



The Gathering: Collectivity and the Development of Bronze Age Cretan Society

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Abstract

In this paper, we argue that the sociopolitical trajectory of Bronze Age of Crete was characterized by the progressive but intentional manipulation of an enduring collective ethos, notably in the organization of gatherings and feasts. These key practices, meant to ensure cohesion, took place within a larger social organization of which the constituents were formed by corporate groups that we interpret as “houses.” We also argue that the nature of these houses changed over time. This process is particularly evident in the varying contexts in which these gatherings took place, with differences in terms of scale and origin of participants and variations in the balance between base-driven and imposed practices. We highlight that a landscape initially dotted with small local communities, connected through kinship bonds and shared practices at the microregional level, was progressively transformed into a homogeneous, all-embracing ideological structure, which pervaded society and constituted the backbone of its hierarchical organization. Legitimized and mobilized within a religious system with clear political overtones, this process resulted into a supra-regional, global network that can rightfully be called “Minoan.”

Keywords Aegean prehistory · Bronze age · Crete (Greece) · House society · Collective ethos

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Introduction

With a surface area of 8,336 km² (3,219 mi²) and a coastline of 1,046 km (650 mi), the island of Crete is one of the largest Mediterranean islands, located at the southern edge of the Aegean but remaining connected with surrounding continents, partly through a string of intermediate islands (Fig. 1). This relative isolation benefitted the development of a distinct Bronze Age civilization, known as the Minoan culture, which had its heyday between c. 3000 and 1200 BC. Despite pleas to abandon the term “Minoan” because it is considered too generalizing (Legarra Herrero 2009), we retain it here; it is not only a catch-all, immediately understandable, but also refers to a much older tradition that leaves sufficient space for chronological refinement, regional variation, and divergent trajectories (Karadimas and Momigliano 2004). We try to show, however, that the term “Minoan” can be rightfully used to express a specific process observed in the archaeological record of the island. The cultural development of Bronze Age Crete is based on both ceramic and architectural phases, the latter intimately connected with the development of the court-centered buildings, commonly known as palaces (Fig. 2). Although there is broad correspondence of the architectural phases with the generally used tripartite division in Early, Middle, early and advanced Late Bronze Age – itself copied from Pharaonic Egypt – there is considerable overlap, showing the artificiality of all periodization (Panagiotopoulos 2021, pp. 39–42).

Moreover, one may question the use of the term “Prepalatial” for the Early Bronze Age in view of the first signs of major construction at certain sites around 2500 BC, in Early Minoan (EM) IIB (Driessen 2007). It is still generally agreed, however, that



Fig. 1. Map of the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean (©Talos; N. Kress).

Absolute Chronology		Cultural Phases	Ceramic Phases	Architectural Phases
1000	Santorini Eruption	Postpalatial		
1100			Subminoan	
1200			LM IIIC	
			LM III B2	
1300		Final Palatial	LM III B1	Reconstruction Knossos & Chania
			LM III A2	
1400			LM III A1	
			LM II	
1500		Neopalatial	LM IB	Construction Second Palaces
1600			LM IA	
			MM IIIB	
1700			MM IIIA	
1800		Protopalatial	MM IIB	Construction First Palaces
			MM IIA	
1900			MM IB	
2000		Prepalatial	MM IA	
2100			EM III	
2200			EM IIB	
			EM IIA	
			EM I	
3000			FN/EM I	
			FN	
4000			LN	

Fig. 2. Tentative absolute and relative chronology for the Cretan Bronze Age (©TALOS; N. Kress).



Fig. 3. Crete: sites mentioned in the text (©TALOS; N. Kress).

the monumentalization that took place more or less at the same time at three different sites (Knossos, Phaistos, and Malia; Fig. 3) in the 20th century BC, the Middle Minoan (MM) IB or Protopalatial (or First Palace) period, represented a major societal watershed during which several other new technologies were introduced, such as the fast wheel, mural decoration, writing, and administration (Devolder 2016b, a; McEnroe 2010; Whitelaw 2012). This was followed somewhat later, in MM II(B?), by the construction of related buildings at other sites (Monastiraki, Petras, and possibly Gournia). Most palaces were destroyed within the same general period, around 1750 BC, after which failed attempts at their reconstruction were undertaken.

Another major period of building and/or rebuilding, the so-called Neopalatial (or Second Palace) period, started around the transition from the 18th to 17th century BC (MM IIIA-B in ceramic phases), first at Knossos but also the central Cretan countryside, with major complexes built at Galatas, Malia, and Sissi. The label Neopalatial is, however, also largely artificial; for example, the moment of construction or rebuilding of the palaces at Phaistos (La Rosa 2002, 2010) and Zakros (Platon 2002) is said to be as late as the 15th century BC or Late Minoan (LM) IB during a period when others had already been abandoned. The eruption of Santorini volcano during the LM IA phase was an event with major consequences for Crete and the wider Aegean (Driessen 2019; Şahoğlu et al. 2022), and there is discussion whether this catastrophe was at the root of a protracted episode of disruption, affecting all Cretan sites, during the 15th century BC (LM IB), some sites apparently even suffering twice (Brogan and Hallager 2011; Soles 2004). To what extent outside forces were implicated in this disruption remains debated (Wiener 2015). The debate between a high and a low chronology of the absolute date of the eruption – the late 17th or the mid-to-late 16th century BC – continues to linger, but the balance seems now definitely to tip toward a mid-16th century BC date (Cherubini et al. 2013; Cherubini and Lev-Yadun 2014; Ehrlich et al. 2021; Warren 2010; Wiener 2018) (Fig. 2).

After the LM IB destructions of 1500–1450 BC, only the site of Knossos survived with an operational palace within a much-reduced settlement, hence the use of the label Monopalatial, Third, or Final Palatial period (Petrakis 2017; Rehak and Younger 1998), which covers the Late Minoan II-IIIa ceramic phases. During this Final Palatial period, the Knossos palace was the center of a new Greek-speaking regime that, based on a centralized administration using Linear B tablets, sought the allegiance of both local and nonlocal elite groups, blending Minoan and Mycenaean Greek cultural traits (Bennet 2011; Driessen and Langohr 2007; Langohr 2019a; Petrakis 2017). A strong possibility now also exists that, besides Knossos, Chania in western Crete housed an operational palatial center in the late 14th and beginning of the 13th century BC (LM IIIA2–B1) (Andreadaki-Vlazaki 2015), even surviving the destruction of the palace at Knossos in the late 14th century BC. The destruction of the two palatial centers foreshadowed a Postpalatial phase (LM IIIB2–IIIC) with shifting alliances that presage the later historical situation (Gaignerot-Driessen 2016).

These successive historical processes took place within an insular environment that, despite its mountainous and rugged terrain, was quite fertile and diversified, ideal for the development of pastoral activities in connection with the growing of olives, vines, and cereals (Fig. 4). It was also rich in well-watered lowland and upland plains like the Mesara and the Lasithi plateau that allowed both more intense and more varied types of agricultural exploitation (Rackham and Moody 1996). Crete, however, lacks prized mineral resources and especially metals, forcing its inhabitants to venture abroad. In this paper, we try to show that these particular circumstances – insularity, agropastorality, and trade – formed an ideal setting for the development of an original societal structure and culture that was above all carried by a strong collective ethos. To corroborate our argument, we first discuss what is meant by collective ethos. We then highlight current views on Bronze Age Cretan society, calling on new insights resulting from the use of an adapted and historically contingent house society model. We argue that this collective ethos was first apparent in rituals and community practices taking place at

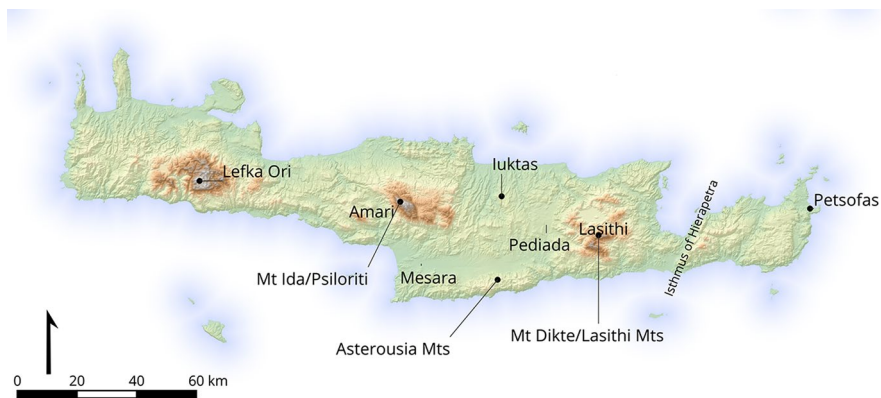


Fig. 4. Crete: natural environment (©TALOS; N. Kress).

egalitarian villages; these rituals were incrementally appropriated and institutionalized and became part of a religious propaganda within a more hierarchical and ideologically closed society that overstretched itself and was ultimately exposed to unforeseen natural conditions, forcing the system to downgrade and to return to a situation more adapted to its insular environment.

Bronze Age Cretan Societal Structure and Processes of Social Reproduction

Before turning to current debates on the sociopolitical organization of Bronze Age Crete, a brief definition of “collective ethos” is needed, as it is at the core of our argument. Man is by nature a social animal, Aristotle (*Politics* 1, 1253a) proclaimed, and a person’s social identity is largely the result of a classification process during which individuals categorize themselves as members of a group, accepting that some belong and some do not, and that group members share certain beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral patterns. “It is this shared feeling of social identity among collectives of individuals that makes them a society,” Bar-Tal and Oren (2000, p.1) argued “since it forms the basis of society’s existence.” Ethos for them is the “configuration of central societal beliefs that provide particular orientation to a society” (Bar-Tal and Oren 2000, p.2). Societal integration and cohesion are usually proportional to the extent to which societal beliefs are shared by members of a community. A societal ethos can change following modifications in societal overall conditions, major restructuring events, or the arrival of new ideas and belief systems, affecting the essence of social identity.

Each society follows a particular ethos, but in psychology and anthropology a general difference is made between a collective ethos, where individual identity is permeated with the collective identity of the society in which, during all stages of life, the collective prevails over the individual, on the one hand, and a more independent view of the self, on the other (Fowler 2004; Hodder 2011; Markus and Kitayama 1991). A collective or interdependent ethos as opposed to an independent view of the self is culturally constructed and situationally bound. Even if the interdependent versus independent categories should be seen as multifaceted and not monolithic (Vignoles et al. 2016), each ethos varies from society to society, and a collective ethos is based on shared myths, communal memories, ideologies, etc., that are communicated through specific material and nonmaterial media. It comes along with a series of social norms, shared beliefs, and in seeing the world as an extension of each individual. This ontology of social relativism with a concern for belongingness, reciprocity, reliance, and empathy (Lebra 1976) implies a degree of depersonalized self-perception and is basically oriented to maintain social harmony and cohesion (Vignoles et al. 2016). This connectedness between members implies that a person’s status is foremost defined by their participation in a larger social unit, and it is foremost relational. It is also reflected by cultural productions (including art), as Gell (1998) already noted: all are embedded in a nexus of social relationships.

It is our contention that such a collective ethos characterized Minoan society during its constructive phases and remained, despite many changes affecting scale and intensity, an important facet up to the end of the Bronze Age. We argue that, from the Early Bronze Age onward, ritual schedules and commensality promoted social cohesion and may be considered the primary materialization of this collective ethos. We also trace the latter in the pervasiveness of shared practices in various domains: common ways of dealing with the afterlife, producing material culture, and organizing the built environment may be considered indicative of similar processes of social reproduction when distributed over extended areas. We also contend that the collective ethos fueled the existence of cooperative labor obligations invested in large construction projects.

