PAPERS AND MONOGRAPHS OF THE FINNISH INSTITUTE AT ATHENS VOL. XXI

CULT MATERIAL
FROM ARCHAEOLOGICAL DEPOSITS TO INTERPRETATION OF EARLY GREEK RELIGION

Edited by Petra Pakkanen and Susanne Bocher

HELSINKI 2015

ISSN 1237-2684
ISBN 978-952-67211-9-4

Printed in Greece by Alphabet SA, Athens.

Cover: Votive figurines from Olympia (photo S. Bocher).

Layout: Vesa Vahtikari

Copy-editing: Jari Pakkanen

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‘Meeting with Others and the Gods’: the Social Uses of Early Cretan Cult-Sites

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Abstract

The argument of this paper is that the cult-sites in early Crete (c. 800–500 BC) did not only function as places where people worshipped the gods but were also locations for different kinds of social interaction. In other words, as meeting-places cult-sites played an essential role as incentives for contacts between people, whether it is inhabitants in a particular settlement or groups of people from different regions of Crete. The social perspective of early Greek cult has often concerned votive display as a means for the aristocracy to manifest its position in society. The deposition of prestigious votives is regarded, thus, a political statement made by the élite. Instead, these kinds of votives are here interpreted as communal depositions. Furthermore, by de-emphasizing the notion of display, I choose to interpret votives as expressions of accessibility to a cult-site and, consequently, the space where the votives were deposited indicates to what degree social interactions could have occurred.

Introduction

Archaeological studies on cult-sites in prehistoric and ancient Greece usually concern religious and cultic issues. In the field of anthropology, however, rituals and cult have often been interpreted from a more social perspective which implies that cult-practices are integrated in the social life of people.[1] It is my purpose to explore the social aspects of votives further by examining cult-practices in Iron Age and Archaic Crete, here also referred to as early Crete. The choice of early Cretan cult as the topic of research gives rise to a number of questions. Firstly, I will consider how studies of early Cretan cult often follow a number of predetermined narratives and research-questions. Furthermore, I will also examine the archaeological prerequisites for identifying and interpreting early Cretan cult, mainly in connection with votives.

My second aim is to argue for an approach that encourages a theoretical and methodological discussion of how social archaeology can contribute to the interpretation of ancient Greek votive deposits.[2] From an archaeological perspective, the defining feature for many cult-sites is the presence of votives. A votive, in turn, is often defined based on its role as a gift to a supernatural power. This exchange embraces an elusive

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[1] This aspect is discussed by C. Renfrew (2007) in a recent article concerning the archaeological study of religion: he points at an interpretation where the archaeological record does not necessarily always reflect cult-practices or religious beliefs but instead an affirmation of social institutions.

[2] I have already elaborated on such an approach in Sjögren 2008, 144–150, on which much of this analysis is based.

relationship between the dedicator(s) and a supernatural recipient which is often difficult to grasp in archaeological terms.[3] However, in the sphere of cult-practices in an early Greek context it is not these kinds of cognitive aspects of votives that have been the focus in research. Instead, we find several studies that emphasize votives as displays pertaining to different identities, be it wealth display of the élite or the display of ethnic belongings, often in the sphere of aristocratic competition.[4] In other words, the cult-site becomes a place where hierarchical structures of early Greek societies are manifested. In such an interpretative framework, the social dimension of cult-sites is clearly emphasized since they are not exclusively treated as spaces for ritual action and communication with supernatural powers. As we shall see, the discourse of social display has also been applied to explain the meaning of certain votive types in early Cretan sanctuaries.

In this paper I will question the common notion of votive display in early Cretan sanctuaries as an exclusive expression of élite manifestation or as a means to visually articulate social status in a ranked society. In my interpretation, cult-sites are not only places where people communicated with the gods but also places that had the potential to induce social interaction between different groups of people. A number of different kinds of cult-sites will serve as examples where votive deposits and associated cultic space indicate the presence of various degrees of social interaction in early Cretan cult.

Master-Narratives of Early Cretan Religion

Crete has often been treated as an island imbued with religion. This view has, in particular, been relevant to our perceptions of Minoan Crete. However, it also applies to the study of Cretan religion in the Iron Age and Archaic periods. Studies of Cretan religion and cult-practices of these centuries have been shaped by a number of master-narratives. The analytical framework for all of these narratives can be associated with analytical foci that are commonplace in traditional studies of ancient Greek cult. Typical for such foci are issues like identification of the deities worshipped, the establishment of a chronological range and origins of cult, site-typologies referring to architectural form and placement of cult, and the classification of votives often based on art historical, stylistic and/or iconographic criteria.

