

MAKING VISIBLE THE INVISIBLE: CRETAN OBJECTS MENTIONED IN THE CUNEIFORM TEXTS OF MARI AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES IN CRETE IN THE II MILLENNIUM BC¹

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INTRODUCTION

The history of Crete is deeply affected by its position at the centre of the Mediterranean, a cross-roads for travel both east-west and north-south (Fig. 1). From the VII millennium BC onwards, an ever-increasing population in the island testifies in part to the continuous arrival of groups by sea: their likely point of origin being the south-western area of Asia Minor². Throughout the Bronze Age the presence of foreign items in Crete increases with time, providing evidence for frequent and regular contacts with the Near East³. The position of Crete, in fact, both sets it at the western limits of the culturally and technologically more advanced oriental world (to which it looks and with which it intensively communicates), and on the frontier with the central-western Mediterranean zone, with which relations will open up from the second part of the II millennium BC in particular.

The diffusionist phrase *Ex Oriente Lux* can be given concrete expression in Cretan history by a series of innovations in its material culture – for example the building of the palaces, which are considered by some scholars the result of contacts with the Near Eastern world⁴. This orient-centered vision has been under critical review in the last decades; the contributions in the opposite direction, namely from west to east, have been highlighted as a result⁵. It is not so much the origin or the diffusion

¹ This article is the result of many exchanges with colleagues in the Institute for Aegean and Near Eastern Studies of the National Research Council (CNR-ICEVO): I sincerely thank them for their willingness to discuss many aspects of this subject with me. Special thanks go to Dr Roberto Dan for the processing of Fig. 1 and to Dr Don Evely for his usual patience and competence in correcting my English text.

² Until lately the first population settling in the island was dated to the VII millennium BC from the findings made under the Knossos palace. Very recent discoveries of a Greek-American team carried out by Professors Strasser, Runnels and Panagopoulou, however, indicate that it was during the Palaeolithic that the first human groups reached the south coast of Crete across the open sea (STRASSER ET AL. 2010).

³ KANTOR 1947; CLINE 1994/2009; CLINE, HARRIS-CLINE 1998; WATROUS 1998; VAN DONGEN 2007; COLBURN 2008.

⁴ Evans already prepared the way for this concept in 1928 (EVANS 1928, II), and was followed by many others, among whom Hood (1978, 48) and Fiandra (1997). See also KNAPP 1998 and PALYVOU 2007, 43-44.

⁵ For instance, BETANCOURT 1998. An absolutely Aegean-centric position was held by Kantor (1947), in her outdated but still fundamental pioneering work. A summary of the many positions on this subject is found in KNAPP 1998 and PALYVOU 2007.

of a phenomenon *per se* that is interesting, but rather the consequential creation of new elements, appearing in a society by autonomous processes or transferred from one society to another. In so doing, they are profoundly integrated into the local culture through the complex phenomenon of acculturation⁶. The construction of the Cretan palaces at the transition from the III to the II millennia BC offers an example of the different interpretations concerning relationships with the Near East and, in particular, with the Near Eastern palaces. Even if the remarked on differences and re-interpretations of the oriental model visible in the Minoan exempla are such as to exclude a direct derivation⁷, it is yet plausible to argue that the Cretan palaces only arose in a favourable chronological phase, when their complex society was able to support and promote this structure. If any derivation from the Near Eastern palatial civilizations is to be admitted, it was only at the general level of a concept of social, economic and territorial organization, the details of which were freely re-arranged and adapted by Cretan society⁸.

The general historical framework into which these innovations are inserted shows that an intense exchange and circulation of ideas, technologies, objects, individuals and groups existed in the II millennium BC. The Mediterranean basin thereby emerges as a sort of proto-globalized world, characterized by extensive mobility resulting in social, economic and intercultural exchanges⁹. By this way of thinking, the analysis of the rich cuneiform documentation sheds light not only on the politics of the time, but also on the fortunes of individuals and small groups; whilst study of the archaeological finds and their archaeometric analysis distinguishes imports from their local imitations¹⁰. The integration and co-operation between the established humanities and the new science-based technologies when applied to the material of cultural heritage has resulted in appreciable re-thinking in these matters. The diffusionist approach – viz. that every innovation or new group of items appearing somewhere was physically introduced by people coming from that innovation's base point of origin – was abandoned. Indeed the pendulum has swung so that an overemphasised negation of diffusionism holds sway: *Pots*

⁶ Palyvou (2007) defines them as 'transcultural integrated elements': she means by this features coming from outside but fully integrated into the local culture.

⁷ MILITELLO 1999.

⁸ Many scholars plausibly place into the III millennium BC the social, political and economic transformations that at the beginning of the II millennium BC led to the construction of the Minoan palaces (BETANCOURT 2008). Recently some scholars even propose the start of the phenomenon in the IV millennium BC (SCHOEP ET AL. 2012. See also the review of CHERRY 2012). But in the same volume in which this new theory is presented, another paper highlights the new features clearly emerging at the end of the Prepalatial, namely at the end of the III millennium BC (WHITELAW 2012).

⁹ In the last decades, in particular, interest in these subjects produced a great increase of meetings and volumes on the international relationships among different countries of the central-eastern Mediterranean and the Near East during the Bronze Age. Scholars from many different backgrounds met to take stock of our information on the commercial, political and socio-cultural contacts of this long period, with a special focus on the II millennium BC (DAVIES, SCHOFIELD 1995; SWINY ET AL. 1997; GITIN ET AL. 1998; KARAGEORGHIS, STAMPOLIDIS 1998; CAUBET 1999; KARETSOU, ANDREADAKI-VLASAKI 2000; OREN 2000; STAMPOLIDIS, KARAGEORGHIS 2003; LAFFINEUR, GRECO 2005; VAN DONGEN 2007; COLBURN 2008; MACDONALD ET AL. 2009).

¹⁰ DURAND 1992; FRENCH, TOMLINSON 2004.

are not people. There emerged a more integrated concept of art and culture, hybrid and international: and so less ethnically distinguishable¹¹. Recent debate on international relationships and on whether one can identify foreign elements through material culture has been couched in anthropological and sociological concepts, of ethnicity and identity: the effect has been to refine even further the interpretation of such in the ancient world¹². There is, however, a danger that this process passes over the concreteness of the data and so loses sight of the ultimate goal – not shared by everyone – of historical reconstruction. Ethnicity and identity are fluid notions, difficult to define and involving complex aspects related not only to human groups, but also to individuals in their everyday lives: the nuances are not easy to parse for people living today, let alone those from the past¹³.

