

A MINOAN SEMINAR.  
THE MESARA THOLOS TOMBS FROM THE  
PROTOPALATIAL PHASES THROUGH THE MYCENAEAN PERIOD:  
NEW FOUNDATIONS AND RE-USE OF THE PAST

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(Venezia, 25 Febbraio 2011)

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## FOREWORD

The organization of this seminar is part of the final phase of the project «From the Tomb to the Palace. Community spaces and the individual dimension in Old and New Palace Cretan society», conducted by the local unit of Ca' Foscari within the PRIN (Project of Relevant National Interest) 2007. I considered appropriate to propose the publication of the scientific results emerged from the seminar work in the *Rivista di Archeologia*, to emphasize the link of the project with the activities of the Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici at Ca' Foscari. I take the opportunity to thank the Director, Prof. Adriano Maggiani, and the editorial board for having accepted my proposal.

Aim of the seminar, held in Venice on February 25<sup>th</sup> 2011, was the study of several aspects of some *tholos* tombs of the Mesara plain in the South of Crete, which were founded or re-used in Middle Minoan IB – Middle Minoan IIA and later. It focused mainly on the deep understanding of the funerary contexts of the Mesara plain in Protopalatial times, focusing first on the chronology of the tholos tombs in use in the Protopalatial period, and then on their function. Which tombs were actually founded in the Protopalatial period? In which phase of the Protopalatial period the Prepalatial tombs were re-used? Which tombs were used (or re-used) in the Protopalatial period for burials and which ones only for non-funerary rituals? Why this differentiation? These important questions ought to be answered through a work that, obviously, could not be concluded within the space of a seminar. Our intention was rather to highlight, examining some case studies, the subject of recent studies inside our research unit, in comparison with an other research experience in the same geographical and cultural context.

In Prepalatial times, and especially between Early Minoan I and Early Minoan II periods, the Mesara plain is characterized by the emergence of the *tholos* tombs, which were used until the end of Pre-

palatial (Middle Minoan IA) and sometimes until the early phases of the Protopalatial period (Middle Minoan IB-Middle Minoan IIA). The majority of these tombs were excavated and published at the beginning of the XXth century by the Greek Archeological Service, and in particular by S. Xanthoudides<sup>1</sup>. These publications were admirable for the time, but were vitiated because of two factors. First, because of the nature of the *tholos* tombs, which are collective tombs, used over long periods of time and containing a large number of successive burials, periodically cleared: their rich, but unstratified deposits were not useful for chronological purposes. Second, because of the lack of Prepalatial and Protopalatial ceramic sequences valid for the pottery productions of southern central Crete. In the Nineties K. Branigan<sup>2</sup> devoted new works to the Mesara *tholos* tombs, focusing on the architectural evidence, on the function of the ceramic assemblages and on the funerary (and non-funerary) rituals associated to the tombs, mostly in Prepalatial times. In these seminal publications, anyway, no chronological distinctions were done for Prepalatial as well as for Protopalatial ceramic material retrieved from the *tholos* tombs, that means non-distinctions between Early Minoan IIA and Early Minoan IIB, Middle Minoan IA, Middle Minoan IIA and Middle Minoan IIB.

Recently, new discoveries and new publications have much enriched our knowledge of both the *tholos* tombs and the settlements of the Mesara region in the Prepalatial and Protopalatial phases. In 2004, the publication of the *tholos* tombs of Lebena, by Alexiou and Warren<sup>3</sup>, has defined the discrete strata containing different ceramic material, dating from Early Minoan II until Middle Minoan IA. Another important contribution is the edition (2010) of the Moni Odighitria cemetery, by Vasilakis and Branigan<sup>4</sup>. In the same years new excavations at Phaistos (2000-2002, and 2004) have revealed significant

<sup>1</sup> XANTHOUDIDES 1924.

<sup>2</sup> BRANIGAN 1970; BLACKMAN, BRANIGAN 1982, pp. 1-57; BRANIGAN 1987a, pp. 29-38; — 1987b, pp. 43-51; — 1993; — 1998, pp. 13-26.

<sup>3</sup> ALEXIOU, WARREN 2004.

<sup>4</sup> BRANIGAN, VASILAKIS 2010.

evidence for Prepalatial times<sup>5</sup>. The stratigraphy retrieved here is important because, for the first time, has allowed a proper definition of the Early Minoan-Middle Minoan IA ceramic sequence for this site. In particular the latest Middle Minoan IA ceramic material has offered a useful starting point for the subsequent ceramic sequence of Protopalatial Phaiastos, since it has allowed the fundamental distinction between the latest Middle Minoan IA and the early Middle Minoan IB in this site<sup>6</sup>. The researches conducted by V. La Rosa at Ayia Triada in the necropolis area (1997-1998) offered the opportunity to propose a new interpretation of *Tholos* A (M. Cultraro) and its southern annexes (F. Carinci) and of subsequent *Tholos* B (now S. Aluia)<sup>7</sup>, while the full review of the graves at Kamilari entrusted to I. Caloi for the Protopalatial phases and L. Girella for the subsequent ones, is rich in many subjects for reflection on funerary practices and rituals.