Top-Down Versus Bottom-Up

Long dominated by a focus on palatial structures and analogies from Near Eastern scholarship, debates on Cretan social structure and political geography have of late been rekindled (Macdonald and Knappett 2013; Pullen 2010; Relaki and Driessen 2020; Relaki and Papadatos 2018; Schoep et al. 2012). Evans' view of a theocratic regime centered at Knossos has been scrutinized within a more general tendency to critically reassess past knowledge (Schoep 2018). The present debate on the nature and role of the palaces is rooted in earlier discussions that recognized a system of social storage and addressed issues of collective distribution and commensality (Branigan 1995; Day and Wilson 1998; Halstead 1988, 2011; Moody 1987b) and in those that highlighted interactions between polities of similar status and scale as primary drivers of change (Cherry 1984, 1986; Renfrew and Cherry 1986).

The view that Minoan civilization, in general, and the creation of Cretan Bronze Age palaces, in particular, were to some extent influenced by contemporary developments in the Near East and Egypt is today defended by few (Blakolmer and Hein 2018; Marinatos 2010), whereas most try to look for indigenous processes, without neglecting some symbolic input from the Near East in domains such as architecture, ideology, and writing (Decorte 2018b, a; Driessen 2020; Kreimerman and Devolder 2020; Schoep 2018). Moreover, the concept that a central authority, based in the palace, was the main agent of innovation and change within society is now also seen as flawed, the result of a misplaced idea of diachronic homogeneity, with the much later centralized and bureaucratic Linear B palace at Knossos indiscriminately used as model for earlier periods (Schoep 2004, 2006).

Viewpoints remain polarized, however, between advocates of a traditional hierarchical model, with palaces regarded as centralized seats of political and religious power (e.g., Betancourt 2002; Panagiotopoulos 2021; Warren 2002), and a more heterarchical societal structure in which monumental court buildings, a term with fewer connotations than palaces, are first and foremost seen as communal arenas of social reproduction (Driessen 2002, 2018a; Hamilakis 2002; Schoep 2002). The basis for these contrasting views is essentially a differential focus on broad top-down interpretive schemes that usually highlight external influences, and more bottom-up, context-specific approaches to internal

agencies. Although the adoption of the former has proven useful in providing syntheses, it is now often considered as neglecting time and regionally specific conditions, as well as scalar differences and constraints. It also ignores alternative leadership strategies, power reconfigurations, and more idiosyncratic sociocultural arrangements. The interplay between strong ideas of community and collectivity and internal differentiation and hierarchization and its evolution through time are today regarded as key factors in emerging complexity and, ultimately, state formation on the island (Parkinson and Galaty 2007, 2010; Schoep 2006; Whitelaw 2004). Furthermore, the “decision making of elites” and the “communal agency of commoners” (Marcus and Sabloff 2008, pp. 9–10) are now understood as co-implicated in shaping Bronze Age Cretan society across different levels of sociopolitical organization (Knappett 2009; Legarra Herrero 2016a; Schoep and Tomkins 2012). More attention to multivocality and marginal groups, with a wider societal reassessment of all social groups and of the ways different elements of society were active agents and parts of social negotiations, is certainly necessary (Driessen 2010a, 2018a; Legarra Herrero 2016a). This last concern with breaking down social complexity characterizes current approaches to Bronze Age Cretan social organization. The dynamic relations between three scales of collective identity – household, corporate group, and the larger community – are now at the heart of debates (Driessen 2018).

If a “community” is best defined as a collection of people with a shared sense of belonging to the same place, either related to a specific site (often a settlement) or to a region (often centered around a focal point, such as a ritual center), the “household” may be understood as comprising people who share the same, relatively well-defined spatial unit, or dwelling, whatever its exact nature or form (and without the necessary presence of kinship ties). For some, the emergence of the household as a socioeconomic unit dates to the Late Neolithic (Tomkins 2010, 2014), even if a strong sense of community, probably encompassing several settlements within a wider region, may still have remained the norm afterward. This evolution, however, could imply that certain communal restrictions and obligations were gradually being released, leaving room for smaller groups to progressively organize themselves more independently. This evolution may have been accompanied by the gradual elaboration of external areas as stages for expressing communality through commensality (Todaro 2013; Todaro and Di Tonto 2008).

The “corporate group” refers to a scale of activity at an intermediate level, in between that of the household and the community. Corporate groups were defined as “groups that function as individuals in relation to property” (Hayden and Cannon 1982, p. 135). They would originally have emerged following considerable economic and/or environmental pressure that forced nuclear families to residential cohabitation. For Bronze Age Crete, we argue that different types of corporate groups – or houses – may have existed depending on the degree of residential proximity of their constitutive parts (Driessen 2018a).

The use of ethnographic parallels is a common trait in the investigation of the relations between these different scales of group identity (Driessen 2018a; Legarra Herrero 2014, 2016a). Although such comparisons are sometimes

regarded as potentially misleading (Christakis 2014), they invigorated the debate, fostering the investigation of a wider range of potential sociopolitical actors, most notably at the corporate level (Driessen 2010a, 2018a; Legarra Herero 2016a; Relaki and Driessen 2020; Schoep and Tomkins 2012). One of the most recent attempts at exploring this corporate group level is that of the Minoan house society model (Driessen 2010a, 2018a; Relaki and Driessen 2020).

A Cretan Bronze Age House Society?

Boas' and Levi-Strauss' house society concept, as revamped (Joyce and Gillespie 2000), has widely been applied in recent archaeological research, with case studies covering both the Old and New Worlds (Beck 2007; González-Ruibal and Ruiz-Gálvez 2016). There is discussion, however, to what extent the model can and should be applied: some argue that a strict series of archaeological traits needs to be present so that the Levi-Straussian notion can preserve its meaning and heuristic power (Gillespie 2007; González-Ruibal and Ruiz-Gálvez 2016). For others, including the present authors, a monolithic use of the term is misleading, and it is primarily the malleability of the concept that is relevant since each society has its own historical contingency and cultural context (Driessen and Relaki 2020).

At the core of the recognition of the house concept on Crete are large-sized residential structures and the palimpsestic occupation of places (Driessen 2010a; Relaki 2009). This intergenerational aspect, taken together with the architectural elaboration of the residences, is interpreted as reflecting corporate groups, with considerable internal vertical hierarchy, perhaps organized in a matrifocal way (Driessen 2012, 2017). This house-centric society is assumed to result from insularity, on the one hand, and specific agropastoral imperatives that demanded labor-intensive long-term involvement as well as concerns to maintain land property, on the other hand (Driessen 2018a; Letesson and Driessen 2020). It would have developed during the Neolithic and the beginning of the Early Bronze Age when an egalitarian social fabric formed an adequate frame for such a society. Enduring, largely equivalent corporate groups evidently coexisted with nuclear or minimally extended stem families, however (Whitelaw 2012, p. 149), consistent with recent estimations of population units from skeletal assemblages in Prepalatial funerary assemblages (Legarra Herero 2014; Triantaphyllou 2018), despite all the problems involved in the proper assessment of these collective tombs (Driessen 2010b).

Becoming Minoan

In the rest of this paper, we highlight the existence of a specifically Cretan trajectory through which an enduring collective ethos had various manifestations. We start with a diachronic overview of social arenas, specific locales where commensality and associated integrative rituals played a key role in social reproduction and political processes paving the way to statehood. We argue that the constitution and reproduction of Bronze Age Cretan houses or communities is intrinsically linked with

these focal places and sets of practices as well as their continuous use through time (Driessen 2010a).

While tracing their evolution, we also briefly explore elements of material culture as well as art, iconography, and religion to illustrate the existence of an entire spectrum of shared practices. What characterized Bronze Age Cretan society is more than a shared sense of belonging to the same place; it was also constituted by the interweaving of relations between people, places, landscapes, animals, plants, and things as well as the practices that tied these together. Approaching Bronze Age Cretan communities from such a relational perspective (*sensu* Harris 2013) is certainly promising (e.g., Driessen 2010a; Herva 2006a, b; Knappett 2005, 2011; Mylona 2020; Shapland 2010, 2013, 2022), but doing justice to these research trends would unfortunately exceed by far the scope of this paper. We point out that some elements of the production, distribution, and consumption of material culture as well as iconographical examples or religious features are all evocative of collective behaviors and illustrate a progressive uniformization of practices. These practices were originally rooted in coresidential corporate groups and anchored locally but were progressively adopted by larger communities. This process first took place at the regional scale and then across the island. This resulted in a much larger cultural homogeneity that was fostered by Knossos-based corporate groups.

We then explore intra- and extra-insular connections, outlining how settlement patterns and international trade also testify to the progressive constitution of a more hierarchically structured society between the second half of the Protopalatial period and throughout the Neopalatial and Final Palatial periods. Using the house society model as leitmotiv, we then conclude by showing how a focus on the development of corporate groups through time and space can help us unravel Cretan Bronze Age sociopolitical organization.

Commensality and the Arenas of Social Integration

Whatever model one proposes, or type or constituency of the basic social unit and corporate group or even the sociopolitical complexity one advocates, a society only functions properly if integrative mechanisms are developed that allow its members to settle disputes, allow social reproduction, face environmental hardships, etc. From the Early Bronze Age onward and incrementally during the Middle and early Late Bronze Age (Fig. 2), different elements of material culture illustrate a progressive hierarchization in society and more pronounced asymmetries between individuals or corporate groups. This is foremost shown by the progressive appearance of differentiated circulation patterns and the segmentation of functional areas within buildings, but also the development of elite architectural and ceramic styles (Day et al. 2006; Letesson 2009; Nikolaidou 2016; Van de Moortel 2002). Such inequalities would have threatened social cohesion within communities and, from early on, integrative mechanisms seem to have been developed that allowed the social system to maintain itself. Internal differentiation and increased intercommunity competition would have been mitigated by specially created corporate strategies and mediating mechanisms

that foremost consisted in the practice of commensal gatherings for special occasions (Driessen 2012; Legarra Herrero 2016a; Letesson and Driessen 2020).

The ritualized sharing of drinks but sometimes also food through feasts is widely recognized as a key mechanism to achieve integration and social cohesion, and this also is true for Bronze Age Crete (Hamilakis 2013, p.175; Moody 1987b; also Driessen 2018a; Legarra Herrero 2016a). And even if the nature and number of the participants involved in such feasting events during different periods often is difficult to assess, these gatherings had multiple functions, serving as a source of power, social reproduction, and integration at the corporate level (Day and Wilson 2004; Driessen 2021; Hamilakis 2013; Macdonald and Knappett 2007). Commensality was probably as important a part of communal sharing within a corporate group or house as it was among corporate groups or houses, ensuring social cohesion, mediating conflicts, and maintaining reciprocal relations (Letesson and Driessen 2020). The practice of communal sharing has been recognized as early as the Neolithic in assemblages at Knossos and Phaistos, and even at this early stage, courts may have existed to serve as gathering places for such commensality (Todaro 2012, 2013, 2020; Todaro and Di Tonto 2008; Tomkins 2004, 2007). If this is correct, it would imply that habitational gatherings preceded all other types of congregation.

In what follows, we first discuss the funerary evidence, mainly because the principal form of mortuary interment was collective, sometimes reaching the hundreds of successive depositions. We then focus on court buildings and their predecessors, which, during the Proto- and Neopalatial periods, progressively seem to have supplanted the cemeteries and peak sanctuaries as the prime loci of social gatherings and integrative rituals, at least in some major settlements. This evolution, we argue, illustrates a clear but a progressive shift from vernacular venues at the egalitarian village level (cemeteries, peak sanctuaries, caves, and settlements) in which the collective ethos was truly reproduced, to build environments where this collective ethos was staged. All venues, however, dwindled at the end of the Neopalatial era, after which new social and ritual arenas came about and a new form of collective ethos appeared. Through these developments, and despite variation in scale and participants, commensality and feasting remained essential features but also coexisted with other integrative rituals, which are briefly evoked.

Vernacular Venues: Gathered in Death, Gathered in Life?

Crete has an exceptionally rich Bronze Age burial landscape, which complements the settlement data that are still limited, especially for the earliest periods. It also provides information on the extent to which funerary customs and ideas about the afterlife contributed to structuring society.