In so rich and intense a scientific debate, this brief contribution looks at a specific aspect of the international relationships and commercial exchanges between east and west: one that involves a few items, from a short period of time and of no great distance apart. It has a Minoan and, more generally, Aegean perspective¹⁴.

Some tablets of the palace of Mari in Syria, destroyed in the XVIII cent. BC, list prestigious objects defined as 'Cretan'; later texts from Ugarit mention people coming from Crete, who are directly involved in commercial activities. Parallels to the objects, described in the Mariote texts, will be sought within the known Cretan corpus, with the aim of 'making visible' the goods in demand by the Mariote palatial elite as prestigious objects.

As will become clear, some of the mentioned items are simple enough to identify, whereas others, from their rarity in archaeological excavations or their vague descriptions in the texts, have not been accurately recognized.

Whenever possible, Protopalatial items (in Aegean terms, ca. 1900-1700 BC) are preferred for parallels, because they are contemporary with the Mari texts. But often recourse is had to Neopalatial (ca. 1700-1450 BC) and Final Palatial (ca. 1450-1370 BC) pieces, due to the restrictions of the data¹⁵.

Further, it is worthwhile recalling the Ugaritic epic of Ba'al and 'Anat: the two deities ask that the god of metals, Kothar-wa-Hasis, to be moved from *Kptr*, his residence (probably Crete), in order to build for them a splendid palace. Kothar-wa-Hasis seems connected to the carpenter god Ilish. His story, as told in numerous

¹¹ CAUBET 1998; KNAPP 1998; MORRIS 1998. For a different approach to the subject, NIEMEIER 1991; 2005; 2009.

¹² The writing on these subjects is truly extensive and increasing rapidly since the Nineties of the last century. See only as an example and with a rich bibliographic repertoire JONES 1997; KNAPP 2001; SHERRATT 2005.

¹³ JONES 1997; FABIETTI 1998.

¹⁴ In this contribution the terms 'Minoan' and 'Mycenaean' will be used with a cultural and geographical slant: to indicate the human groups living in Crete in the II millennium BC and in the Greek Mainland during the Late Bronze Age. I do not enter the debate about the existence of political entities termed 'Minoans' and 'Mycenaeans'.

¹⁵ I have opted here to follow the traditional Aegean chronology, pending an agreement on the date of the Santorini eruption and the relations between Aegean and Egyptian chronological sequences. Concerning this, see WARBURTON 2009.

eastern texts, mostly from Ugarit, seems to indicate that Minoan handicrafts and carpentry-work were well known and appreciated not only by men, but even by the gods themselves¹⁶.

I. THE MARI TEXTS MENTIONING CRETAN PRODUCTS

Looking at the geographical position of Mari, the city is set on the Euphrates much in the middle of the Near Eastern world: virtually equidistant from the Hittite capital Hattuša in the north, the Elamite one, Susa, at the south-east, the Egyptian one, Memphis, at the south-west; Crete lies further to the west (Fig. 1). Mari is located, not by chance, on one of the major communication routes – both east-west and north-south, in the Near East, as the richness of the palace archives and the archaeological discoveries of goods and raw materials testify. Very probably tin, one of the essential but restricted goods of the Bronze Age, was obtained from the Far East (possibly from Elam), and was transported through Mari on its way to the Mediterranean. The harbour of Ugarit was probably a more immediate entrepot for passing on this fundamental raw material both towards Crete and more western sites¹⁷. A Mariote tablet mentions a quantity of tin delivered by Zimri-Lim's emissaries to a man coming from Crete, defined as the 'chief of Cretan merchants in Ugarit', and to his interpreter. This text indicates that a community of Cretan merchants was active in Ugarit¹⁸.

In the first half of the II millennium BC and for reasons not exclusively economic, Crete looked eastwards to rectify the absence of tin, copper and other exotics. Only in the second half of the II millennium, with the political and socio-cultural changes taking place in the Aegean does Crete, still searching for raw materials and for commercial interchanges, start to direct its attention towards the central Mediterranean¹⁹.

The texts we are dealing with have been published by Durand and Guichard²⁰. Chronologically they concern the reigns of the Mari sovereigns Yahdun-Lim (1815-1798 BC) and Zimri-Lim (1775-1761 BC). Of particular interest is the journey made by Zimri-Lim in the year 1765 (according to the medium Near Eastern chronology) from Mari to Ugarit on the Syrian coast, where he saw the Cretan fleet²¹.

The objects mentioned in the Mariote texts are the following:

1. LEATHER GOODS: BOOTS, FOOTWEAR, BELTS

In an administrative account concerning the 6th year of the reign of Zimri-Lim (1770 BC) a pair of Cretan boots is mentioned. There are also other texts in which appear shoes and belts from Crete²².

¹⁶ Mentioned in PALLYOU 2007, 45.

¹⁷ HELTZER 1988; 1989.

¹⁸ The mentioned text is ARMT XXIII 556, lines 28-31: HELTZER 1989; CLINE 1994/2009; 1995; NIEMEIER 1998.

¹⁹ VAGNETTI 2003. The contribution of the central Europe regions requires more consideration too, MUHLY 2003b.

²⁰ DURAND 1983; GUICHARD 1993; 1999, 167; 2005. The existence of some of these texts was already reported by George Dossin in 1939 (Dossin 1939, 111-112).

²¹ See with bibliography, GUICHARD 1993; 1999, 167; 2005.

²² ARMT XXI 342, lines 5-12. DURAND 1983, 454-455; CLINE 1994/2009, 127; GUICHARD 1999, 170.



Fig. 1 – Map of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East (modified by Dr Roberto Dan *after* <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~jtreat/rs/maps/2/2med.gif>).

2. WEAPONS: SPEAR, DAGGER, HOLDER FOR WEAPON AND DINNER KNIFE

The items mentioned seem to be parade weapons, since they are explicitly described as decorated with precious materials. In an administrative text a weapon with applications in gold and lapis lazuli is explicitly mentioned. A dinner knife and a sort of dagger, with a gold-plated hilt and silver decoration, are also mentioned. A text from the beginning of the reign of Zimri-Lim mentions also a special container for a Cretan weapon, a remark that seems to confirm the special attention given to these specific foreign items²³.