The first narrative concerns the Minoan heritage. There has been a tendency to relate religious practices of early Crete with a Minoan religious tradition, which implies continuity in cult.[5] Many cultic features of the Iron Age and Archaic periods are consequently assigned an origin in the Minoan culture. The second master-narrative concerns the impact of Near Eastern influences on the religion of early Crete. Various religious features and cult-practices are compared with Near Eastern equivalents. It is a notion that has been treated in a way similar to the Minoan legacy and on many accounts the two narratives converge. This kind of convergence can be observed in the way archaeological remains have been interpreted in relation to a religious context. Motifs with religious connotations, like for instance the naked goddess present in seventh-

[3] Osborne 2004, 2–3.
[4] Morgan 1990, 46; Langdon 1987, 107–113; de Polignac 1996; Whitley 2001, 143–144.
[5] In Sjögren 2008, 64–69, I discuss the notion of cultic continuity from the Bronze Age to later times in Crete.

century contexts, have both been explained as an artistic influence from an Oriental motif and as an expression of a transformed older cultic tradition, in this case the worship of a Minoan goddess.[6]

Finally, a third master-narrative is often present in research on religion in Crete after the Bronze Age. It involves political implications of early Cretan cult, where cult-practices have been interpreted as part of developing political institutions within the early Cretan *polis*.[7] One example is the seventh century cult-building in the *polis*-settlement of Prinias in Central Crete, which has been connected with the Cretan *syssition* where communal meals were shared by men of the élite class. The frieze of the building, which displays horse-mounted warriors, has been seen as an expression of some kind of élite manifestation.[8] At the same time, other sculptures on this building have been interpreted from a Near Eastern horizon.[9]

Cult-sites in Early Crete

Although my primary concern is not with issues of definition, in the case of early Crete the character of the empirical material at hand, often fragmentary and remaining uncovered under different circumstances, is one reason why basic criteria for the archaeological identification of cult should be discussed. Therefore, a methodological account based on a few observations about cult-activities in the archaeological context of early Crete may be appropriate here.

A relatively large number of cult-sites are known in Crete from these centuries. During the Iron Age and Archaic periods religious practices took place at different kinds of cult-sites. Their archaeological character ranges from chance finds, sites discovered through survey work to sites that have undergone various degrees of excavations. In general, the largest bulk of sites have left us with relatively little remains and the presence of votives is often the main guiding feature in the identification of a cult-site. Most of these sites provide archaeologists with votive material of a kind that we would define as having unambiguous religious connotations, like figurines and plaques of terracotta and bronze, decorated full-scale versions of bronze armor (helmets, cuirasses, *mitrai*) or miniature versions of armor and pottery. It is finds like these that determine the designation of a cult-site especially when other material remains are scarce.[10] In other words, such votives become diagnostic elements in the identification of a cult-site. The practice of depositing votives must, however, also have included other kinds of remains beyond the obviously

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[6] Böhm 1990, 141–143, sees the frequency of this motif in seventh-century Crete both as a sign of cultic continuity from the Bronze Age and as a willingness to adopt an eastern mode of cult.

[7] Watrous 1996, 108 connects religious life, and a community's relationship with the gods, with the political development of Archaic *poleis* in Crete.

[8] D'Acunto 1995, 49–50 interprets the frieze as an aristocratic political statement related to the formation of the *polis* at Prinias.

[9] Carter (1997, 86–96) interprets the sculptural decoration of the building as a Cretan adaptation of iconography connected with the Syrio-Palestine institution *marzeah* which she believes is a close equivalent to the Cretan *syssition*. Carter, therefore, draws the conclusion that the building displayed not just a superficial, artistic inspiration from the East, but rather a deeper institutional connection between Crete and the Levant.

[10] These votives can be defined as 'primary votives', referring to the terminology used by Gudrun Klebinder-Gauß in this volume.