Not much can be made from the pre-Bronze Age funerary evidence, since the few Neolithic intramural burials at Knossos, cave contexts, and a thus far unique Neolithic cemetery of pit graves at Sphendyli (Angelarakis 2019) do not allow in-depth analysis for lack of contextual data. From the very beginning of the Early Bronze Age, circular, stone-built aboveground tombs, or ‘tholoi,’ were constructed principally in the Mesara and south of the Asterousia Mountains (Fig. 4), with isolated

examples also in central and eastern Crete (Legarra Herrero 2014; Papadatos and Sofianou 2015). Although there is some discussion of whether these circular tombs represent an indigenous development rather than a sign of incoming groups (Papadatos 2007; Papadatos and Tomkins 2013), they contrast with the small, stone-built rectangular structures, known as ‘house tombs.’ These seem largely a northern and eastern Cretan phenomenon. Circular and house tombs constituted the main forms of burial structure during much of the Early and Middle Bronze Age, and aggregations and sequential relocations of human remains are present in both. A particularly clear example of this practice is illustrated by the Agios Charalambos funerary cave on the Lasithi plateau, where the contents – both human and artifactual – were brought in from an original funerary context elsewhere (Betancourt 2014; Langford-Verstegen 2015; Schmitt and Déderix 2022).

All major types of funerary structures – tholos and house tombs but also caves and rock-cut chamber tombs – were used for collective, primary burials (Schmitt et al. 2018), i.e., for the successive interments of generations of deceased. This, and the fact that these tombs were intermittently opened and closed, abandoned, reused, and emptied, makes it especially difficult to reach conclusions about the size and makeup of contributing social groups or about formal burial rights (Legarra Herrero 2014, 2018; Schmitt et al. 2018; Triantaphyllou 2018). Within all types of burial structures, individuals of both sexes and all ages have been identified: if there were rules restricting formal burial, these may only have applied to categories of people that remain entirely invisible in the archaeological record. Some have claimed that the number of individuals divided by the longevity of tomb use corresponds with a successive use by nuclear families (Triantaphyllou 2016, 2018), but the many signs of interference, the investment in, and the intergenerational use of the tombs suggest, for us, more extensive contributing units, such as larger corporate groups (Driessen 2012; González-Ruibal and Ruiz-Gálvez 2016).

Although several tombs (but not all or everywhere) contained valuable goods, including Cycladic/Cycladizing figurines, copper-based daggers, sealstones, gold diadems, stone vases, etc., such exotica can only rarely be associated with particular individuals (Stampolidis and Sotirakopoulou 2017). Rather than exceptional high-status individuals, the distribution of wealth (or the absence of it) over all tombs of a cemetery suggests homogeneous, competing groups (Letesson and Driessen 2020; Mina et al. 2016; but see Manning 2018), and it seems clear that burial customs advertised a collective identity through which deceased individuals reintegrated the community, with group ideology as a central focus. This was reinforced through the organization of collective rituals within the funerary context, and there is good evidence to show that these rituals, at first mainly involving libations using terracotta rhyta that represent women and animal-shaped libation vessels, developed into funerary feasts, but only after the construction of the first canonical palaces, in MM IIA-B (Girella and Caloi 2019, p.769). The evidence for such feasts comes mainly from recently excavated or reevaluated cemeteries (e.g., Kamilari, Sissi, Petras). Some have claimed that Minoan religion had its foundations in funerary rituals (Lupack 2010; Peatfield 2016a), and it is true that ritualized consumption, libations, fragmentation, limited animal sacrifice, and perhaps even games such as bull leaping (as already illustrated by libation vessels in the form of bulls) were practiced in the

Prepalatial period. But it is perhaps more likely that, even at this early stage, burial zones formed only one of several venues in which rituals focusing on regeneration and fertility took place.

The gradual introduction during the Early Bronze Age and after of clay containers within collective tombs could suggest an increased importance of the individual to the detriment of the larger group, but this is debated (Hamilakis 2018; Legarra Herrero 2016b; Schmitt et al. 2014; Vavouranakis 2014). One cannot fail to observe that funerary buildings became scarcer as the Middle Bronze Age advanced, and investment in their construction diminished. At more or less the same time, the investment in nonfunerary gathering venues increased. This is especially clear in the east Cretan site of Petras, where the abandonment of the EM I–MM IIB cemetery more or less coincides with the construction of a central building or “palace” on top of the nearby hill. The same may be true for other sites. It suggests a relocation of the focus of ceremonial practices and, potentially, an attempt by some corporate groups to exert a certain degree of control over said practices (Letesson and Driessen 2008). It may also explain why special funerary buildings are lacking from major palatial settlements during the Middle Bronze Age. Most burial types indeed continued into the Neopalatial period, but they can almost be counted on a single hand (Myrtos-Pyrgos, Kamilari, Sissi, Poros), and during LM IB they were practically nonexistent apart from at Poros (Fig. 3). In these few cases, there is good evidence for the continuation of commensality within a funerary context (Cadogan 2011; Girella and Caloi 2019). While our evidence may be entirely defective or alternative methods of body disposal were used (Devolder 2010), it almost certainly points to a radical change of ceremonial focus, from collective funerary grounds to monumental buildings in habitation areas. What this process potentially entailed in terms of control of access and shift from popular rites to institutionalized cults is discussed below (Letesson and Driessen 2008, 2020). But the absence of cemeteries, and hence the abandonment of a venue for potential popular, noncontrolled gatherings, can also be interpreted as an imposed interdiction. Similar restrictions seem also to have operated in other settings.

The change in burial habits during and after Late Minoan II, which perhaps started late in LM IB, is therefore particularly remarkable. At Knossos, the remaining sole prime center, the wealth and variety of stone-built funerary architecture is surprising (Preston 2004, 2005; Whitelaw 2022): shaft graves, regularized rock-cut chamber tombs with a long access corridor or dromos, underground beehive or tholos tombs (some imitating Levantine- and Mainland-inspired forms and practices), and other burial types are used to express differential status, clearly indicating social competition. Most tombs were constructed to receive individuals, some probably families. The dead were often accompanied by valuable goods in gold, ivory, bronze, and semiprecious stones but also by offensive and defensive weaponry, which suggests the consolidation of a warrior ethos (Georganas 2018; Molloy 2012). For the first time, one-to-one correspondences between individuals and grave goods can be made; with the change from collective to individual burial and the investment in highly visible funerary monuments, these correspondences are the prime indicators of a radical social change. The surprising uniformity of funerary gifts during the

Final Palatial period suggests membership of an elite class, sustained by the Knossos Linear B administration (Driessen and Langohr 2007). In quite a few funerary contexts, biologically defined women and/or gendered objects leave no doubt that some of the most elaborate forms of burial included high-status women (e.g., at Knossos, Archanes, Sissi, Phaistos). Matching this with the male-biased textual evidence and, to some degree, iconography remains challenging (Olsen 2014). What also seems clear is that there no longer was commensality in the cemeteries. Funerary processions were undoubtedly organized, and the labor investment in tomb construction was remarkable, but there are no signs that cemeteries served as venues for extended gatherings.

The major destruction of Knossos at the end of LM IIIA2 hardly affected burial types, but the newly recovered independence of local chieftains is alluded to by the greater diffusion of tholos tombs throughout the island. Grave goods (perhaps initially including loot from the palace at Knossos) gradually became less rich, probably because the original palatial workshops were no longer active in providing elites with prestigious objects. The reuse and pillaging of older tombs became more obvious and continued for centuries. There are few signs for funerary-related commensality during the Final Palatial period, and the Neopalatial interdiction may have been maintained. During the Postpalatial period, however, kraters and drinking vases were very much present within tombs, as grave gifts, underlining their importance during the life of the deceased; this occurred throughout the island. The presence of vases in the dromoi of the LM IIIA-B cemetery at Armenoi and within the Palama cemetery at Chania suggest that funerary commensality was again practiced (Langohr 2009, p. 223).

This discussion of the funerary record highlights the long-term importance of the consumption of food and drink in relation to collective funerary practices and how the progressive emergence of nonfunerary arenas played a more central role in social reproduction during the Cretan Bronze Age. We next explore this shift in more detail in other venues, as we see it as intrinsically linked to increasing sociopolitical hierarchization and the remobilization of the collective ethos.

Other Vernacular Venues and the Reproduction of the Collective Ethos

Besides funerary contexts, there is a growing body of evidence for the Prepalatial period that suggests collective rituals were also taking place in a discrete number of mountain-top shrines (Haysom 2018), in caves and within courts in settlements where the first canonical palaces were constructed (Driessen 2007, 2021). Thus far we lack concrete proof that these locales already functioned as intraregional hubs, but this is likely (Haggis 2002; Legarra Herrero 2016a).

The Cretan landscape is dotted with mountain peaks that serve as landmarks, visible from afar, that may have played a role in navigation, territorial control, and pastoral exploitation (Fig. 5). Several peaks also were chosen as places of worship and votive offering (Kyriakidis 2005; Nowicki 2019; Peatfield and Morris 2012). The sheer number of figurine dedications and masses of fragmented pottery at some peaks suggests participation both by large numbers and at considerable

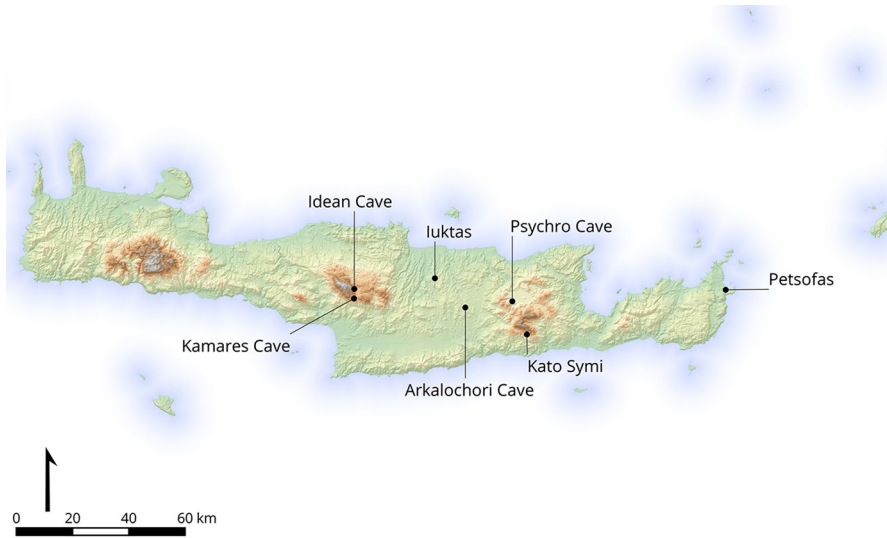


Fig. 5. Crete: cave and peak sanctuaries mentioned in the text (©TALOS, N. Kress).

regularity, but some other peaks evidence only a discrete frequentation. While the evidence that mountain peaks were used for ritual gatherings remains limited for the FN-EM I phase (Nowicki 2001; Peatfield 2016b), there is little doubt that, by EM II, some peaks, such as Iuktas near Knossos and Petsofas near Palaikastro, were already used for such gatherings. The number of peak sanctuaries steadily grew during the Protopalatial period, dotting the island and often at considerable distance from the major lowland centers, stressing their link with pastoral communities (Morris and Peatfield 2006; Peatfield 2016a; Peatfield and Morris 2012). In the Neopalatial period, however, only those peaks with close links to urban centers continued as sanctuaries, receiving much more prestigious dedications than before, suggesting a clear institutionalization of the cult practices (Cherry 1984, 1986; Peatfield 1987). These, too, were given up at the end of the period. Besides these peak sanctuaries, a few other remote locations were chosen for ritual activities and gatherings, such as Kato Symi, high against the southern slope of the Diktaean Mountains (Christakis 2013). Again, the initiative seems clearly grassroots, but the quality of the dedications in the Neopalatial period also suggests a switch from a popular to a more institutionalized cult.