3. PRECIOUS VESSELS

Numerous references to precious vases, both in gold and silver, are made. In particular are named:

- a. Four silver one-handled vases
- b. Three silver vases (bowls)
- c. Six gold vases: A. one is one-handled of a weight of '2/3 mine and x shekels'
B. one of weight '1/3 mine and 6 1/2 shekels'
- d. A gold vase, weight '2/3 mine and 2 1/2 shekels',
- e. A set of total weight of '8 mine and 7 gold shekels', taken to Aleppo and consisting of:

- A. a *susmarrûm*-basin with spiral
- B. two vases with incised decoration and without handles
- C. a zoomorphic vase in the shape of a *kirādum*-animal (weasel?

Quadruped?)

D. a prestigious vase without handle with a *papparhītum* vegetal motif in the middle, weight 20 shekels.

A total of some 12 gold vases and 7 silver vases²⁴.

II. 'MADE IN CRETE' OR 'MADE À LA CRÉTOISE'?

Extraordinary though these texts are for their time and the possible international scenarios between different political entities that they envisage, yet it is necessary to exercise some caution in accepting them at face value.

First, all these items are defined as *kaptarītum*, 'Cretan', an adjective capable of bearing a variety of meanings. Guichard stressed that defining an object as Cretan does not mean with absolute certainty it came from Crete. Theoretically it is also possible that an object was made 'à la crétoise' somewhere else, even perhaps in the

²³ DURAND 1983, 258-261; HELTZER 1989, 13-14; CLINE 1994/2009, 126-128; GUICHARD 1999, 175-176; 2005.

²⁴ CLINE 1994/2009, 126-128. The approximation in these figures is due to the fact that, as underlined by Guichard (1999, 171-173), it is impossible to define for certain the precise number of these goods, as sometimes the same vase is being recorded over and over again on different tablets. Some pieces recorded in the palace accounting have later vanished, given as gifts or exchanged with other potentates.

very workshops of the palace of Mari. In confirmation of this, he mentions another text in which Zimri-Lim seems to have 'ordered' a 'Cretan' ship decorated with lapis lazuli, but built for him in the palace of Mari²⁵. We must remember here the international dimension of the art of the II millennium BC, when products circulated and were often imitated in the local ateliers²⁶. For this reason Guichard reports an analogous example taken from the Aegean world. In a tablet of the Ta series of Pylos a prestigious vase is defined as *ke-re-si-wo*. The French scholar, quoting the interpretation of Godart, translates the term as 'made in the Cretan style'²⁷.

In fact the term *ke-re-si-wo* is very disputed. A heated debate surrounds it as to its meaning, from the decipherment of Linear B until today²⁸. The term has also been translated as 'furnished with horned handles': probably an ill-chosen phrase²⁹. The majority of experts considers the adjective as related to Crete, meaning both 'made in Crete' and 'made in the Cretan style'. No specific reason exists to favour one reading above the other.

Local production of items, in imitation, is a well known fact for all the Bronze Age. In the last decades the application of archaeometric analysis to entire classes of archaeological materials has confirmed this, especially in the case of pottery³⁰.

The archaeological data on Cretan exports found on the Greek Mainland, for example, indicates that in the initial phases of such a process copies are lower in number than the real imports. Among the minoanizing objects, moreover, it is necessary to distinguish between items produced in continental Greece (but so similar to a genuine import as to suggest they were made by Cretan artisans that had moved to and worked on the Mainland), from local products mixing traits both local and foreign. Sometimes the difference is evident enough, as in the case of the two Vapheio cups. Both show scenes of bull-catching, but with critical differences in the choice of decorative motifs and style (Fig. 9a-b). Most scholars, in fact, define cup A as a genuine Minoan product (Fig. 9a), i.e. the work of a Minoan artist (in Crete or in mainland Greece), and cup B (Fig. 9b) as a Mycenaean imitation, created by a mainland artisan trained in typical Cretan technology and style³¹.

With regard to the objects termed 'Cretan' in the Mari texts, it is the desire for something 'Cretan' that is important: not so much whether it was really made in Crete or produced locally in imitation. Such on-the-spot reproduction of an object evaluated as desirable because precious, foreign or simply because considered more functional and/or pretty, is not an unswerving rule. Imitations tend to arise after a degree of familiarity has been experienced, after imports have been circulating for a certain length of time. It may be necessary for the imports to become appreciated first and that some technology of production be learned. This learning can happen either through the local artisan's own trial and error or through the contribution of

²⁵ GUICHARD 1999, 168.

²⁶ GUICHARD 1993, 44; CAUBET 1998; GUICHARD 1999.

²⁷ CAUBET 1998, 108; GUICHARD 1999, 169; GODART 1990, 217-218; GUICHARD 2005.

²⁸ DOCS2, 498, 553; DMic II, 348; DEL FREO 1990.

²⁹ BIRASCHI 1993.

³⁰ MUHLY 2003a; FRENCH, TOMLINSON 2004.

³¹ VASSILIKOU 1995, 125-130.

craftsmen from the exporting country³². The stimulus can be provided by specific historical events. At the end of the Bronze Age, the downfall of the mainland Mycenaean palaces and the consequent end to a world that contained palatial workshops producing luxury objects for export was combined with the slowing down of the inter-Mediterranean trade caused by a feeling of continuous uncertainty (probably from the incursions of the Sea Peoples). Despite all this, in some areas of the eastern Mediterranean the production of Aegean-type pottery actually increased. The phenomenon of replication, as is often confirmed by archaeometric analysis, can in fact to be augmented when it becomes more difficult to find foreign items.

What goods were copied? The majority, to now, are pottery vessels, while objects and vases in metal are very rare. As is well known, pottery is the commonest find in archaeological excavations, whereas metal items, exactly the goods mentioned most in the Mari texts, are more difficult to find (and so to assess if imitations) because metal is cast and recycled to infinity. In the wider context of the Mediterranean interconnections of the first half of the II millennium BC, it is plausible to think that most of the foreign items mentioned and found were genuine imports. The Cretans move early in their expansion to the east, and no specific factors in the Levant existed to promote internal reproduction.

One other aspect needs to be considered that contributed to the value assigned to an *original Cretan import*: its exotic quality, its very foreignness. I do not think this is an exclusively modern attitude, but one every bit as valid in the ancient world³³. Why else do goods coming from Crete and other foreign countries get listed and exchanged as elite gifts? Why else are they worth copying? The value of an object is thus not represented solely by the quantity of precious materials in it, the technology used nor the style in which is made, but also by the long distance it has travelled. It is this multiplicity of aspects that make up its value as a whole.