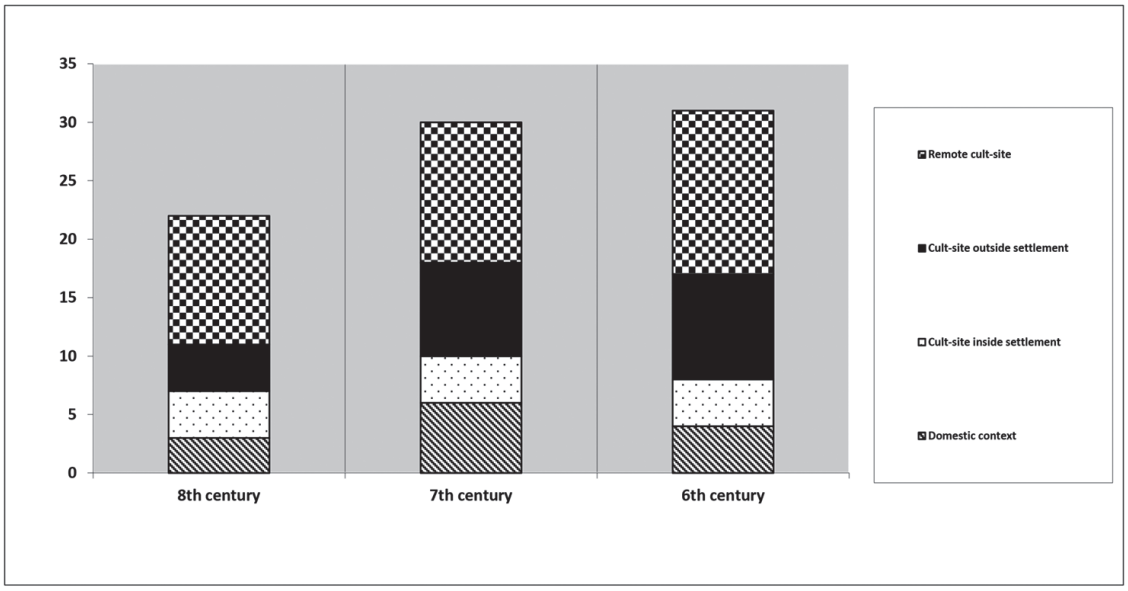

Fig. 7.1. Number of cult sites with votives, but with no indications of other cultic activities (data from Sjögren 2003).

cultic – artifacts like jewelry, pottery and bronze vessels that can also be found in other archaeological contexts. Thus, such objects could potentially have had another function (and value or meaning) in settings other than the cult-site. Furthermore, a cultic place did not necessarily have to involve the practice of depositing votives, which implies that cult-sites lacking votives run the risk of becoming invisible in the archaeological record. Other archaeological criteria for the identification of cult-sites must be applied, but beyond the presence of altars and remains of sacrifices this may be a difficult issue to solve.

Scrutinizing the archaeological situation shows that the largest part of Cretan cult-sites from this period have been identified through the presence of votives – and nothing else (Figure 7.1). All of these sites could, however, not have functioned as places where regular, long-term intentional cultic activities took place. Identification through mere presence of votives is fairly unproblematic in those cases where the deposits contain substantial amounts of votives which suggests an intentional cultic use of the site. One example is the large deposit inside the modern town of Sitia in eastern Crete, where up to 900 terracotta figurines and plaques dating to the eighth and seventh centuries were found in different pits.[11] Even though no architecture was discovered, the number of votives deposited indicates the existence of some kind of space intended for cultic activities (in this case the deposition of votives), either at the place where the deposit was discovered or somewhere close by.

In other cases the number of known votives is so small that the identification of a cult-site has rested on other criteria. For example, at Sta Lenika (Figure 7.2) in the region of Agios Nikolaos, south of modern Elounda, identification of the worshipped deity through an interpretation of the architecture established the function of the site. A cult-building dating to the Hellenistic period was excavated by French archaeologists in the 1930s and in connection to this an earlier simple one-room building of uncertain

[11] Papadakis 1980.