Caves were another category of vernacular venues, and in the Cretan context, some of these can be identified as cult places, frequented more regularly throughout the Bronze Age than peak sanctuaries, although their numbers remain relatively low throughout the different periods. As early as the Final Neolithic period, some caves received the occasional figurine dedication, but they were increasingly visited and used for massive ritual dedications throughout the mature Bronze Age, for example, the Kamares and Idaean Cave (Platon 2013; Tomkins 2012a). During the Neopalatial period, some caves, such as Psychro and Arkalochori, held massive metal dedications, some in gold (Kilian-Dirlmeier 1993),

a sign that corporate groups linked to the palace showed an interest in such traditional cult places. Some authors have also suggested that lustral basins, sunken rooms that appear in the second half of the Protopalatial period and typify many elite buildings, represented an attempt at creating cave settings within the built environment (Hitchcock 2007). Although, with some exceptions (Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 2013; Vokotopoulos 2022), there may have been a dip in cave frequentation during LM II-III A1, they were important again in the Postpalatial periods (Watrous 2004).

We have mentioned the potential traces of gatherings during the Neolithic period at Knossos and Phaistos. It was, however, during the advanced Prepalatial period that the first true signs of architectural elaboration appeared in a few settlements. In EM IIB, in particular, there were monumental terrace walls, paved courts or open areas, and larger, rectangular architectural structures, some even with an upper story (Driessen 2007; Shaw 2016; Tomkins 2012b). Some of the court-related complexes seem to have adopted a more or less north–south orientation that would be retained for centuries after. This incipient complexity at the three sites where later palaces would be constructed (Knossos, Malia, Phaistos), but occasionally also elsewhere (Vasiliki, Sissi), again suggests that this was largely an indigenous and bottom-up process (Driessen 2021). Later terracing works and monumentalization in the major centers has unfortunately abetted the eradication of earlier levels, which means that modalities leading to the construction of the first canonical palaces in MM IB remain elusive. In certain cases, however, the earlier architectural remains were intentionally incorporated and left apparent in the later structures (Driessen 2021).

The presence of dumps of drinking vases and food remains within these sites also suggests that ceremonial gatherings took place in these venues, perhaps following labor mobilization or attempts at regional integration, and that the remains of these gatherings were kept and curated (Driessen 2018a; Haggis 2012). Beginning in Early Minoan I, the structured deposits ensuing from these feasting ceremonies always consisted of large quantities of high-investment ceramic containers (either by form or decoration) with performative functions. Consecutive fine wares such as the Pyrgos, Vasiliki, and east Cretan white-on-dark wares consistently show up in such deposits, and the fine ceramics continued to fulfill this role throughout much of the Cretan Bronze Age (Apostolakou et al. 2017; Borgna 2004; Caloi 2018; Day and Wilson 2004; Haggis 2012). Hence, the Prepalatial well deposit at Knossos is said to reflect large-scale or cyclical commensality (Day and Wilson 1998, 2004), while more limited intra-community practices are attested at contemporary Myrtos Fournou Korifi (Catapoti 2011; Whitelaw 2014).

The presence of sealings (clay lumps impressed by seals) in settlement contexts suggests that whatever functions the sealstones had, one was keeping track of the movement of goods, long before writing was introduced (Krzyszowska 2005). Since these sealings not only came from sites where court buildings were later constructed, the monitoring of transactions within smaller, local communities seems to have been important within extended household contexts. They are often seen as “early identity cards” (Younger 2018, p. 348) or “badges” for

groups (Weingarten 2018). Seals could then have served as group emblems while being associated with particular individuals, during both the Pre- and Protopalatial periods.

As such, these various social arenas and the practices they hosted played a decisive role in advocating integration, cooperation, and equivalence between groups of different sizes and with variable wealth and access to raw materials (Letesson and Driessen 2020).

Court Buildings and Palatial Architecture: Staging of the Collective Ethos

Palaces in our view represent a development from these earlier locales of interaction, serving both intra- and inter-settlement cohesion and hosting various types of integrative actions.

First Palaces: Staging Equivalence

While funerary areas and peak sanctuaries maintained their popular character during the Middle Bronze Age, court centers from MM IB were conceptualized as more formal arenas where power imbalance was mediated. The central buildings were still, however, constructed through a bottom-up, noncoercive process in which the collective mobilization for the construction itself was one of the main tension-reducing mechanisms (Driessen 2018a). Corporate groups collaborating in the construction of the complexes would have acquired the right of use or access, with large central courts hosting ritual activities, most notably in the form of feasts (Driessen 2012; see Tartaron 2008, pp. 96–98). Elsewhere, we have argued that the First Palaces were built to stage a certain idea of equality rather than celebrating communality (Letesson and Driessen 2020), advocating a symbolic equivalence between corporate groups, or houses, of various sizes, power, and prosperity. Together with other large Middle Minoan buildings such as Quartier Mu at Malia, they testify to the first absorption within the built environment of gathering practices and commensal activities traditionally associated with the exterior world (Letesson and Driessen 2008).

This “appropriation of the communal” (Tomkins and Schoep 2010, p. 76), which belies a growing concern for the control of such events, would not only serve to foster a feeling of group identity but could also be manipulated as a strategy of exclusion to marginalize lesser social groups (Schoep 2004), paving the way for the radical appearance of more hierarchical structures and centralized forms of authority in later periods (Macdonald and Knappett 2007; Schoep and Knappett 2004). One of the features that implicates different groups in their construction is the diversity of wall masonries, and later of masons’ marks, that occur within these buildings, potentially indicative of the investment of work parties belonging to different corporate groups (Devolder and Lorenzon 2020; Driessen 2018a). The implication of different corporate groups is also hinted at by two other features: the presence of various stylistic ceramics groups within the building deposits (Caloi 2018; Haggis 2012) and the nonresident sealing pattern as represented in the large sealing deposit

found within the Middle Bronze Age palace at Phaistos (Relaki 2012). Moreover, at Phaistos, evidence suggests that potters gathered on a cyclical basis at the palace and produced the ceramic sets that were to serve in the communal ceremonies (Todaro 2016).

Both the architectural elaboration of the palaces and the use of writing and administration within such complexes were gradual rather than sudden processes (Decorte 2018b, a). This is especially clear for the palaces of Phaistos (Todaro 2013) and Malia (Devolder 2016b, a) where core areas, laid out in MM IB, gradually developed in MM IIA and MM IIB to eventually form more enclosed court complexes. The same may be conjectured for the palace at Knossos but here later reconstructions largely obscure constructional stages (Macdonald 2017; Macdonald and Knappett 2007). A full-fledged administration can likewise only be shown for the final MM IIB phase of the Protopalatial period, and the different scripts and media used by the various palace centers underline the piecemeal advancement of the process (Karnava 2017).

That communal practices became incrementally ritualized is illustrated by the use of more elaborate vessels and exclusive material culture at various levels. But for the first time, hierarchical differences were operational. Although interpretations differ regarding the *kouloures*, the large circular pits located in the West Courts at Knossos and Phaistos, we propose they were specially constructed containers for the curated deposition of paraphernalia used in large-scale feasts (contra Kessler 2017). The simplicity of the vases used in these gatherings contrasts with the drinking vase assemblages found within or near palatial buildings, such as the early Protopalatial Lakkos deposit at Petras (Haggis 2007, 2012), the MM IB pottery deposit in the West Wing of the Palace at Knossos (Macdonald and Knappett 2007, p. 163), and the different bench deposits in the first palace at Phaistos (Caloi 2012, 2020). These deposits often include polychrome Kamares ware, a wheel-made pottery characterized by perfectionism that is obvious from its elaborate ceramic forms and intricate floral designs, potentially imitating silver vessels (MM IB–MM IIB). These assemblages are interpreted as having accompanied special moments in the biography of public buildings (Caloi 2012, 2020), reflecting feasting activities of different social groupings using sets of differently formed and decorated vessels that served as visual markers of roles or identities. The number and find contexts of fine Middle Bronze Age wares suggest these commensal ceremonies were confined to selected societal groups, or their representatives.

At the same time, we observe a partial relocation or rather duplication of feasting rituals from settlements to funerary contexts, especially in nonpalatial sites, and to peak sanctuaries. These may illustrate that attempts by corporate groups or houses connected to court centers to appropriate the communal had not yet managed to obtain full regional integration and that vernacular venues still operated largely independently and outside the developments in the main urban centers.

Nature-influenced imagery and floral designs gradually increased during the Middle Bronze Age, and human figuration appeared in two-dimensional art with people mainly represented in daily activities (e.g., Blakolmer 2020b; Boutsidis 2017). Ritual or religious imagery was exceptional, however, and limited to a few sphinxes and some other creatures (Anastasiadou 2011; Anderson 2016; Younger 2018).

Dedications of terracotta figurines of miniaturized humans and animals in peak sanctuaries, the former as substitutes for their dedicators, the latter as substitutes for the objects of their concern, did continue, however, but no deistic cult can be identified (Haysom 2018; Kyriakidis 2005; Morris 2009). This changed only in Middle Minoan IIIB, as evidenced by the temple repositories at Knossos, where two-dimensional human figuration includes bull leapers, chariot scenes, and religious elements that remained standard throughout the Neopalatial period. The same context also yielded a large collection of nature-related imagery and the fragmented faience statuettes of bare-breasted women (“snake goddesses”) (Simandiraki-Grimshaw and Stevens 2013), that have become emblematic for Minoan culture. More changes were on the way, however.

Second Palaces: Institutionalizing Similarity

The close link between commensal practices and public building activities continued during the Neopalatial period, as, for example, at Sissi and Gournia (Buell 2022, p. 302; Caloi 2018; Driessen 2018). There are indications that cyclical feasts involving large numbers of participants were organized within these complexes rather than outside, as was the case before with the kouloures. The less-exclusive character of these meetings is suggested by the plain and mass-produced drinking cups, showing that the number of participants had increased considerably. This large-scale consumption, possibly involving entire settlements and their satellites using the ubiquitous conical cup, is often explained as a Knossos-imposed strategy of integration (Driessen 2021; Mathioudaki 2021; Wiener 2007, 2011), and we see it as one of the key mechanisms of the staging of the collective ethos (Letesson and Driessen 2020). The presence of stored assemblages of high-quality containers in exotic materials, however, such as that in the Treasury of the Zakros palace or that of the Room of the Stone Vases at Knossos, shows that more exclusive and probably more intensely ritualized commensality practices also happened. This contrasting situation between less and more inclusive gatherings suggests that institutionalization was more successful than during the Protopalatial period, since we also observe an unprecedented degree of hierarchization and standardization in material culture and the spatial configuration of the built environment during the Neopalatial period.

This standardization is especially obvious in the almost iconic use of assemblages of objects such as conical cups, rhyta, and wall paintings that, through their wide diffusion across Crete and the Aegean, all convey a sense of being part of a similar “Minoan” society (Knappett 2011, pp.161–168). Where the plan and circulation patterns within residential and public structures are concerned, access regulation and spatial segmentation suggests a stricter social categorization, probably reflecting increased hierarchization in Neopalatial society (Letesson 2014, 2015). Concomitantly, however, many buildings remained centered on a room or space where all circulations converged and people could gather (Letesson 2009). The incorporation of social gatherings in the fabric of built environments hence happened at various embedded scales, a process that further illustrates the more vertical structuration of society.

The higher degree of centralization and prevailing exclusionary tactics in the Neopalatial period, and even more during the early phases of the Late Bronze Age, may have made it even more difficult for traditional corporate groups or houses to adapt to the more blatant hierarchical structuring of the sociopolitical organization that was then operational. Knossos clearly became the primary palatial center, with others progressively losing their importance (Whitelaw 2018). In this regard, it is likely that the second palaces not only had rather different or additional functions than their predecessors, including becoming seats of a more exclusionary form of government and fully fledged economic centers, but they also considerably differed among each other, with some perhaps retaining traditional collective ceremonial roles that now were centrally controlled and sanctioned (Driessen 2021). No two palaces are identical, and although most are characterized by large internal and external courts and monumentalized facades (Letesson and Vansteenhuyse 2006; McEnroe 2010; Palyvou 2018), differences of scale and elaboration are obvious. Large-scale storage, for example, is evidenced at the palaces of Knossos, Malia, and Phaistos (Christakis 2011, 2014), but it was clearly less important in the other complexes.

