of material culture and beliefs. Rituals associated with the funerary deposition and focusing on the deceased and the local groups lost their importance in favor of other ritual contexts. The rites being off, it is most probable that the populations dealt with the corpses in a hasty way, following immemorial practices. The continuation of use of some tombs, either for burials or only for rituals, might illustrate a reaction of some groups against the ambient homogenization, while expressing a desire to connect with the early occupants of the tombs. The diachronic study of Neopalatial funerary customs and rites indicates therefore that the period constitutes a transition between the disinterest for former ritual contexts, and the appearance of new practices such as those associated with chamber tombs, which will play a leading role in social expression during the so-called Mycenaean period on Crete.