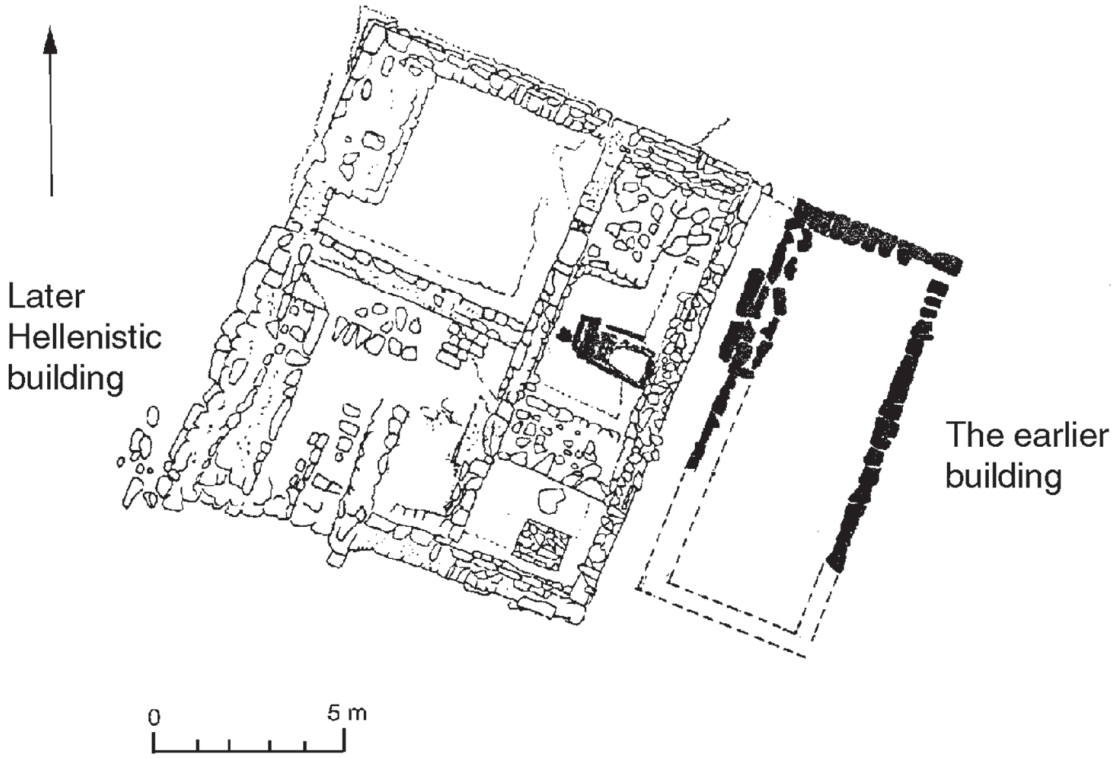

Fig. 7.2. Elounda: Sta Lenika (after Bousquet 1938, pl. 42 and Mazarakis Ainian 1997, fig. 452).

construction date was discovered.[12] Hellenistic inscriptions found at the site, and in the region, identified the cult-building as 'ancient Aphrodision' and since one Hellenistic inscription refers to the rebuilding of an earlier temple, it has been assumed that this excavated earlier building was the older version of the Hellenistic temple. Furthermore, on basis of an inscription dating to the sixth century found in modern Elounda mentioning a cult to Ares it was assumed that the temple involved a combined cult to Aphrodite and Ares (hence the double *cella* of the Hellenistic building).[13] This cult-site is an example where later unquestionable evidence of cult is projected onto an earlier situation where remains of cultic activities are nevertheless very few. Besides the building, a hearth, or assumed 'altar', together with Protogeometric and Geometric pottery was found outside the entrance. Found in a different context the cultic interpretation of the hearth may not have been so evident. Three associated deposits containing a small bronze figurine of a bull from the Archaic period, and terracotta masques and figurines of uncertain date, are perhaps more indicative of a cultic function for the site. However, the archaeological situation before the Hellenistic period is so vague that the cultic character of this site during the Iron Age and Archaic period cannot be determined.

Many Cretan cult-sites are only known through small-scale unsystematic excavations conducted a long time ago where the results have unfortunately not been properly published. Furthermore, cult-sites have been uncovered through discoveries by chance or through survey work. In these cases, it is consequently impossible to analyze any deeper cultic or social meanings in the activities that once took place. Illustrative

[12] Bousquet 1938.
[13] Prent 2005, 348.

of such circumstances are the many caves where their location, and the fact that they are caves, often qualifies them as cult-sites even when there are only one or two votives known from the site. To mention a few examples: the Lera cave on the Akrotiri peninsula in Western Crete where only one female terracotta figurine from the Archaic period has been found, a cave above the modern village Liliano in Central Crete where a terracotta bull figurine and a faïence head of the seventh century was found, and the Mavro Spelio cave at Knossos with one terracotta figurine from the Archaic period.[14]