Both hierarchization and standardization are often regarded as closely related to a politically motivated and religiously sustained process of institutionalization originating at Knossos (Knappett 2018). In this process, art began to play a major role of religious propaganda: uniform styles in different areas of the island suggest intensive interaction and a tendency to conform to a single style. Sealstones and rings in precious metals almost exclusively portrayed ritual and religious scenes (Becker 2018). The detailed rendering of body color, hair, dress, etc., in artistic representation in general suggests the existence of age groups, probably linked to certain rites of passage or initiations (Marinatos 2018; Morgan 2018; Puglisi 2020). Deistic anthropomorphic representations also appeared in various supports (frescoes, ivories, metal rings). Were anthropomorphic representations of deities in earlier periods (and later, cf. Gaignerot-Driessen 2014) prohibited by taboos? Or was their appearance a later feature within an existing nature-oriented aniconic religion (Driessen 2015)? When anthropomorphic religious iconography appeared, a female figure occupied a primary position. This too is a cultural marker, setting Bronze Age Crete apart from contemporary societies (Goodison and Morris 2013). We ignore whether with each prominent female representation the same divinity was intended, but the presence of seemingly un-Greek names among the recipients of offerings in the later Knossian Linear B tablets makes the prior existence of a small pantheon likely (Gulizio and Nakassis 2014). Other religious figures, including males and fantastic creatures such as sphinxes and genii, did occur, but they were clearly not of equal importance. At the same time, male prowess through ritualized sports and hunts involving bulls and lions or close combat (boxing) also became very prominent in Minoan art (Molloy 2012).

Peatfield (2016a) suggested that the appearance of a female divinity was part of a religious power strategy motivated by Knossos and should be seen against the background of other signs of Knossian influence during the Neopalatial period; this process was accompanied by a reduction in the number of peak sanctuaries but also the elaboration in architecture of those that remained operational (Nowicki 2019; Vavouranakis 2018). With the appearance of religious iconography, cult symbols

that previously were rare also became prominent, including horns of consecration, the double axe, marine elements, and the sacred knot. Most of these remained in use throughout the following Final and Postpalatial periods, even if their meaning probably changed considerably (Haysom 2010; Kanta 2018; Nikolaidou 2016). Minoan religion, however, remains a highly debated field. Some authors often draw parallels with contemporary Near Eastern societies, either in general (Lupack 2010; Marinatos 2010) or concerning particular details (Blakolmer 2018b; Blakolmer and Hein 2018; Kuch 2017; Schoep 2010b). Others defend a more indigenous development in which religion involved a great deal of experiential praxis, with ecstatic and shamanistic overtones and trance-achieving performances that may have been more important than the religious feasts organized within the court buildings (Peatfield and Morris 2012; Tully and Crooks 2016).

The emblematic use of material culture to foster and represent group membership is something so universal that we may assume its use on Crete, but the issue remains little explored (Blakolmer 2010; Cunningham 2007; Driessen 2022). The nature of the affiliation, inclusive or exclusive, spatial, political, or ideological, is trickier to ascertain. In terms of iconography, some elements are compelling (absence of a clear ruler iconography, prominence of women, use of animal imagery, etc.) and clearly convey a specific conception of power that is different from that of contemporary societies. The representation of collectiveness through gatherings is, somewhat surprisingly, most evident in Neopalatial frescoes, at a time when societal hierarchization was most obvious. This, again, suggests a mobilization of a collective ethos for political reasons. Since Knossos was probably behind much of the imagery and technological innovation during the Neopalatial period, the creative process is regarded as ideologically charged. This materialized ideology would, for example, explain the popularity of bull symbolism, emblematically representing Knossos (Sikla 2018). Some also argued that nature paintings had a substitutional role, implying that the spaces in which such large-scale art occurred should also be seen as ideologically charged (Chapin 2004; Hitchcock 2007).

The need for ideological propaganda can potentially be understood as a strategy to legitimize the territorial expansion that is documented for Knossos in a diachronic reconstruction of notional support hinterlands (Whitelaw 2019). Knossian dominance may have been effective, but interpretations waver between tight management, integrative feasts, and ideological propaganda (Driessen 2021; Whitelaw 2019). As mentioned above, some cult places, such as Iuktas and Kato Symi (Fig. 5), were monumentalized at the beginning of the Neopalatial period (Christakis 2013). The implication is that traditional cults, which resolutely organized around collective practices in local foci before, were progressively integrated in more structured practices as corporate groups and communities were confronted with stronger inequalities, a process, during the Neopalatial period, ultimately fueling a Knossian religious propaganda that, as discussed below, had repercussions beyond the confines of Crete. In this context, anthropomorphic representations of deities and a standardized iconographic repertoire allowing the distinction of subgroups within communities were probably used to tie society together into a more hierarchical structure. It is likely, however, that throughout the Cretan Bronze Age, rituals focusing on generation and fertility continued to exist, perhaps more peripherally and in remote

communities, together with a more local and vernacular anchorage of the collective ethos.

A New Societal Ethos?

The Late Minoan IB period was a period of major changes in all domains. The arts, epitomized by the marine style in ceramics, are considered either an apogee (Blaakolmer 2020a; Poursat 2008; Soles 2004; Warren 2012) or a way to deflect attention from an ongoing crisis (Driessen 2019), involving greater inequalities (Christakis 2019b) or, where Knossos is concerned, a logistical stress in provisioning an ever-increasing population (Whitelaw 2019). Shapland (2010, 2013) observes that the modes of relations apparent in the Linear A script and iconography evoke analogical collectives, with radically distinct beings ordered in a hierarchical structure, concomitant with the emergence of elites and an ontology of difference. This hypothesis is consistent with analyses of the built environment, which indicate a more structured and segmented society. It also shows that advocating similarity in such an increasing hierarchization of the social system was not sustainable. In any case, these relational ontologies position Minoan art as an integrative part of a wider human-environment conceptualization in which creative expressions are regarded as animated rather than being an illustration of animated objects.

This fluidity between art and nature, as Estrin (2015, p. 117) calls it, pervades all Minoan material creations, breaking down distinctions between art and reality. As a consequence, large-scale artistic expressions (frescoes, plaster reliefs) are seen as attempts to create a kind of enchainment process through which animated indoor settings maintain relationships between the human and the natural environment (Binnberg 2019; Estrin 2015; Shapland 2010, 2013, 2014, 2022). This interpretation has wider implications for three-dimensional art and the interrelation between miniature and large-scale representation (Knappett 2020). The litho-chryselephantine masterpiece that is the kouros of Palaikastro (MacGillivray et al. 2000), for example, can be regarded as animated and its violent destruction as a real act of killing. This also explains why certain examples of exceptional figurative art, such as the ‘snake goddesses’ or the carefully stacked frescoes from the House of the Frescoes, both at Knossos, were curated.

In some domains of material culture, the cultural break at the end of the Neopalatial period was limited. In architectural production, however, it was considerable, and during the 14th and 13th centuries BC, the built environment progressively presented a less sophisticated picture, with the abandonment of cut stone masonry, for example (McEnroe 2010), but also a more regionally diverse one. After the LM IB collapse, old-style palatial buildings were no longer constructed, and in LM II-III A2 only the palace at Knossos remained in use, in an urban environment that was considerably reduced. New residential structures were rare and mostly unpretentious, with habitation mostly within patched-up ruins.

This forms a considerable contrast with the frantic building restoration and decorative program in the Knossos palace itself, which involved gypsum ashlar, stone friezes, and frescos (Driessen and Langohr 2007; McEnroe 2010; Whitelaw 2022), or

the developments at regional centers such as Hagia Triada and Chania. For some, Late Bronze Age elites continued to be largely composed of indigenous members, with an outside influx only at the beginning of the process. For others, this influx happened only during the 13th century BC (see Langohr 2009). Considering the changes in material culture in LM II, an influx from the Mycenaean Mainland this early seems most likely. Afterward, a Knossian-directed, top-down imposed process of acculturation and economic exploitation, including gradual language replacement, took place. Combined textual (Linear B), zooarchaeological, palaeobotanic, and isotopic studies illustrate a major investment in the control and exploitation of livestock, agricultural, and textile production by the Knossian palatial administration (Isaakidou et al. 2019; Nitsch et al. 2019), carried out by a considerable military apparatus. While this was habitually assumed to reflect a redistributive model (Christakis 2011; Halstead 2011), there is now a plea in favor of a market model and a stronger focus on household economy (Christakis 2019a; Nakassis et al. 2011; Parkinson et al. 2013). Both models are, however, notably difficult to recognize archaeologically (Feinman 2013; Stark and Garraty 2010). Hard stone seal production stopped with the final destruction of the palace at Knossos, but before its destruction, the administration used a similar sealing system as on the Greek mainland (Panagiotopoulos 2014; Weingarten 2018). Well-dated mid-13th century BC tablets and inscribed stirrup jars were also found at Chania (Pratt 2016). At the time, the site clearly took the lead in the production of pottery and in the export of olive oil. The existence of monumental architecture, associated with human sacrifice (Andreadaki-Vlazaki 2015), and the high number of Mycenaean imports (Bernhardt 2018) may also be noted. That a palatial administration existed at Chania in this period (LM IIIA2-B1) seems to us an unavoidable conclusion.

During the Final and Postpalatial period, drinking and feasting ceremonies continued within settlements, and structured feasting deposits have been found in second-order settlements. The containers involved radically changed, however (Borgna 2004; Driessen et al. 2008; Langohr 2019b). The Linear B texts illustrate the importance of state-organized feasts within central places during the Final Palatial period (Wright 2004), while archaeological assemblages from structured deposits in smaller but both contemporary as well as later settlements have been interpreted as attempts to reinforce local cohesion prior to and following the collapse of state administration (Driessen et al. 2008).

Although perhaps announced by earlier practices at LM IB Myrtos-Pyrgos (Cadogan 2009), a more standardized type of settlement cult practice is evident during the Late Minoan IIIA2-B periods: assemblages usually comprise tubular stands with snake-like handles for offering cups, associated with triton shells and other paraphernalia. These cult contexts were first incorporated within single buildings but later externalized into freestanding complexes that served larger communities. At this point onward, they also included larger terracotta statues of females with upraised arms, probably representative of, and dedicated by, the different subgroups that formed the participating groups and/or communities (Gaignerot-Driessen 2014). Such dedications announced practices that continued into historical times. The Linear B records attest to the existence of a polytheistic pantheon at Knossos with some divinity names recurring in later Greek religion (Blakolmer 2018b; Gulizio and Nakassis 2014; Peatfield 2016a), but it may be questioned whether rural sites followed similar practices. A gradual syncretism

between an introduced mainland Greek pantheon and an indigenous Minoan one seems likely, a process perhaps accomplished only during the Iron Age.

Intra- and Extra-insular Connections: Settlement Patterns and Trade Networks

The Mediterranean in general is often conceptualized as a highly interconnected space, an open sea with which various communities engaged, through which people moved, objects were traded, and new ideas spread from a very early date (Broodbank 2013; Tartaron 2013). To contextualize our core argument, we first look at Cretan settlement patterns before discussing the importance of trade networks and extra-insular connections and mobilities. We contend that tracing the evolution of settlement patterns can help us understand how communities evolved and connected to one another across increasing scales, from their original local anchorage to the deployment of their activities at regional and insular levels. The progressive integration of larger parts of the island of Crete into the orbit of certain sites (in particular, Knossos during the Neopalatial period) is clearly evocative of a series of concomitant processes (Driessen 2001; Whitelaw 2014, 2018, 2019). We argue that a similar scalar evolution may have existed for corporate groups, where original coresidential corporate groups were progressively replaced by proximate corporate groups that eventually were supplanted by dispersed corporate groups (Driessen 2018a, pp. 294–296). In other words, houses extended their influence and integrated members – or other houses – way beyond their original locus. We believe this process largely explains the more hierarchical structuring of society and its legitimation through a remobilization of the collective ethos in a politico-religious propaganda.