III. GOODS ON OFFER FROM THE CRETAN MARKET DURING THE II MILLENNIUM BC

1. LEATHER GOODS AND FOOTWEAR (FIGS. 2-7)

The climate and so survival conditions on Crete do not permit the recovery of perishable goods, such as hides, but the rich iconographic heritage available to a certain degree fills this gap. Frescoes in particular, but even seals and figurines in the round all provide information on clothing and accessories worn by men and women of the time.

³² This is what happened in the central-western Mediterranean during the second half of the II millennium BC. After a *long* connection that had brought Aegean products into the Italian islands and peninsula markets since Late Bronze I (in Aegean terms), during the Late Bronze III in particular in southern Italy many artisan workshops started to produce Aegean-type pottery. Recent researches employing both archaeological and archaeometric systems of analysis look to indicate that people coming from the Aegean and/or local people trained in the new Aegean technologies were involved in the local production. At the same time, on the other hand, there are clear proofs of local attempts being made to reproduce the same technological progresses as evident in the imported material. VAGNETTI, JONES 1988; VAGNETTI 1999; BETTELLI 2002.

³³ COLBURN 2008.



a



b



c



d

Fig. 2 – BELTS AS TUBES AND AS BANDS (not to scale): a-b) Fresco from the Knossos palace with bull-leaping acrobats (after SAPOUNA-SAKELLARAKI 1971, pl. A: a-b); c) Model of cloth in faience from the Knossos palace (after VASSILAKIS N.D., 86); d) Fresco from the lustral basin of Xesté 3 in Akrotiri, Thera (detail after DOUMAS 1992, 142, fig. 105).

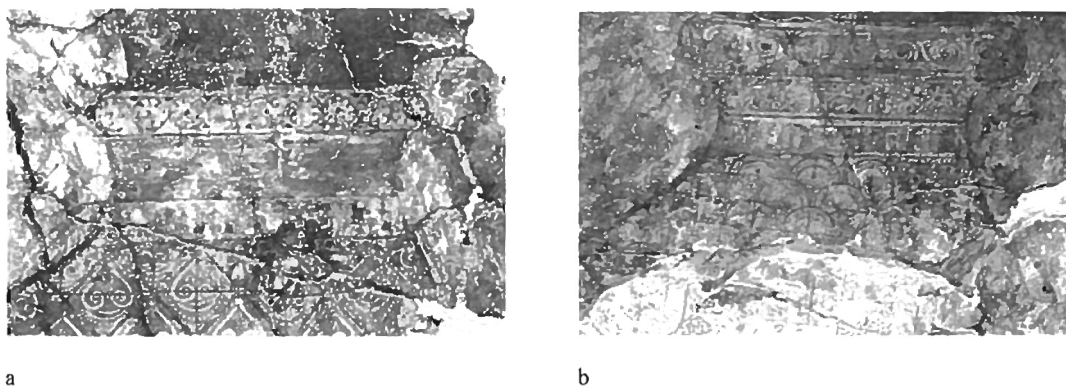


Fig. 3 – BELTS AS TUBES: a-b) Procession Fresco from the Knossos palace
(after SAPOUNA-SAKELLARAKI 1971, pl. B: a-b).

Belts were probably a fundamental element of clothing: so aiding the Cretan preference for a figure with very slim waist³⁴. For men, the belt also plays a practical role too – to hold a knife, a dagger or some such: a fashion assuming also a social meaning in time³⁵. In Minoan representations of the Middle and Late Bronze Ages, belts seem of two types: one is thick and of a circular section, a sort of tube (sometimes doubled), that emphasizes the waistline (Figs. 2a-c, 3a-b); the other one is a flat band worn with two pendant strap-ends, set slightly lower on the hips (Fig. 2d). The first type is most associated with male figures, whereas the second one is more common on females, even if not exclusively so³⁶. This fashion for belts distinguishes Cretan use from that typical in Mari and, in general, in the Near East, where a long tunic without any belt is frequently worn. It is also possible, then, that Cretan belts were appreciated just for their ‘being different’ from the common dress habits in Mari. The belts known in Protopalatial times and so contemporary to the Mari texts appear quite simple³⁷. More decorative specimens come from the Procession Fresco of the Knossos palace and are dated to the Final Palatial period (Fig. 3a-b)³⁸. They are belts of the first sort and are worn by males. Apparently they are made of three parts, the top and the bottom bands probably of cloth, tailored as a tube and filled with something giving them a certain bulk (wool?); the central band could be of leather, or even metal, and so looks more rigid in the representations. Every band is profusely decorated with motifs and is woven in different colours.

³⁴ SAPOUNA-SAKELLARAKI 1971. The scholar presents a detailed typology of loincloths and belts, stressing that some of them were worn quite exclusively by people appearing overweight and long in the tooth.

³⁵ MARCAR 2006.

³⁶ I wonder if this ‘fashion’ could be in some way linked to the need to wear a high and thick belt to support the body when lifting weights.

³⁷ SAPOUNA-SAKELLARAKI 1971, 7-30.

³⁸ The fresco, from the *Entrance Corridor* of the *West Porch* of the palace, presents three groups of males and females, richly dressed and sometimes carrying on objects (EVANS 1928, II, 719-736; IMMERWAHR 1990, 175-176; EVELY 1999, 229-232).



a



b

Fig. 4 – BELTS AS BANDS (not to scale): a) Fresco from Xesté 3 at Akrotiri, Thera (after DOUMAS 1992, 140, fig. 103); b) Statuette in faience of the Snake Goddess from the Knossos palace (after VASSILAKIS N.D., 85).

For the second type of belts, in frescoes those worn by female figures present many internal variations: one of the more elegant is that of the seated girl in the lustral basin of Xesté 3 in Thera (Fig. 2d). Here the long strips of the belt, embroidered or painted with dark motifs, form a complicated whole. The banded belts are sometimes represented with a decoration of thin vertical motifs (Fig. 4a-b) that could represent cloth or stencils on leather. Particularly elegant are the belts with a thin cord tied in the back as a *sacral knot*, worn again by the girls of Xesté 3 (Fig. 5a-b).