Our seminar is intended to address a new and focused attention to the funerary evidence in the Mesara during the Protopalatial times. The purpose is either to illustrate some recent studies of burial complexes founded *ex novo* in this period, or to propose a more detailed discussion of the forms of re-employment of complexes with *tholos* tombs of Prepalatial date.

In light of the fact that some of the *tholos* tombs built in Protopalatial times have a continuity of use or a re-use in later life, i.e. in Neopalatial and Mycenaean periods, it was considered necessary to provide space to a digression on this specific topic in order to complete the picture of the re-use of burial evidence in the Mesara region.

I decided to set the work of the seminar bringing together a small group of young scholars recently engaged in the study and review of structures and funerary offerings found in the tombs of Mesara mentioned above. These complexes, excavated in the last century, were published as partial or incomplete, and for each of them has felt, by planning various research projects, the need to provide a complete and thorough new edition.

More specifically, our interest has focused on the important structures founded in the Protopalatial

period, i.e. Kamilari, Ayia Triada B, Apesokari I, with particular attention both to the single chronological phases in which they were used (i.e. Middle Minoan IB, Middle Minoan IIA, Middle Minoan IIB) and to the socio-political and economic conditions of the period in which they were built. It has not been neglected, in these contributions, to highlight the comparison between the funerary complexes in which is attested a continuity of use (Kamilari) or a reoccupation (Tholos B of Ayia Triada) in the Neopalatial and Mycenaean phases.

Recent studies on the necropolis of Kamilari by I. Caloi enabled her to illustrate the numerous innovations related to the foundation of the tholos in Middle Minoan IB and especially to its continuity of use in Middle Minoan IIA and Middle Minoan IIB, during which we see a diversity of use of the structures, and even a change in the forms of ritual. In this regard, of particular interest is the discussion of the similarities between the funeral rites performed in Middle Minoan IB at Kamilari and those of nearby Ayia Triada, as well as those attested at Koumasa. The comparison with cemeteries remained in use in Middle Minoan IB and/or in Middle Minoan IIA, as Lebena, Koumasa, Porti and Vorou, as well as with the complex of Platanos, partly re-used in Middle Minoan IIB period, raises interesting research perspectives concerning the articulated framework both of funerary evidence and burial (and non-burial) rituals documented throughout the Protopalatial period.

The study of *Tholos* I of Apesokari was recently addressed by G. Flouda (Archaeological Museum of Herakleion), engaged in a detailed review of data relating to the foundation and continuity of use of this cemetery, consisting of two tholoi, Tomb II, of Prepalatial date<sup>8</sup>, and Tomb I<sup>9</sup> founded in Middle Minoan I and remained in use until the Middle Minoan IIB period. Apesokari I is characterized by the unique presence of two altars, one of which shows excellent comparisons with the altar found in Kamilari, mostly for the pottery deposit. This peculiarity of the site has provided an excellent starting point to discuss the similarities between the funerary and/or propitiatory rituals that took place

<sup>5</sup> LA ROSA 2002, pp. 635-883; — 2004, pp. 611-670.

<sup>6</sup> TODARO 2005, pp. 11-46; — 2009a, pp. 105-145; — 2009b, pp. 333-352; CALOI 2009, pp. 373-440.

<sup>7</sup> CULTRARO 2000, pp. 309-326; — 2003, pp. 301-327; CARINCI 2004, pp. 25-40.

<sup>8</sup> DAVARAS 1964, p. 441; now under study by G. Vavouranakis.

<sup>9</sup> SCHÖRGENDORFER 1951, pp. 13-22.

in several cemeteries in the Mesara during the Protopalatial period.

The revision of the phases of use of the Kamilari cemetery in the early Neopalatial period (i.e. Middle Minoan III), is the subject of the paper by L. Girella, which presents an interesting range of problems, because the intense occupation of a *tholos* at this time is unique in the context of the entire funerary evidence on Crete. The continuity of use of the *tholos* tomb also in the subsequent Neopalatial phases (Late Minoan IA and IB) and later in the Mycenaean (or Late Palatial) period, especially in Late Minoan IIIA1 and Late Minoan IIIA2, allowed, in addition, a comparison with the neighboring Tholos B of Ayia Triada, equally reoccupied in this phase.

As is well known, the cemetery of Ayia Triada consists of two *tholos* tombs: Tomb A, connected to a group of small rooms located to the south, was

built in EM II and remained in use almost until MM II period. Tomb B, however, newly founded in MM IB, continues to be used until the MM IIB<sup>10</sup>. The discussion based on the paper by S. Aluia has moved, in this case, mainly on the re-use of Tomb B during the Mycenaean period, in conjunction with the reoccupation of the adjacent settlement of Ayia Triada.

The different but intersecting fields of interest of the young scholars, who have contributed to this seminar, offer many insights and so many questions, part of a debate dedicated to a topic still open to new solutions, in an attempt, albeit a limited one, to introduce new elements to a reading of the funerary contexts of the Protopalatial period in the Mesara, an aspect which, although very complex and diversified, has often been neglected and is therefore still poorly debated.

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<sup>10</sup> PARIBENI 1905, cc. 677-756.

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