Pottery Production at Pre- and Protopalatial Phaistos: Data from the Excavations on the Palace Hill

Pottery production in the Prepalatial and Protopalatial Mesara has long been discussed from the perspective of the finished products (Day et al. 2006), because the kilns uncovered at Phaistos, Ayia Triada and Kommos were all attributed to the Neopalatial period and in any case, provided little if any information about production.

The discovery, from excavation at Phaistos (La Rosa 2008; 2009) and my subsequent study of the newly discovered assemblages (Todaro 2009; 2011A; 2012; 2013), however, has made clear that the pottery kilns preserved to the west of the west court of the palace dated to the Protopalatial period (Carinci 1997) and in the last and tell preserved of a series of kilns built in the same area from at least EM III through MM IIIB (fig. 1). This discovery and the contextual re-evaluation of all the Prepalatial and Protopalatial assemblages retrieved from the same area by Levi and La Rosa has led to the hypothesis that the western slope of the palace of Phaistos was occupied by a potter's quarter laid out on terraces extending west of the palace over an undetermined area (Todaro 2009; 2011A; 2012; 2013). Interestingly, the available data suggests that the production area was permanently occupied by artisans who made stone vases and was also periodically frequented by groups of potters who shared the facilities of the area, but to distinguish their output by painting or incising their distinctive mark on the rim of vases that would have been hard to distinguish from others in the common kiln (Todaro 2009). It has however proved difficult, so far, to ascertain whether the potters lived at the site, which from at least the fifth phase of occupation was organised in clusters of buildings scattered across the slopes of the three hills, or from a wider area.

As far as the terraces opened by S. Fiandra in the 1960s in the area to the south of the palace (fig. 3) seem to hint at the presence of a production area in close proximity to the palace, as several kiln wasters were reported together with MM II pottery, ochre remains and pure clay inside broken vases (Fiandra 2000). The materials retrieved from these trenches, however, do not seem to have been kept at Phaistos and thus the potential of this discovery for a deeper understanding of the organization of pottery production at Prepalatial Phaistos cannot be tested further.

New Data from the Survey of the Christos Effendi Hill

Recent work conducted at Phaistos by a Greek-Italian mission coordinated by E. Carinci and M. Bredaki (Bredaki et al. 2009) has unexpectedly made possible a reconsideration of the issue of pottery production at the site, in terms of extension, location and internal organization of the production area. Indeed, a preliminary study of the materials collected in 2011 during a survey of the southern slopes of the hill of Christos Effendi (fig. 4) has allowed the author to identify a large group of MM IB-IIA pottery, with several kiln wasters, a fragmentary potter’s wheel, and what appears to be the floor of a kiln (fig. 3). All this evidence was concentrated in three adjoining topographical survey units (fig. 4), and points to the existence of an MMIA pottery workshop some 800m west of the palace.

It also suggests that in the phase in which the palace was physically transformed and received most of its most distinctive architectural features – facade built of orthostats, monumental entrance, Joufloures, raised walkways (Carinci-La Rosa 2009) – three areas of the site were involved in pottery production. One stood on the slopes of the palace hill, one on the southern slope of the same hill, and the other some 800m west of the first two. This last area is close to a pottery assemblage uncovered by Taramelli in 1899, consisting of a large amount of Kamares ware, and relatively close to a kiln accidentally found in 1954 during the construction of the road connecting Phaistos with Matala. Unfortunately, the exact position or chronology of this kiln – which according to Levi was literally cut in half by the opening of the road – cannot be ascertained. It was however certainly located in the vicinity of the church of St. George, and hence half way between the kilns lying west of the west court of the First Palace (fig. 4).

Potential for Future Research

The data from the survey of the Christos Effendi, coupled with the information gathered from the western and southern slopes of the palace hill and the area between the Middle Acropolis and the hill of Christos Effendi, helps to shed light on the organization of pottery production at Phaistos. The available data suggests a multiplicity of locations involved in pottery production in MM IA, a situation that needs to be explained. The types of kiln wasters documented on the palace hill and on the slopes of Christos Effendi hill are fairly homogeneous in shape and ceramic class. Taking into account that the production area located near the palace seems to have been only periodically frequented by potters who gathered there to supply participants in ceremonies held in the western court with the necessary ceramic objects, it might be hypothesised that the actualy resided permanently on the slopes of the hills of the Phaistos ridge. On the other hand, considering that only Ayia Triada was involved in pottery production in the Protopalatial period as borne out by the kiln wasters and the potter’s wheel found in the area of the necropolis, on which see Carinci 1997), we possibility should be considered that all the areas between the western and southern slopes of the Palace hill was occupied by a huge potters’ quarters who produced Kamares ware, potli, and dark-on-light tableware. This second scenario has enormous implications for the way in which we see pottery production at a palatial centre.

We will be testing this scenario in a three phase project, which will involve (1) a thematic survey to locate the trenches opened by S. Fiandra in the 1960s in the area to the south of the palace in order to find other concentrations of evidence linkable to pottery production and thus to circumscribe areas where the presence of firing a buried kiln is higher; (2) geo-magnetic investigations of these areas, (3) trial trenches to ascertain whether or not pottery concentrations point to a buried kiln and thus, what the entire area in question was occupied by potters.

References bibliography