Concerning *footwear*, the available information is very scanty. Indeed Minoan iconography generally portrays its human figures as barefooted, with few exceptions. From what does exist we can deduce there were at least two shoe categories: a sort of half boot, close-fitting and low-cut (Fig. 6b, d), and interwoven strap-sandals (Fig. 6a, c). The representations of half boots are numerous: among them the *Chieftain Vase* of Haghia Triada, where one of the youths wears a belt and boots³⁹, and again the Vapheio cup A (Fig. 9a). Dated to the Late Bronze Age is the half-boot rhyton found in Attica: finely decorated in the contemporary pottery style, even if it sports a markedly curled tip, it belongs to the same set in shape and decoration (Fig. 6d)⁴⁰. To these examples can be added the numerous clay feet of different dimensions coming from many sites in Crete and in the Mainland. Among them,

³⁹ WARREN 1969, 37, 174-180, pl. P197.

⁴⁰ DEMAKOPOULOU 1988, 122, n. 60, with bibliography.



Fig. 5 – BELTS AS SACRAL KNOT: a-b) Crocus gatherers from the Xesté 3 in Akrotiri, Thera (after DOUMAS 1992, 154, 160, figs. 118, 123).

the Protopalatial ‘feet’ from Archanes are noteworthy. Variouslly interpreted as lasts for shoe production, as votive objects or as elements of a *xoanon*, these two clay items were here found in what is argued to be a cult area (Fig. 7c-d). The excavator considered them as part of a life-size wooden statue, as they lack suspension holes that often characterize votive objects, and from the place in which they were found⁴¹. If therefore the two items were part of a wooden statue probably covered with a tunic, as proposed, it is possible they represented half boots or indeed really were covered by leather shoes. The clay fabric, in fact, is coarse and similar to the pithoi one – so perhaps we can deduce that they were not intended to be seen?

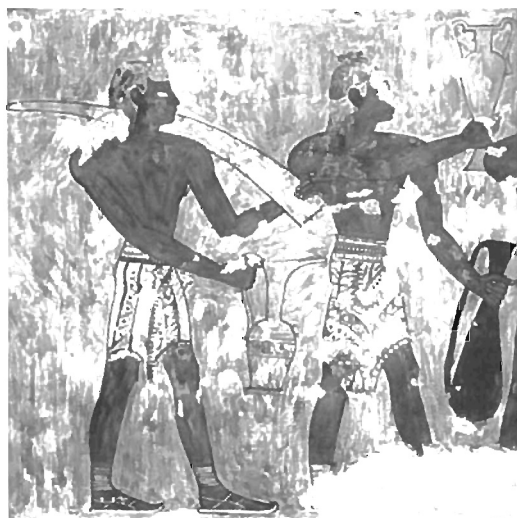
For sandals, an ivory fragment of a figure, large for the standards of the period (at a third to half life-size) presents elegant interwoven strap-sandals (Fig. 6c), recalling the sandals of the Keftiu in the Rekhmire tomb frescoes in Egypt (Fig. 6a)⁴².

Time-wise all the mentioned examples – on the *Chieftain Vase*, the Vapheio cup and the ivory fragment – are Neopalatial (ca. 1700-1450 BC). As shoes for foreign consumption, they had to have some special features with respect to shape, material and decoration. Those on the Palaikastro Kouros offer an example: fashioned in gold foil and fitted onto the ivory feet. They are made up of a cross-strap on the instep and a broader one covering the ankle and lowest part of the leg: they seem a sort of open half boots (Fig. 7a-b)⁴³.

⁴¹ SAKELLARAKIS, SAKELLARAKI 1997, 531-539.

⁴² EVANS 1928, II, 727, fig. 455; HEMINGWAY 2000, fig. 9.2f.

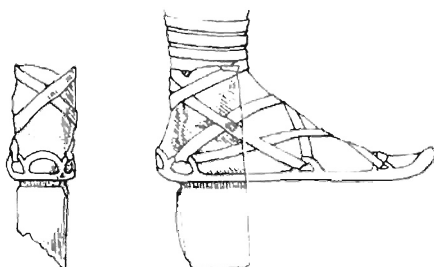
⁴³ MOAK 2000, 74; MACGILLIVRAY ET AL. 2000.



a



b



c



d

Fig. 6 – FOOTWEAR (not to scale): a-b) Keftiu from Rekhmire tomb in Thebes (*after* KARETSOU, ANDREADAKI-VLASAKI 2000, 92, nn. 67-68); c) Ivory fragment of foot with sandal from the Knossos palace (*after* EVANS 1928, II, fig. 455: a-b); d) Half-boot rhyton from Voula in Attica (*after* DEMAPOPOULOU 1988, 122, n. 60).

From this quick excursus into the Cretan evidence, it is plausible to think that if the Cretan shoes from Mari were really exported from Crete, they could be interwoven strap-sandals, as well as the boots expressly mentioned.

This hand-crafted tradition has survived the millennia: high, tight-fitting boots remain an integral part of the Cretan traditional costume even today⁴⁴, while sandals with leather straps are a typical island product, exported throughout Greece and abroad.

⁴⁴ TZIRTZILAKIS 2006, 106, 125.