This trajectory, we argue, is also echoed to some extent in extra-insular connections and Bronze Age Crete's position in trade networks. Although the island was always dependent on trade, importing and exporting various goods and resources, overseas contacts intensified significantly during the Middle Bronze Age. Furthermore, during the Neopalatial period, Crete actually exported a complete cultural package rather than mere objects. Ways of doing and, presumably, of conceptualizing one's place in the world spread across the Aegean. As also suggested by Knappe (2018), we believe that this process was intimately linked to the progressive sociopolitical hierarchization and the institutionalization of similarity.

Settlement Patterns and Intra-Cretan Connections

Crete is one of the most intensely explored regions in the world, and the rate at which archaeological surveys took place is impressive (see Driessen 2001; Gkiasta 2008; Spencer and Bevan 2018). At first, such explorations focused mainly on small and peripheral areas, with limited evidence for individual sites (Hope Simpson et al. 1995; Moody 1987a; Watrous et al. 2004), but progressively larger areas were covered (Buell 2014; Chalikias 2013; Chalikias and Oddo 2019; Haggis 2005; Müller-Celka 2007; Müller-Celka et al. 2014; Panagiotakis 2003; Watrous et al. 2012, 2017;

Whitelaw et al. 2018). And recently, the focus has switched from the fertile coastal plains of the lowlands to more marginal and mountainous regions (Beckman 2019; Gaignerot-Driessen 2016; Kalantzopoulou 2022; Nowicki 2000; 2014; Papadatos and Kalantzopoulou 2022). This work allows us to recognize some general trends in the development of settlement patterns throughout the Cretan Bronze Age that echo the overall sociopolitical trajectory outlined in this paper. They should, however, be put in perspective with variations and idiosyncrasies that are attested at various local and regional scales throughout the Bronze Age.

In most subregions of the island, the EM I period is the continuation of an earlier, Final Neolithic occupation, although new site foundations also occurred. Pockets of arable land were sought after to establish small farms, while settlements that exceed 2 ha are rare. Very few have been excavated, however. Only in recent years have the early phases (EM IA–IB) of the Bronze Age been illustrated by settlement rather than only by funerary remains (Betancourt 2013; Molloy et al. 2014a; Papadatos and Tomkins 2013; Sofianou and Brogan 2018), while the EM IIA period is now illustrated by new evidence at Sissi. In general, the EM I–II landscape is characterized by site-specific boom-and-burst trajectories (Legarra Herrero 2012) with a wide range of regionally diverse settlement patterns and land use strategies. It is unlikely, however, that communities had territorial aspirations that extended beyond their immediate valley-sized catchment area (Whitelaw 2012). As argued elsewhere (Letesson and Driessen 2020), this egalitarian village level was the setting in which the collective ethos originally developed. At the time, coresidential corporate groups were tied to a specific place (i.e., locus bound, cf. Driessen 2010a), and gatherings and commensality are mostly attested in the funerary record. Following demographic growth, larger Final Neolithic and EM I communities, however, may have tried to expand their subsistence capacity. These processes may have been accompanied by increasing social tensions as is clear from the EM IIB archaeological record.

These destructions do not seem to have disrupted a steady growth and complexification of habitation in the major centers throughout EM III and into MM IA, primarily illustrated by the construction of terraces, ramps, and houses at Knossos, Phaistos, and Malia (Devolder and Caloi 2019; Hood and Cadogan 2011; Todaro 2013). Survey evidence too suggests that the number and size of settlements steadily grew during the late Prepalatial period, a situation underlining that expansion at the centers was not simply triggered by nucleation, although such a process may have played a role in their sustained development (Molloy et al. 2020; Whitelaw 2012, 2014). The settlements of Knossos (57 ha), Malia, and Phaistos (both around 50 ha) indeed continued their expansion well into the later Protopalatial period (Whitelaw 2019), although second-order sites remained small. These developments may help explain why communities not only became larger but also interacted across larger distances on a more frequent basis, which fostered the creation of locales for integrative rituals such as peak sanctuaries. At the same time, corporate groups may already have grown to become proximal (i.e., including several households within a settlement or region) rather than coresidential.

The highest number of sites encountered in various surveys of lowland areas date to the MM IB–II (Driessen 2001), but it is also clear that, apart from the Lasithi plateau (Fig. 2), permanent habitation in higher-laying areas was avoided

(Kalantzopoulou 2022). This may suggest that societal complexity demanded intensified production and the inclusion of outlying lowland areas within the agricultural potential of proximate polities to feed growing populations (Whitelaw 2019). Beyond central Cretan sites that were at the forefront of change, the trajectories of smaller or more peripheral communities are more difficult to understand. These were certainly not uniform and substantial parts of the island, and certainly the mountainous zones seem to have remained outside the direct economic, social, or political control of larger centers (Kalantzopoulou 2022; Legarra Herero 2016a; Whitelaw 2018). This could reflect that some areas of the island were still characterized by a stronger importance of locus boundness and proximate corporate groupings, whereas, in others, demographic pressure and cross-regional interactions gave rise to more dispersed corporate groups, houses in which hierarchical patterning was stronger because they had to conceptually bridge larger distances. The farther away such groups grew from their original locus, and hence became more outwardly hierarchically structured, the stronger they had to advertise their collective ethos. Other actors probably also became involved in the development of a more pronounced palatial society. On the basis of parallels with Near Eastern hierarchical systems, Whitelaw (2017) has defended the idea that institutions of various types, centered in the main palatial centers, were a crucial driver of sociopolitical and economic change. The vast majority of urban settlements in Bronze Age Crete were “agro-towns” with fairly undifferentiated populations, mainly comprising farmers, and limited crafts and services (Whitelaw 2019, pp. 91–95; see also Letesson et al. 2017); only a few exceptional settlements such as Knossos, Malia, and Phaistos, which had higher concentrations of specialized occupations (administration, religion, service, fine arts), would have been significantly more concerned with craft production and trade (Whitelaw 2017, 2019).

At the end of the MM IIB period, many settlements throughout Crete were burned. While the destruction of the palaces at Phaistos and Malia has been blamed on seismic activity (La Rosa 2010; Stürmer 2013), this is doubtful: they were not immediately rebuilt afterward, and it is rather likely that destructions by fire result from human action. Knossos, less affected during this phase, is usually regarded as the culprit, even if it did suffer some earthquake damage in the following MM IIIA phase (Macdonald 2017; Mathioudaki 2018). Some sites were never resettled afterward, others only after a long period. Such conflicts may also have resulted from tensions between different types of houses, with the proximate and locus-bound ones facing amalgamation through the manipulation of the collective ethos by dispersed corporate groupings.

Long considered an obscure period, similar to the Egyptian Intermediate periods, Middle Minoan III has progressively been reinterpreted and is now seen as a period of Knossos-centered innovation (Macdonald and Knappett 2013). Although the presence of MM IIIA and IIIB ceramic deposits within and outside the Knossos palace suggests occasional setbacks – perhaps also earthquake related – the continuous architectural expansion of the palace and rebuilding during the Neopalatial (or Second Palace) period suggest great dynamism and resilience. With the noticeable exception of Knossos, which reached an extent of 100 ha and a population

of 20,000–25,000 (Whitelaw 2019; Whitelaw et al. 2018), most other major sites decreased in size at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age (Buell and McEnroe 2017; Whitelaw 2019). No other Bronze Age site in the Aegean ever matched the size of Knossos. Demographic and urban growth as well as the need to support a more diversified nonfarming population must have impacted the demand for surplus and hence the need for a larger catchment area (Christakis 2008; Whitelaw 2018). It is thus likely that Knossos progressively integrated subsidiary centers within its territory and gradually acquired a supra-regional administrative role (Whitelaw 2019). Although we may now fairly securely assume that central Crete as a whole was under Knossian control in LM I, its influence beyond may have been variable – in scope and nature – impacting local communities quite differently (Knappett 2018; Whitelaw 2018).

While site numbers rose in the Knossos region, a considerable reduction in settlement numbers and sizes occurred in most other subregions of the island. Some explain this as reflecting a need to allocate more land for exploitation as a consequence of improved agricultural practices through water retention via dams and terraces (Müller-Celka et al. 2014; Orengo and Knappett 2018; Soles and Flood 2014); others see it as a consequence of regional imperialism and settlement rank demotion (Driessen 2001; Whitelaw 2019). There is also increasing evidence for the incorporation of mountainous areas within lowland economies (Papadatos and Chalikiak 2019). The major house(s) or proximate corporate groups associated with the palace of Knossos clearly had to adopt a more dispersed profile to cover a larger territory, including the creation of a series of potential outposts, such as the smaller palaces of Galatas (Rethemiotakis 2002), Sissi (Driessen 2021), or Zakros (Platon 2002), and broadcast more efficiently the religious propaganda legitimizing their dominion. We also believe that, to some extent, such a “mega-house” (Letesson and Driessen 2020, pp. 16–17) was also a very powerful political institution, probably linked to the emergence of a proper palatial state.

Stratified ash deposits at various sites and environmental cores leave no doubt that the eastern part of the island was blanketed with a tephra cover from the eruption of Santorini, in LM IA (Brogan and Sofianou 2009; Bruins et al. 2019; Driessen 2019; Kulick and Westgate 2021; Molloy et al. 2014b; Soles et al. 2017; Vokotopoulos et al. 2014). There is also increasing evidence for contemporary tsunami disturbance on Crete and elsewhere (Bruins et al. 2008; Galanidou et al. 2014; Şahoğlu et al. 2022; Werner et al. 2019); such disturbance is conjecturally used to explain damage and clearance dumps in north-coast sites (Driessen and MacGillivray 2011; Watrous et al. 2015). Essential resources such as livestock, agriculture, water provisioning, port installations, and settlement structures were probably affected by eruption-related events, but specialized studies are rare (Chliaoutakis and Chalkiadakis 2020; Driessen and Macdonald 1997; Riley 2004). Complete or partial site abandonments during and after LM IA may potentially be the result of collateral damage from the eruption (Driessen and Letesson in press; Tsipopoulou 2007). The precise impact of this natural disaster on LM IA Cretan society, however, and the connection with the fire destructions that affected many sites in the period afterward remain debated. Inchoate investment in regional hubs such as Phaistos (never completed it seems), Mochlos, Palaikastro, and Zakros, and the establishment of subsidiary

centers in the mountains, which allowed a stricter control system of essential production, are observed in the period following the eruption (Kalantzopoulou 2022). The pillaging and burning of these centers strongly suggest that this imposed control met resistance.

During the initial Final Palatial period, the number of settlements decreased substantially, and taken together, it is difficult not to interpret the LM IB–LM II period as a time of crisis, characterized by a massive, temporary depopulation for which external movers (warfare, epidemics, natural catastrophes) and internal strife related to the LM IB collapse have been invoked (Wiener 2015). The disturbances of the LM IB period had a considerable impact and long-lasting effect from which the island took time to recover. But the situation did quiet down again, and there were no major disruptive events during the LM II–IIIA2 period that led to major depositional episodes. This, indirectly, may indicate that attempts, presumably instigated by the authorities at Knossos, to pacify the island were relatively successful. Since the Linear B records mention the presence of a nameless king at Knossos, we may, for the first time, label the controlled territory a kingdom. The latter, however, should not be considered a close-knit domain but rather a discontinuous landscape of influence, with certain satellite settlements strictly administered by Knossos or its representatives, while large tracks (and not only in the mountains) stayed outside its economic control and cultural influence (Driessen 2022; Langohr 2019a). This phase can be understood as the acme of the process of hierarchization where an extremely large and dispersed house (probably the result of the amalgamation of several corporate groups) centered on Knossos became a fully fledged state.