In light of the above described archaeological circumstances the votive becomes the most important analytical element in the identification of a cult-site in early Crete even though location in the case of caves, and later cultic situations, are used to identify cult-sites. It is, however, not unproblematic to presuppose a presence of votives since activities related to cult do not necessarily have to comprise the deposition of votives. In other words, it is a particular kind of cult-site that we are able to identify archaeologically. For instance, traces of sacrificial activities could also be seen as a defining feature for cult-sites. In the case of early Crete, the archaeological evidence for sacrificial rituals is, however, fairly poor and when it exists there are only a few known cases in the form of scrappy indications.

Related to sacrifices are such activities as dining. In archaeological contexts, sacrificial dining has recently been interpreted as expressions of communal meals often associated with élite consumption.[15] Dining is, thus, a more direct illustration of the social uses of a cult-site. Particular pottery, such as drinking vessels and plates, and the remains of animal bones indicate a presence of dining activities. For early Crete this is, however, problematic since there is often a lack of reported animal bones, especially in older publications.[16] This hampers our understanding of communal dining and the focus is, therefore, often placed on the deposition of votives as expressions of cultic activities.

A Social Archaeology of Votive Deposits

Social space can be seen as the result of relations between individuals and groups, and such relationships are not always something concretely tangible in the archaeological remains. It is the associated activities, or human behavior, which shape the social meaning of cultic space. The deposition of votives implies a considerable number of participants in a ritual and the space where this ritual occurred would thus function as a place of assembly.[17] As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, in this analytical setting votive

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[14] For information about the Lera Cave, see Guest-Papamanoli and Lambraki 1976, 212–237; on the Liliano Cave, see Hoffman 1997, 49 and Karetsou and Stampolidis 1998, 221, no. 258; for the Mavro Spelio, see Forsdyke 1926–1927, 248–250.

[15] In recent years there has been an increasing interest to study the concept of feasting and dining as a religious ritual in archaeological contexts. There has, however, been a particular focus on Minoan and Mycenaean settings as seen in a number of published conferences such as Wright 2004 and Hitchcock et al. 2008. For a later Dark Age example, see d'Agata 1997–2000 and d'Agata 1999 concerning the Early Iron Age site of Sybrita in western Crete where rubbish pits containing ash, charcoal, animal bones and pottery sherds have been interpreted as possible remains from dining connected with rituals.

[16] Dining associated with sacrificial activities occurred at the cult sites of Kommos, Amnisos, Kato Syme and possibly also the so-called Altar Hill at Praisos; Sjögren 2003, 54.

[17] Renfrew 2007, 115–116.

deposits are, therefore, interpreted not only as the results of cultic actions but also as reflections of social activities. In the study of early Greek cult, votives are often treated as social markers, i.e. the display of votives is seen as a means to manifest social status of an individual or possibly as some kind of political statement of a collective. The votive becomes an object of social prestige. There are, however, alternative ways to interpret the social meaning of votive deposits.

Certain votive types can be interpreted as private cult-offerings, while others probably functioned as part of a more communal cultic act. I have elsewhere argued that already by the late eighth century we see some kind of standardized manufacture of votives in Crete, mainly mold- or wheel-made terracotta figurines and plaques, and this is even more apparent in the following two centuries.[18] My interpretation of this increase in votives was that it may be a sign that more people were now able to acquire votive objects manufactured for the specific purpose of communicating with a deity at a cult-site. Votives like these may have had the same meaning as ordinary utility goods and it may, therefore, be possible to assign them a private, personal use. Moreover, the fact that most of them are small and portable implies that they were suitable as gifts from an individual and could therefore be described as 'personal votives'. It should be emphasized that what I mean by this term is that these votives were personal in the sense that many people had the possibility to acquire them not in the sense that they reflected personal characteristics of the votary. Besides representing communication between individuals and gods, the presences of such votives can also be seen as reflecting attendance at, and accessibility of, a cult-site. In other words, a high number of 'personal votives' would perhaps indicate that the cult-site had the potential to bring about a high degree of social interaction.