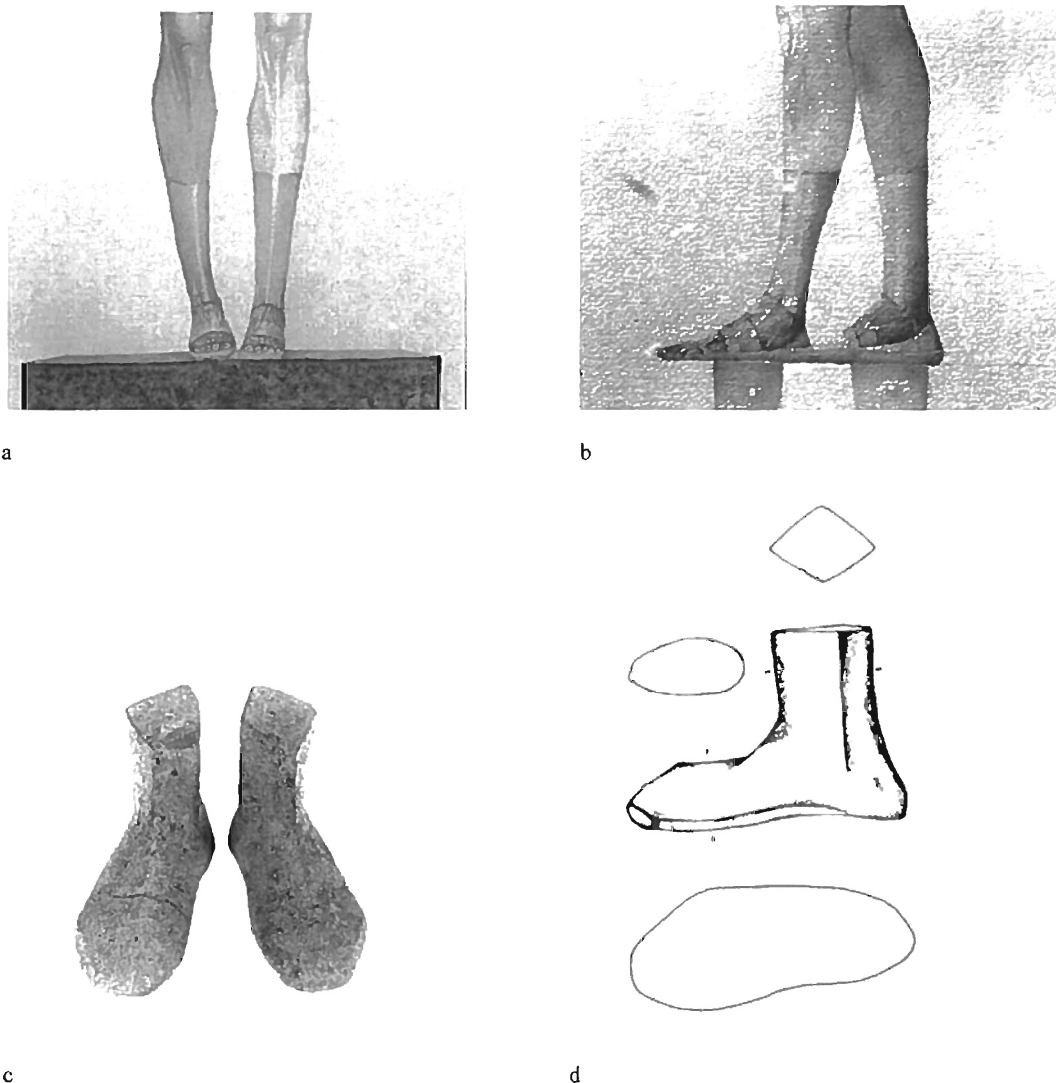


Fig. 7 – FOOTWEAR (not to scale): a-b) Reconstruction of the footwear of the Palaikastro Kouros (detail *after* MOAK 2000, pl. k); c-d) Clay 'Feet' from Archanes (*after* SAKELLARAKIS, SAKELLARAKI 1997, fig. 531).

2. WEAPONS (FIG. 8)

When approaching the matter about the Minoan metal objects mentioned in the Mari texts, it is worth remembering that for the entire III millennium BC (until the emergence of the First palaces) Cretan metallurgy shows numerous points of contact with its Near Eastern counterparts, with respectable import/export links between the two areas. Cretan metalworkers developed their own traditions and technologies, that show influences from the Near Eastern traditions⁴⁵. One of the

⁴⁵ BRANIGAN 1967. On Minoan metallurgy in general see BRANIGAN 1974; MUHLY 1980; TZACHILI 2008.