With a major destruction of the Knossos palace late in the 14th century BC (LM IIIA2), the site may have been demoted and its regional and insular role considerably reduced. The collapse of its regional control and the cessation of taxation revenues terminated its millennium-long prime place, but it also opened the way for a more independent and prosperous development of both the Mycenaean mainland and the subregions on the island itself during the 13th century BC. The monumental structures built at Hagia Triada during the late 14th century BC, perhaps initially a Knossos-directed enterprise, continued to be expanded and embellished, and the site survived for another generation (Privitera 2015), no doubt in close connection with the harbor town at Kommos through which most of the external trade took place.

Other settlements, however, especially in eastern Crete, after the palace destruction of Knossos, were less influenced by Knossos during the 13th century BC, as seen primarily in the changes in pottery production (Cunningham 2017; Langohr 2019a; Liard 2019; Macdonald 2018; Psychas 2020; Smith 2010). Regionalism, also identified through petrographic studies (Nodarou 2007), prevailed even if pan-Cretan shared practices related to communal drinking and the mortuary sphere continued, notwithstanding specific preferences in the different subregions (Langohr 2019b). The presence within several settlements of this phase of large-scale structures combining residential and semipublic functions suggests a return to a more collective type of organization (Driessen 2017). Overall, during the 13th century BC (LM IIIA2–B), the island was transformed into a mosaic of seemingly independent sociopolitical communities, an important point that set the stage for later developments (Gaignerot-Driessen 2016). As suggested elsewhere (Letesson and Driessen

2020, p.18), this downscaling process may indicate a return to a mode and a scale of social organization more adapted to the specific topographical context of the island.

Trade Networks and Aegean Connections

Traditionally, travel and trade for nonlocal resources are considered prime drivers for communication and connections (Vanzetti 2020), and approaches to Cretan long-distance contacts are primarily based on two data sets: direct evidence through objects produced or made of raw materials deriving from outside the island as well as Minoan artifacts found elsewhere, and indirect evidence from texts and iconography (Bevan 2007; Eder and Pruzsinszky 2015; Gorogianni et al. 2016; Kiriati and Knappett 2016; Phillips 2008). Nevertheless, concerns about the reliability of quantitative, artifact-centered approaches focused on exotic imports as indicators of the frequency of long-distance contacts and, more generally, of prehistoric trade in the Aegean have been raised (Manning and Hulin 2005; Parkinson 2010; but see also Cline 2010, pp. 164–168).

The idea of distance is of course important here, and patterns of connectivity can be better understood if addressed across multiple scales, from more frequent and less formal interactions at the local level, through interregional contacts, to long-distance connections within a more global network (Knappett 2011; 2018; Parkinson 2010). World-system theory of the late 1990s has been replaced by postcolonial concepts such as globalization (Knappett 2016a; Maran 2011) and hybridization (Stockhammer 2012; Vanzetti 2020). Rather than using simple core-periphery models, it is recognized that complex and multiscalar agencies are at play in mobilities and cultural contacts (Driessen and Vanzetti 2020; Kiriati and Knappett 2016; Maran and Stockhammer 2012). Nevertheless, much empirical work remains to be undertaken, especially to standardize our data recording and analyses to enable detailed comparisons within and beyond the Aegean and Mediterranean contexts.

Crete has a long history of maritime contacts with surrounding areas, and trade and cultural exchanges always played a decisive role in power dynamics within communities and corporate groups (e.g., prestige strategies and in-house hierarchization) but also between them and beyond the confines of the island (Fig. 1). This is the reason why following the sociopolitical trajectory described in this paper from an extra-insular perspective is deemed essential here. While debates on the nature and chronology of the Paleolithic occupation of Crete continue (Strasser et al. 2010, 2011, 2018), evidence for Mesolithic encampments in the period 9000–7000 cal BC has been recognized on the southern coast of the island (Carter et al. 2016, 2018). The presence of obsidian within the assemblages testifies to the navigational skills of the early settlers, and expeditions such as these prepared the way for the colonization of the island, early in the seventh millennium BC (cf. Fig. 2, the Aceramic Neolithic), when the first permanent settlement on the Kephala hill at Knossos was established; aDNA suggests southwest or central Anatolia as the origin of the settlers (Clemente et al. 2021).

Todaro (2020, p. 66) argues that Crete became an integral part of the wider Aegean world in the Late Neolithic, much earlier than traditionally assumed (e.g.,

Nowicki 2002) because the island was of interest for maritime communities that, in search of raw materials, colonized most of the Aegean islands between the end of the sixth and the first half of the fourth millennium BC. At Phaistos, certain ceramic particularities link the first establishment with the Cyclades (Todaro 2020), while surface material in southeastern Crete shows similarities with the southwestern Dodecanese (Nowicki 2014). During the Final Neolithic, however, Crete witnessed an important socioeconomic reconfiguration in which long-distance connectivity played a crucial role. This process is attributed by Nowicki (2014) to the arrival of groups of migrants and the foundation of new coastal sites during the fourth millennium BC, whereas inland sites hosted earlier occupants of the island (but see Kalantzopoulou 2022). Opinions on the origin of the newcomers for this period differ, but too few settlements have been excavated to answer the question conclusively. Other scholars present these Final Neolithic changes as related to long-distance trading networks emanating from Crete and directed toward Cycladic and Attic resources (Papadatos and Tomkins 2013).

But even if some limited long-distance trade between Crete and the Cyclades may have started earlier, the Early Bronze Age I/II period still marks its real emergence (Broodbank 2000; Renfrew 1972). As yet there is no clear evidence that the FN IV–EM IA community of Kephala Petras (Papadatos and Tomkins 2013) was a gateway rather than just obtaining materials for its own consumption; the real gateway sites, Poros-Katsambas and Mochlos, took off somewhat later (EM IB) (Carter 2004; Whitelaw 2004; Wilson et al. 2008). The strategic location of these two communities gave them privileged access to off-island raw materials, finished products, and technical knowledge. This monopoly allowed them to control the distribution of these commodities within their respective hinterland, hence mediating “how the island interior of Crete accessed and conceptualized a wider world beyond the island” (Papadatos and Tomkins 2013, pp. 371–372). Although trade was variable – both in terms of intensity and destination – during the Prepalatial period, these gateway communities probably were the main sources of exotica that were manipulated by certain groups to assert their superior position as attested by EM I–MM I grave assemblages (Colburn 2008; Legarra Herrero 2012; Papadatos 2007). These prestige strategies could point to individuals or groups of individuals asserting their superior position within their respective houses (or coresidential corporate groups) but also to the progressive emergence of proximate corporate groups (i.e., larger houses) distinguishing themselves from less successful, more localized, social groups. Cycladic, Levantine, and Egyptian exotica were more common in the Early Minoan period up to end of MM IA when there was an obvious increase just before the first palaces were constructed (Driessen 2020, p. 78; Wiener 2013b). In parallel, this is also the time that Cretan artifacts started to spread across the Aegean (Knappe 2016a; Todaro 2020, p. 68).

There is also good evidence for population mobility during the Prepalatial period. During the EM IB–IIA phases, imported or imitated ceramics, figurines, obsidian, tomb typologies, and technologies in some north-coast settlements indeed show considerable influence from the Cyclades (Galanaki 2021; Papadatos and Tomkins 2013; Wiener 2013a), suggestive of another wave of settlers as yet not substantiated by DNA or isotope analyses (Nafplioti et al. 2021; Triantaphyllou et al. 2015). The

foundation of a settlement in Kythera in EM IIA, probably by Cretan seafarers, can also be seen in this frame (Broodbank and Kiriati 2007).

The MM I–II period is marked by a generalization of contacts between Crete and the Greek mainland, the Cyclades, the Dodecanese, coastal Asia Minor, as well as the northeast Aegean (Knappett 2016a) (Fig. 1). Cretan pottery is found in considerable numbers, but only small quantities of Cycladic imports are found on the island. Crete stimulated these commercial exchanges, probably because of a demand for copper and tin – unavailable on the island – while it also started to export high-status goods in its own right (Bevan 2007). By the late third/early second millennium BC, there is more evidence for links between Crete and the Near East, particularly with Egypt, in particular for goldwork, faience, ivory, seals, and stone vessels (Bevan 2007). Foreign exotica (as opposed to raw materials), however, became rare during the Middle Bronze Age (Driessen 2020). Considering that this period saw the emergence of the first palaces and hence the need to legitimize a growing societal hierarchization through a staging of the collective ethos, it is not surprising that “foreign” objects were not favored, as they may have been interpreted as anti-thetic to a more vernacular Cretan tradition. These intensified maritime contacts are often related to the introduction, around 2000 BC, of the masted sailing ship, only attested iconographically so far (Broodbank 2010; Knappett 2018; Tartaron 2013). This development in transportation mode also fostered the spread of other technical innovations on Crete, such as the roughly concomitant appearance of ashlar orthostate architecture, metallurgical techniques, the use of writing, and the production of wheel-assisted ceramics (Kiriati and Knappett 2016). It is also conceivable that the more dispersed distribution of larger corporate groups participated in the spread of innovation across the island. Actual harbor installations, apart from ship sheds and slipways (Shaw 2017), have not yet been identified, although some sites, e.g., Cape Plaka on the south coast, may have moles that potentially date back to the Bronze Age (Hadjidaki-Marder 2021).

The Neopalatial period (MM III–LM I) is first and foremost characterized by the consolidation of an extensive and complex trade network that survived into the latest phase of the Bronze Age (Cline 2010, 2015; Knappett 2016b; Knappett et al. 2008). Not only did finished goods travel but also know-how and technologies, marking “a shift from networks of exchange to networks of affiliation” (Knappett 2016a, p. 35; Knappett and Nikolakopoulou 2005). Various types of Minoan artifacts and practices were adopted and adapted across a wide area, while on Crete itself a diffusion of artifactual traditions and a standardization pervading all expressions of material culture and the built environment has been noticed (Blakolmer 2018a; Devolder 2018; Hood 2020; Letesson 2015; Shaw 2015). The term “Minoanization” is generally used to describe this off-island spread of shared culture and its influence on much of the southern Aegean (Gorogianni et al. 2016; Knappett 2016b). Although this process is undeniable, there was a high degree of regional and temporal variation (Gorogianni et al. 2016; Knappett and Nikolakopoulou 2008). Following Jennings (2011), Knappett (2016b, 2018) suggests not only that Minoanization is a form of globalization – with complex connectivity and intense interactions triggering social changes – but it is also better understood as related to Cretan interior geopolitics, marked by a greater centralization of power at Knossos. He also

suggests that the actual link between the two may have been made effective by the “sharing of religious practices reducing distances between communities” (Knappett 2018, p. 990). Trade and economics remained important but were entwined with rituals and religion as key movers of communication and connection. This not only illustrates that the religious propaganda legitimizing the increasing Knossian power spread beyond the confines of the island but also that the original spatial anchorage of some of the major houses may have been dispersed farther away throughout the Aegean. This overextension probably affected their legitimacy, as it probably was rather difficult to maintain an appearance of collective ethos on such large distances and so far away from their original key places, the initial locus to which the houses were bound.

Using a network approach, Knappett and colleagues (2008, 2011) also modeled maritime interactions at the beginning of the Late Bronze Age and simulated the potential short-term and longer-term impacts of the Theran eruption on exchange routes and the overall stability of Minoan Crete and of its influence across the Aegean (see also Jarriel 2020). In their simulations, the volcanic eruption does not cause the immediate collapse of the trade network but necessitated a reorientation of routes. The response eventually caused network collapse. During the post-eruption phase, Mycenaean ceramic imports to Crete (Bernhardt 2018) and to the Cyclades and Kythera (Gorogianni et al. 2016; Mountjoy 2008) clearly rose, probably reflecting a gradual expansion of mainland influence over the Aegean during LM IB (Fig. 1).