Other types of votives can be contrasted with these kinds of smaller, portable and standardized votives. I am here primarily referring to votives where size, material and/or execution of their manufacture clearly separate them from 'personal votives'. Examples are decorated tripods, cauldrons, bronze shields and helmets. It is possible that these were the votives offered by high-ranking, wealthy individuals and can, therefore, be regarded as objects enforcing, or reflecting, some kind of unbalanced power-relationship within a society. Armor and weapons could, in such an interpretation, represent the offerings from an élite warrior class and in this context tripods-cauldrons have become symbols that represent political power in early Greece.[19] This statement mirrors a well-known, and basically accepted, view on how the early Greek aristocracy manifested their position in society through élite display. An alternative hypothesis concerning these kinds of votives could, however, be that they functioned as collective votives and, therefore, did not automatically represent élite display but were rather the communal offerings at a cult-site.[20] In other words, a communal aspect could be ascribed to the prestigious votive and the presence of these offerings would suggest that the cult-site also functioned as a place for social interaction.

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[18] Sjögren 2008, 145–150.

[19] For example, see Morgan (1990, 45–47) and Osborne (1996, 96–98) on the idea that offerings of tripods and arms were displays of wealth. Bearing on the statements of Homer that tripods were the prizes and gifts of the aristocracy Morris (2000, 278) and Whitley (2001, 144) connect the tripod-cauldron to a heroic setting of early Greece. Papalexandrou (2005, 4) states that tripods should be seen as 'the symbol par excellence of authoritative discourse and, hence, of political power and territorial domination'.

[20] That tripods could be interpreted as collective dedications has also been suggested by Papalexandrou 2005, 162–163.

Thus, from a different interpretative perspective, votives could represent other social activities than the display of status. To assume other kinds of social meaning into votives we must also look at their associated cultic spaces. I will here consider a few different kinds of cult-sites. Depositions of votives may have been done by one person at a place which was not accessible to many people, i.e. a private place. The best example would be a votive offering found in a domestic setting, which could then be defined as a house-cult. The few known cases of private cult-activities in early Crete often involve occasional examples of 'personal votives'. The most obvious instance of private cult in a domestic setting is found in the large building-complex at Phaistos, dating to the eighth and seventh centuries (Figure 7.3).[21] This complex probably functioned as house-quarters for several different households. The fact that it was organized around a large open courtyard and that a large elliptic hearth was placed in the middle of a room measuring 35 square meters (room AA) suggests social interaction at some kind of communal level. This room may have been used for communal gatherings for people living in the settlement of Phaistos or in this particular house-block. The hearth and associated pottery suggests that communal dining took place in room AA. Singular, fragmentary, examples of terracotta figurines are found in rooms P, Q and CC which surround room AA. The condition of the votive material, and their uncertain archaeological context, does not indicate that we are here dealing with examples of regular house-shrines. Rather, it could be seen as sporadic cases of private offerings at different times of the house-quarter's life-history since some were found at floor-level and others at surface-level.[22] So, despite the fact that the house-quarter at Phaistos had communal localities for social interaction, the domestic nature of the architecture and the sporadic presences of votives suggest that the extent of social interaction must have remained small and within a closed group of people.

While the domestic setting at Phaistos implies that cult-activities were of a private kind, most cult-sites should have functioned as places where many people could meet. The seventh century cult-site on the acropolis of Gortyn in central Crete is an example where 'personal votives' are the most frequent votive type found. During the period after the ninth century, this cult-site, which included a cult-building on the summit and an assumed large altar on a terrace at the eastern slope, was located outside the settlement itself.[23] However, the cult-site is intimately connected with the settlement. Gortyn from the eighth century onward can be interpreted as a settlement with a developing urban expansion which by the sixth century could be defined as a town.[24] It was a settlement that spread at various locations on the hills to the east of the acropolis and on the fringe of the Mesara plain below.

The main interest of scholarship has been to determine the deity worshipped at this site. The connection to Athena Poliouchos is, however, mainly based on the iconography of later Classical and Hellenistic terracotta figurines and since it is not certain to what extent the seventh century cult related to the later fourth century cult one should perhaps

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[21] Rocchetti 1974–1975, 169–300; Cucuzza 2000.
[22] For an account of the find-material and find-circumstances, see Sjögren 2003, 128–129.
[23] The interpretation that the upper wall-construction of the terrace was an altar, as suggested by the excavators (Rizza and Scrinari 1968, 102–103), has recently been questioned by d'Acunto 2002, 209–211.
[24] For a description of the archaeological situation at Gortyn from the 10th to the 6th century, see Sjögren 2003, 34 and references; Sjögren 2008, 176, n. 518.