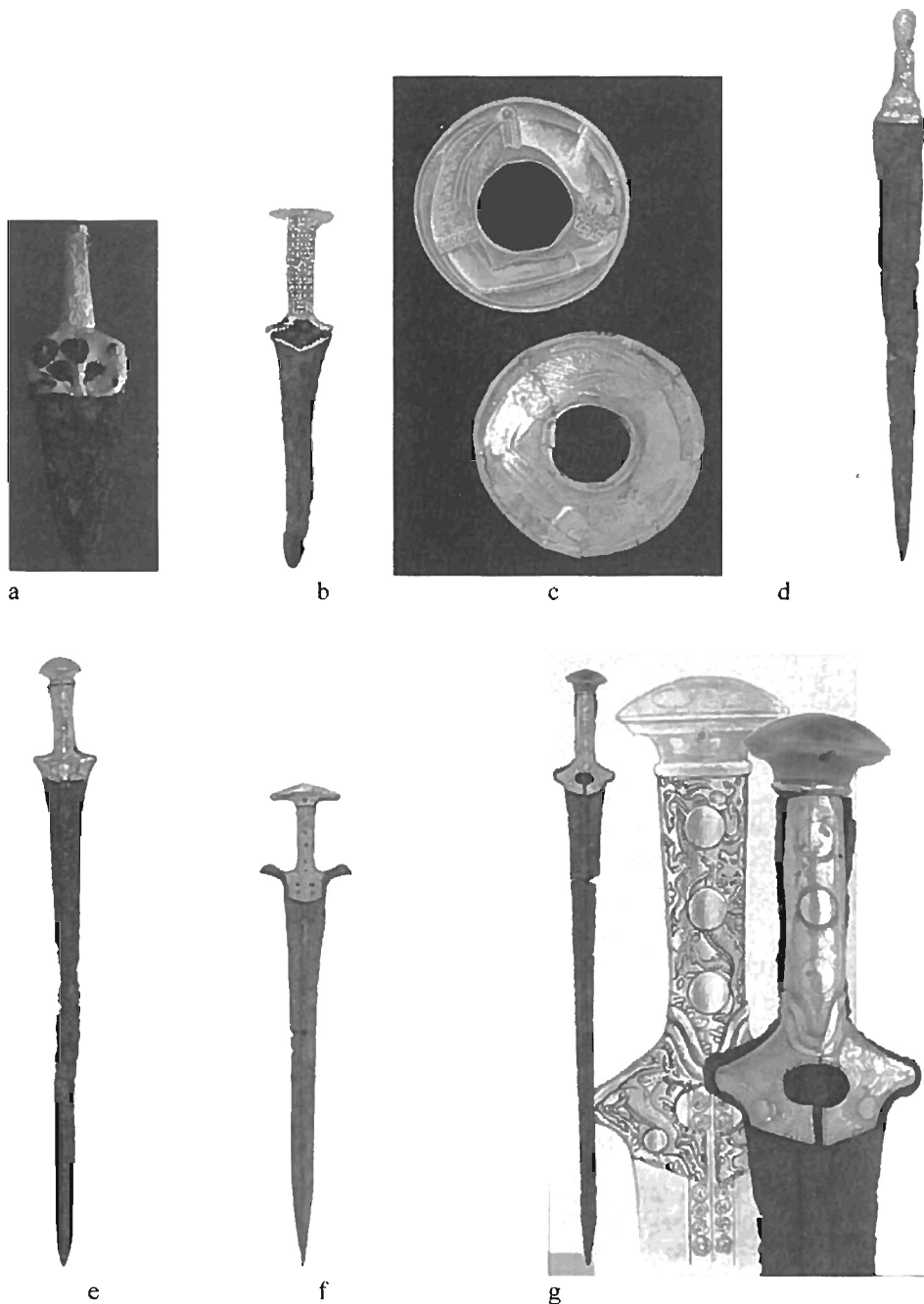


Fig. 8 – WEAPONS (not to scale): a) Bronze dagger from the necropolis of Moni Odigitria (*after* VASSILAKIS 2001, 209); b) Bronze dagger with gold hilt from Mallia; c) Golden pommel with acrobat from Mallia (*after* VASSILAKIS N.D., 87); d) Bronze sword with gold-plated hilt of stone and rock crystal pommel from Mallia; e) Bronze sword with gold-plated hilt, pommel and rivets, decorated with spirals from tomb 36 of the Zafer Papoura necropolis at Knossos; f) Bronze sword with bone hilt from tomb 14 of the Zafer Papoura necropolis at Knossos; g) Bronze sword with rock crystal pommel, rivets and gold-plated hilt, decorated in repoussé with lions hunting wild goats, from tomb 2 of the Venizeleio necropolis at Knossos (b, d-g *after* DIMOPOULOU-RETHEMIOTAKI 2005, 200, 204, 201, 203, 202).

earliest of the ornamented weapons found in Early Bronze Age Crete presents numerous Near Eastern features (Fig. 8a)⁴⁶.

Weaponry found in Crete in the first half of the II millennium BC is not that numerous. Of course metal objects were reused and recast, so preventing exact numerical evaluations. Further for a very long period there is no good continuity in the existence of burial sites, which are the contexts in which weapons are more usually found. Even so, the rarity of weapons for the III millennium and the first half of the II induces one to assume there were other reasons in play. It is possible, in fact, that weapons were not part of the usual grave assemblage of the Minoans and their way of expressing themselves. The contrast with the Final Palatial phase could not be more stark: here a great number of different weapons, clustered in sets, is found in the so-called Warrior Graves at Knossos and Chania⁴⁷. These weapon sets date to a quite short period, equal to two/three generations (ca. 1450-1370 BC): they are ascribed either to the physical presence of people from Mycenaean Greece, where such weapon assemblages are common, or to a sharp cultural change happening in Minoan society. In this last case, weapons would become essential for a new identity definition as warriors or simply as men of a certain status⁴⁸.

In Crete the few available Middle Bronze Age weapons are much bedecked with precious materials and probably so very fragile as to be considered as parade weapons. An extraordinary Protopalatial knife from Mallia has golden openwork probably designed to cover a wooden handle (Fig. 8b). The golden pommel with an acrobat and the bronze sword with a gold-plated stone hilt and rock crystal pommel, both from Mallia (Fig. 8c-d), are likewise Protopalatial and therefore contemporary to the Mari texts: they are all items of special status and prestige.

Different is the case of the Final Palatial Warrior Graves at Knossos: they contain rich assemblages, with weapons not only numerous and sometimes beautiful (Fig. 8e-g), but also absolutely effective and functional *qua* weapons. These are not only signs of social status⁴⁹.

Apropos the well-known 'inlaid' weapons found in Grave Circles A and B at Mycenae and in tombs of Mycenaean Greece in general, the technology employed in their manufacture has been attributed to Minoan Crete, even if related archaeological evidence in the island is lacking⁵⁰.

The table-knife mentioned in the Mari texts recalls the present-day Cretan production of knives, sometimes richly decorated with mantinades, verse and images. Those at Chania in north-western Crete may serve as typical examples of a varied class that are exported to all the island and mainland Greece⁵¹.

⁴⁶ VASSILAKIS 2001, 209.

⁴⁷ ALBERTI 2004 with bibliography; ANDREADAKI-VLASAKI, PROTOPAPADAKI N.D.

⁴⁸ It is a very complex and controversial matter, where some scholars interpret the new assemblages with weapons as a sign of mainlanders present in Knossos and Chania in this phase (ALBERTI 2004), while others see the change as the result of internal socio-cultural transformations (PRESTON 1999).

⁴⁹ MOLLOY 2008. ALBERTI in press.

⁵⁰ DAVIS 1976; XENAKI-SAKELLARIOU, CHATZILIOU 1989. The finding of 'inlaid' weapons, in fact, is limited to the Peloponnese, with the exception of two exemplars from Thera and Cyprus (DEMAKOPOULOU 1990, 140-143).

⁵¹ TZIRTZILAKIS 2003; 2006.

3. GOLD AND SILVER VESSELS (FIGS. 9-12)

Concerning work in precious metals from the first half of the II millennium BC in Crete, the problem of some metal sources can be briefly considered. Some metals (tin and gold) still resist analysis from the point of identifying provenance. The gold could be of alluvial origin, maybe imported thanks to the mediation of Mycenaean merchants at least in the second part of II millennium, and earlier by the Cretans. As for tin, at this time it probably reached Crete from the East or southern Anatolia. Western sources were tapped later by the Aegean peoples, from the middle of the II millennium⁵². Amongst the sources of copper exploited, and increasingly important in the Palatial eras and after, are the mines in Cyprus. Real Cretan imports and their imitations here show the connection, as does par excellence the creation of the Cypro-Minoan script in Late Cypriote IA (ca. 1600 BC)⁵³.

Like weaponry, vessels of precious metals in Crete are extremely rare, especially in the first half of the II millennium BC. Numerous though are containers in gold and silver from the Mycenae Grave Circles and from other sites outside Crete – many believed to be Minoan exports by the experts⁵⁴. The contrast between the display of richness in these first Mycenaean tombs and the apparent simplicity of the few contemporary Minoan assemblages is explained as part of the dearth of finds in Proto- and Neopalatial Crete, or – more likely – as a cultural tendency in Cretan burial customs⁵⁵.