Trade continued to expand in scale across the Mediterranean from the late 15th to the 13th century BC and included parts of northern Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Sicily, and Sardinia (Bevan 2007, pp. 36–38; Cline 2010). The focus of the network, however, progressively changed from Crete to the Greek mainland (Knappett 2016a, p. 37). Interregional exchanges, cultural contacts, and mobilities for this period in the Aegean are essentially investigated under the interpretive scheme of “Mycenaeanization” (Gorogianni et al. 2016; Maran 2011; Stampolidis et al. 2014). Mycenaean imports, common during LM IB, were very rare during LM II–IIIA1 but increased again during LM IIIA2–B (Bernhardt 2018). Kommos stands out as the principal – if not only – substantial point of exchange on LM IIIA–B Crete, even if major administrative centers were still active at Knossos and Chania (Gheorghiadē 2020; Langohr 2019a; Parkinson 2010). Long-distance exchanges seem more decentralized on Crete, a phenomenon that “may be related to the establishment of a new era of trade, where the exchange of high value materials began to occur independently of state control” (Parkinson 2010, p. 22). After the fall of Knossos, during LM IIIA2–B, contacts and exchanges endured, but Cretan communities evolved largely outside the Mycenaean orbit (Langohr 2019a). One is tempted to assume that the island was then more of a peripheral player in the network of foreign relations.

From House to State, Scaling Up, and Down Again

In this section, we offer a diachronic overview of how we believe a collective ethos came about, and we highlight the ways in which it was expressed or mobilized in various types of gatherings, playing a key role in Cretan Bronze Age sociopolitical organization. We do this with references to the house society model (Letesson and Driessen 2020) and focus on the scalar and organizational evolution of these corporate groups. Through the Bronze Age, houses grew bigger – certainly by incorporating other smaller houses – and extended farther, evolving from coresidential groups to proximate groups (at the local level) to finally becoming dispersed houses stretching their influence throughout the island of Crete and beyond. This process is key, as we argue that it is precisely this release from proximity and co-presence at a specifically meaningful locale that triggered a series of reactions revolving around the manipulation of the original collective ethos.

As originally argued (Driessen 2010a), at the foundation of the ideological basis that tied house members together was a shared sense of belonging to the same place, and a place that acquired a specific meaning by its continuous use through time. This “locus boundedness” is hence inherently spatial and temporal, implying the propinquity of house members at a specific location (Driessen 2010a, p. 43). It also entailed a close connection between the living and the dead (Vavouranakis 2007).

During the Prepalatial period, directional or preferential exogamy of houses resulted in greater subregional cohesion and cultural uniformity, as attested by the evident signs of intraregional interaction, materialized foremost through ceramics, sealstones, and funerary customs. As in many other house societies (González-Ruibal and Ruiz-Gálvez 2016), members within these Prepalatial corporate groups were not strictly equal, as attested by the use of exotica in prestige strategies (Driessen 2020; Legarra Herrero 2012). Hierarchy existed but cohesion was ensured through the organization of communal events, highlighting a shared identity that surpassed actual rank differences. At the regional scale, the first hubs emerged at this time – formed by cemeteries, peak sanctuaries, and settlement structures that included large courts (Driessen 2007; Haggis 2002). These allowed the communal, nonexclusive gatherings of houses from various origins and status, turning the hubs into meaningful places of connectivity. This was also instrumental in the transformation of limited regions into relatively well-connected cultural clusters, albeit with few interregional linkages. The key here is gathering and the prevalence of spatial contexts favorable to inclusive congregation (Letesson and Driessen 2008). At the time, some houses had already adopted a proximate character as they were growing larger and extending their reach further. During the Prepalatial period, however, differences between houses in terms of wealth, access to raw materials, size, etc., were probably still minimal, and intergroup relationships within these regional clusters were maintained by advocating collegiality, cooperation, and equivalence.

In the Protopalatial period, these hubs were scaled up: the number of peak sanctuaries increased considerably as did the settlement-linked funerary areas, but in both cases no specific signs of inequality can be identified. The courts became more structured and were fully integrated in the fabric of articulated building complexes,

but they also progressively submitted to a more intensified process of accessibility control (Letesson 2014). The inauguration of a specific symbolic apparatus – ashlar, writing, elite ceramics, sealstones – underlined the more exclusive character of participation in these gatherings, but differences, both qualitative and quantitative, were present between those taking place within settlements as opposed to those connected to more local hubs, such as cemeteries and peak sanctuaries.

The base-driven character of the process is clear from the differences between the various regions of the island, but a hybrid form of society was already in place in some areas (e.g., Knossos, Malia, Phaistos), with state-like features – centralization, administrative practices, inchoate hierarchization at the intergroup level, etc. (Legarra Herrero 2016a) – and a combination of corporate and network strategies (Blanton et al. 1996; Feinman 2000). We believe that this process was linked to the emergence of marked differences among houses and their progressive detachment from their original locus, which threatened cohesion at the mesoscale of regional communities and should rather be linked to Cretan dynamics rather than external influences (contra Manning 2018, p. 47). The first palaces were created to compensate for such asymmetries. Their very construction was a collaborative effort and an integrating process, but they were also used to stage ceremonial practices, most notably in the form of feasts, to advocate a symbolic equivalence between houses that varied in size, power, and prosperity.

During the Neopalatial period, differences between houses became even more pronounced: ranking and equivalence strategies that were originally internal processes (i.e., essentially taking place at the intra-house level) became much more externalized (Letesson and Driessen 2020, p.16). They not only happened more intensively at the inter-houses level but also covered much wider areas as some houses became more dispersed, extending their influence beyond the region in which they originally appeared. Some houses, especially at Knossos, indeed probably became so large, wealthy, and powerful that they developed a privileged relation with the palatial building, with better access, use, and control of their collective resources. Concomitantly, an increased architectural segmentation is attested with the full introduction of controlled communal spaces, both open-air and roofed, within the fabric of the buildings, which probably reflects an increased categorical differentiation between ages, gender, and status (Letesson 2009, 2013), but also among corporate groups.

Within this changing sociopolitical landscape, cohesion-maintaining mechanisms were created at the various societal levels, transforming local groups into interconnected communities. One of the main mechanisms was the introduction of a high degree of standardization in all domains of material culture, affecting production, distribution, and consumption (Knappett 2011). Architecture, ceramics, and iconographic language (Blakolmer 2010) became highly uniform, and local idiosyncrasies (e.g., in funerary customs or cult practices) were suppressed (Devolder 2010; Peatfield 2016a). Sociopolitical complexity hence dictated the material context, but the material context also reciprocally materialized, perpetuated, and intensified the sociopolitical complexity.

In this context, communal sharing and the collective ethos were mobilized to compensate for aspirations for – and consequences of – hierarchical ranking among

corporate groups and in Cretan society in general. The second palaces were no longer “devoted to equality matching but the theater of the enactment of an ideology of communal sharing” (Letesson and Driessen 2020, p.16), in other words, gatherings became a way to control and propagate propaganda to the wider public, institutionalizing an appearance of similarity. This strategy seems to have been successful, resulting in an island-wide imagined, self-reproductive community sustained by symbolic and material mechanisms. This phase is often regarded as the Golden Age or apogee of the island, which was also copied and/or imposed abroad. This move was paralleled by an effective, on-the-ground Knossian political control (Whitlaw 2019) but also a far-reaching religious propaganda (Knappett 2018).

What the system gained in scale, it lost in resilience, however, especially when confronted with unforeseen natural events, such as the Theran eruption and its consequences (Driessen and Letesson in press). The immediate reaction seems to have been intensified economic exploitation of previously marginalized hinterlands (Kalantzopoulou 2022; Papadatos and Kalantzopoulou 2022) but also to increase existing cohesion-reinforcing mechanisms. On the one hand, this led to the construction of additional gathering places (such as Zakros and Phaistos), an intensified administrative control of economic surplus, as illustrated by Hagia Triada, a more exclusive symbolic apparatus, and probably additional rules regulating participation in communal events. On the other hand, noncentralized gathering places such as peak sanctuaries and cemeteries were reduced in number and were more strictly controlled.

Collective practices probably became too exclusionary, abstract, and remote to stay effective. Specific houses may have incorporated or replaced other house groups, or dispersed themselves throughout larger territories, lacking the temporal and spatial anchorage of earlier corporate groups and stretching links that were more difficult to maintain. We think that this combination – the effects of the eruption and the overstretching of the system – was responsible for the demise of the poly-palatial system in LM IB (Letesson and Driessen 2020, p.17). Communal gatherings were stripped of their intrinsic value and integrative potential, and their disappearance precipitated societal disintegration. To some extent, it was the disconnection of the house-palace propaganda from local situations and affinities that weakened the system. The collective ethos wavered, house members and, probably, whole communities were excluded from the sociopolitical process. This may have caused friction and discontent while alternative pathways in political representation seem to have been looked for.

The more individualistic, male-oriented character of society during the advanced Neopalatial is obvious and finds confirmation in the textual data of the Linear B tablets of the following phase. During the Final Palatial period, most of the symbolic apparatus remained the same, but it was now entirely imposed and no longer base driven. During this phase a strong centralization materialized under the authority of an administration that is similar to contemporary systems in the Near East. The geographical structuring of the island, however, comprising highly differing environmental microzones (Fig. 4) that limit overland control, does not favor such a system, and it collapsed under its own weight, breaking down into several smaller regional networks during the Postpalatial period (Langohr 2020). The downscaling implied by this loss of centralization allowed each region to develop more

autonomously again, though remaining interconnected where the exchange of some products was concerned. In such a context, surviving or newly established corporate groups explicitly invested in the reappropriation of earlier, meaningful places with a long history of residence, as evidenced, for example, at Malia, Sissi, and Palaikastro, and this return to a weaker politically interconnected system ultimately prepared the island for its entry in the city-state world of classical antiquity.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued for the existence of a specific societal trajectory throughout the Bronze Age history of Crete. A landscape initially dotted with small local communities, connected through kinship bonds and shared practices at the microregional level, was progressively transformed into a homogenous, all-embracing ideological structure that pervaded society and constituted the backbone of its hierarchical organization. Legitimized and mobilized within a religious system with clear political overtones, this resulted in a supra-regional, global network that can rightfully be called Minoan. We also contend that, throughout the Cretan Bronze Age, gatherings and feasts remained key practices to ensure social cohesion, but the evolution of venues through time hints at differences in terms of scale and origin of participants while reflecting clear variations in the balance between base-driven and imposed practices.

How did this happen? We have argued that it was through the progressive but intentional manipulation and institutionalization of an enduring collective ethos. Manifested in shared practices – attested in the production, distribution, and consumption of material culture but also in funerary customs, the built environment, ritual, and religion – this collective ethos was inherently attached to a specific form of social organization, that of a house society, which drastically evolved during the Cretan Bronze Age.

During its early phases, the collective ethos was clearly aligned with communal sharing through commensal practices in local and regional settings. Gathering in cemeteries may have involved only the household or local community without social distinction; peak sanctuaries, caves, and court buildings may initially have had some kind of regional integrative function involving corporate groups of various status (Haysom 2018; Relaki 2012), presumably under the initiative of the more important ones.

Through time, differences among corporate groups led to various mechanisms of hierarchization among them. Because of this differential ranking – probably related to heterogeneous access to wealth, prestige, and foreign goods but also to a varying degree of territorial reach – a stronger need to maintain social cohesion arose. This was obtained through the creation of court buildings in which collective rituals were staged that implied balanced and/or equivalent contributions to communal events by corporate groups or houses of variable importance (responding to equality matching sensu Fiske 1991).

The increase in scale and hierarchization during the latter half of the Protopalatial period, which was exacerbated in the Neopalatial period, was legitimized and

rendered acceptable for the public by the instrumentalization of the collective ethos by Knossian houses through a narrative of similarity. Beyond attempts at social integration and cohesion, this institutionalization then also served to extend their control over the island (and beyond). This process neither totally eclipsed more local or vernacular collective activities, nor prevented Late Bronze Age Cretan society to collapse under its increasing hierarchical rigidification further reinforced by the Knossian overarching religious and political propaganda. Maintained for a while during the Final Palatial period, this hierarchical structuration of society finally dwindled, replaced by other forms of local and regional collectives and a resuscitation of integration-enhancing gatherings.

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