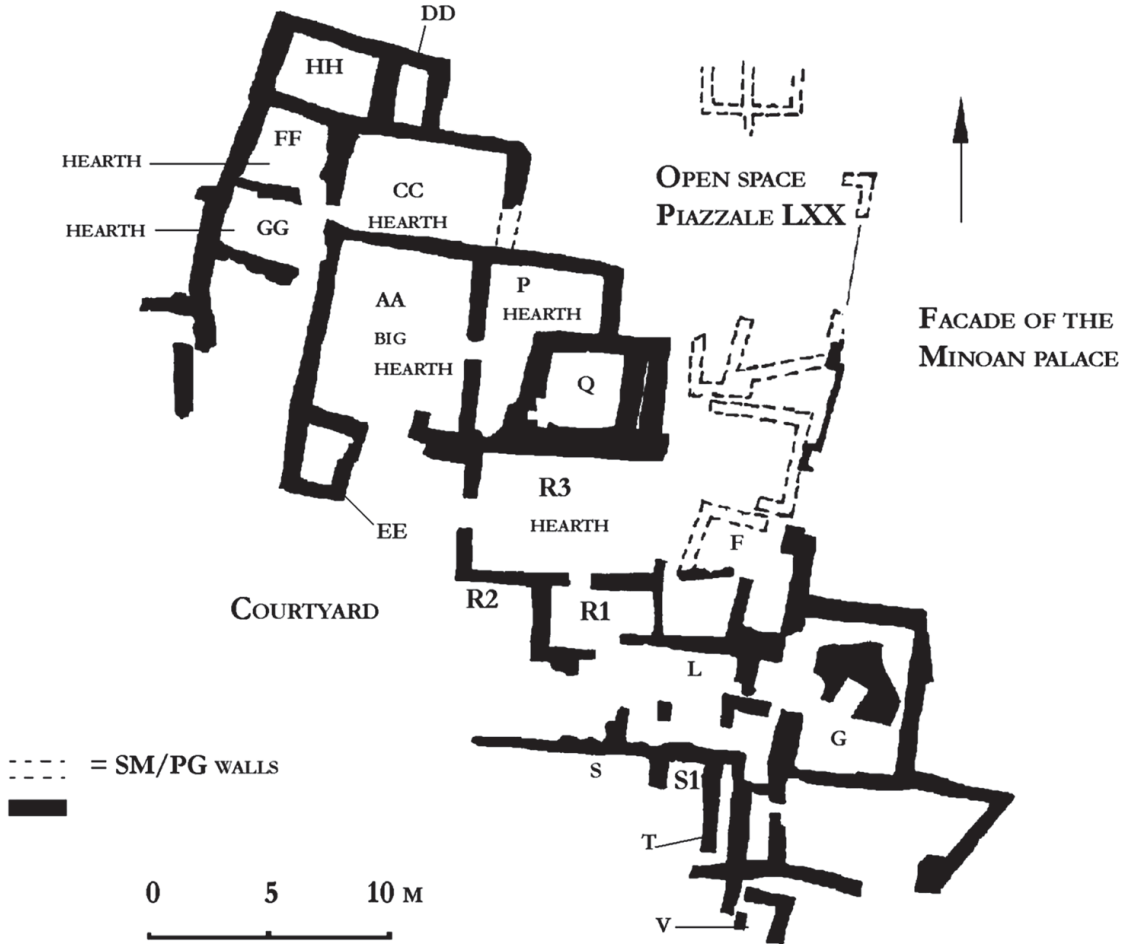

Fig. 7.3. House quarter from Phaistos (after Rocchetti 1974–75, fig. 1).

leave this issue aside.[25] Even if the seventh century votive material to a great extent is represented by female terracotta figures, there is such a variety in iconography and material types that the votives cannot be used to determine the main deity at this early period. What can be established is, however, that the 'personal votive' dominates and we should, therefore, be able to draw some conclusions about the social use of this cult-site.

Since the bulk of votives were found in connection with the wall of the so-called altar it may have been this terrace that functioned as the main social space for the cult-site, even though I would suggest that the area around the cult-building on the summit may have been equally important for communal gatherings. Hand-, mold and wheel-made terracotta figurines make up the majority of the votive material.[26] In addition, votives like a few small limestone statues, miniature bronzes (tripod-legs and armor), a few fragments of life-size *mitrai*, some fibulae and pins, clay versions of miniature helmets, and several hundreds of terracotta votive shields were uncovered at the terrace and in a large votive pit.[27] Thus, the personal kind of votives is virtually the exclusive offering type at this cult-

[25] D'Acunto 2002, 215–221 and Prent 2005, 273 both assume that Athena Poliouchos was worshipped in the 7th century.
[26] Sjögren 2003, 130–131. In total 413 terracotta figurines and plaques and the majority date to 7th century. The figurines mainly represent nude women, while there are some male warriors and youths. 39 are animal figurines. The plaques depict women, sphinxes, antithetical animals, lions and a few warrior scenes.
[27] Prent 2005, 268–269; Rizza and Scrinari 1968, *passim*.

site. The presence of such votives in large quantities would probably denote a communal accessibility to the cult-site.[28] So, the social interaction of this cult-site basically involved the inhabitants of Gortyn where the make-up of the votive material indicates depositions of offerings made by individuals and not by a particular group of people. Since there is no conclusive evidence of animal sacrifices and communal dining at this site it is the deposition of votives by individuals that must have enabled the social interaction.[29] I would suggest that while the meeting with the gods was a pre-planned undertaking, the meeting with others was of a more spontaneous nature.

Thus, the cult-site on the acropolis of Gortyn would have involved participation by the inhabitants of the adjacent settlement. A common feature of early Cretan cult-sites seems to be that locations associated with a particular settlement infer to a large extent private use, as indicated by a great presence of 'personal votives'.[30] The earlier mentioned cult-site at Sitia, with its high number of small terracotta figurines and plaques, is a comparable example. On the other hand, a different situation can be observed at cult-sites that were more regional in character. I am referring to places which may have attracted participants from different settlements in a region, or even the entire island, such as, for instance, Kato Syme, the Idaean Cave, Palaikastro and Psychro. There is a tendency that we at such sites find prestigious votives of high investment that I earlier defined as communal, such as tripod-cauldrons, bronze shields and weapons. However, keeping with the idea that the prestigious votives belonged to an aristocracy, a common suggestion is that sanctuaries like these were not only regional meeting-places, but also arenas for conspicuous display. Thus, the votives on display functioned as the political statements of a regional aristocracy. It is an interpretation that concurs with the political narrative that has characterized the study of early Cretan cult.[31] On the other hand, at most of these regional cult-sites we also find 'personal votives' which would indicate a communal accessibility. For instance, at such regional sites as the Psychro Cave in Lasithi or Kato Syme, the 'personal votives' actually dominate in the votive assemblage.[32] So, a possible diverging interpretation is that these sites in the first place should not be seen as cultic institutions where individual political ambitions were realized, but rather as places that enabled social interaction with groups of people from different settlements. In such an interpretation, the prestigious votives become collective offerings rather than denoting aristocratic display.

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[28] Prent (2005, 267) defines the cult-practices as communal without taking the private, individual aspect into account.

[29] Questioning the interpretation that the wall on the terrace represented an altar, d'Acunto (2002, 212–213) suggests that the terrace was an area where votives were placed. Thus, calling the terrace a 'donario', it would have had a similar function to that of the treasuries in later sanctuaries.

[30] On this idea, together with data from cult-sites, see Sjögren 2003, 59–60.

[31] Prent (2005, 355–356) works from this kind of hypothesis, which is shown in several of her interpretations of so-called extra-urban sanctuaries. A case-in-point is Palaikastro (pp. 532–554) on the eastern coast where the prestigious votives are interpreted as expressions of regional aristocratic competition.

[32] Sjögren 2003, 158–159.

Conclusion

In this article, I have questioned the common notion that regional sanctuaries in early Crete were places for aristocratic competition and individual political manifestations through the display of prestigious votives. Instead, different cult-sites, whether domestic, urban or rural, are seen as places where, besides religious rituals, social interactions at various levels took place. I de-emphasize the concept of display as the all-inclusive social signification associated with votives at early Cretan cult-sites. Furthermore, my approach to votive deposits at early Cretan cult-sites shows that it is difficult to separate religious practices from social behavior. Archaeological record associated with cult, and their interpretations, do not always present an expected dichotomy between religious and secular life.

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