Among the vases mentioned in the Mari texts, the ones most recognizable as ‘Aegean’ are the ‘one-handled’ vases. They could be either cups or bowls, part of the typical symposium set employed both in the Minoan and Mycenaean worlds; they are frequently found in tombs. Besides the Vapheio cups (Fig. 9a-b), there exist other cup types, the most common being the conical cup with spool or ring handle. It is the cup carried by the Keftiu in the Senmut tomb in Thebes, probably made of metal as represented in the frescoes (Fig. 9e)⁵⁶. Shaft Grave V of Circle B in Mycenae contained two specimens: the one in gold is elegant and well preserved (Fig. 9d), whilst the other in silver is smaller and less well-proportioned (Fig. 9f). Both are considered as Minoan works⁵⁷. A similar cup, but with a strap handle and its surface covered entirely by deep and broad horizontal grooves, is considered to be the work of a Mycenaean artisan, educated in Minoan metallurgical techniques and tastes (fig. 9c)⁵⁸.

⁵² MUHLY 1980; BASS 1997; NIEMEIER 1998; MUHLY 2003b; 2009.

⁵³ HIRSCHFELD 2010, 379. Actually the Minoan imports in Cyprus are not very frequent, but their number increases substantially during the Late Bronze III: CATLING, KARAGEORGHIS 1960; KARAGEORGHIS 1979; KANTA 1980, 309-313; KARAGEORGHIS, GEORGIU 2010.

⁵⁴ LAFFINEUR 1977; XENAKI-SAKELLARIOU, CHATZILIOU 1989.

⁵⁵ LAFFINEUR 1990-91. The few exceptions concern some multi-chamber tombs used for many generations and often found plundered. They have been found in Kythera, Poros and Knossos (COLDSTREAM, HUXLEY 1972; DIMOPOULOU-RETHEMIOTAKI 1988; MUHLY 1992; ALBERTI 2001).

⁵⁶ MATTHÄUS 1995.

⁵⁷ DEMAKOPOULOU 1990, 308-309.

⁵⁸ DEMAKOPOULOU 1990, 291.



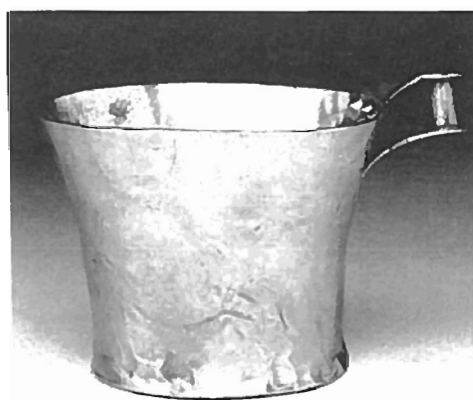
a



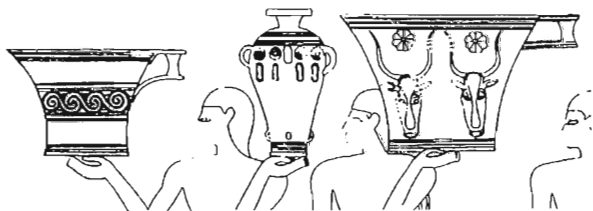
b



c



d



e



f

Fig. 9 – GOLD AND SILVER VESSELS, XVI-XIV CENT. BC (not to scale): a-b) Cups A and B from Vapheio (after ME0 2004, 32; DEMARGNE 1964, fig. 283); c-d) Golden cups from tombs IV and V of Circle A of Mycenae (after DEMAKOPOULOU 1990, figs. 239, 259); e) Detail of the Keftiu from the Senmut tomb at Thebes (after MATTHÄUS 1995, fig. 1); f) Silver cup from tomb V of Circle A of Mycenae (after DEMAKOPOULOU 1990, fig. 260).



a



b

Fig. 10 – GOLD CUPS (not to scale): a) Gold cup with spirals from a chamber tomb of the Haghios Ioannis necropolis at Knossos (*after* DIMOPOULOU-RETHEMIOTAKI 2005, 348); b) Gold cup from the tholos tomb of Marathon (*after* DEMAKOPOULOU 1988, 121).

Another cup-form is the low version with its wide strap handle, characteristic of both Minoan and Mycenaean contexts and belonging to a slightly later phase (Fig. 10a-b). The first of the two cups here illustrated was found in Knossos: decorated with spirals, it is considered a Minoan product. The second one was found at Marathon in Attica: extremely elegant in its simplicity, it is considered instead a Mycenaean product⁵⁹. The spiral decoration, mentioned also in the Mari texts, is a very common motif in Crete in all classes of products.

Very few examples combine both gold and silver. A low silver cup from the Vapheio tholos is decorated with an elaborate gold band applied to the rim, with relief whorl shells that look very similar to spirals. It is considered a Minoan product (Fig. 11a). Different sites in the Argolid have returned a number of exemplars of the same typology⁶⁰. A silver kylix, with its lip, handle and base in silver-plated bronze, and the lip and handle again bordered in gold, was found in a tomb from the Venizeleio necropolis at Knossos (Fig. 11b): the use of three different metals in one object demonstrates the complex technical level achieved by Minoan craftsmanship⁶¹.

Kylikes are the typical drinking vessels employed in Mycenaean symposia, found both at the beginning of the Mycenaean era and in its later phases. Although in its earlier phases the type is characteristic more of the Mainland than Crete, yet a gold one-handed kylix from Shaft Grave IV of Circle A in Mycenae is considered Minoan from its typology, elegant handle and technical execution (Fig. 11c)⁶². Another kylix from Mycenae has two handles ending in a dog's head biting the cup rim (Fig. 11d). This extraordinary piece is made of two pieces of golden sheet joined by 15 tiny golden rivets and a silver one. In this case the experts' opinion is that the artisan was a Mycenaean, perfectly accomplished in the Minoan metallurgical tradition⁶³.

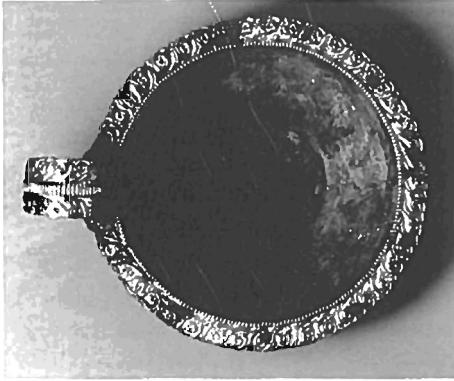
⁵⁹ HOOD 1956; DEMAKOPOULOU 1988, 121.

⁶⁰ DEMAKOPOULOU 1988, 103.

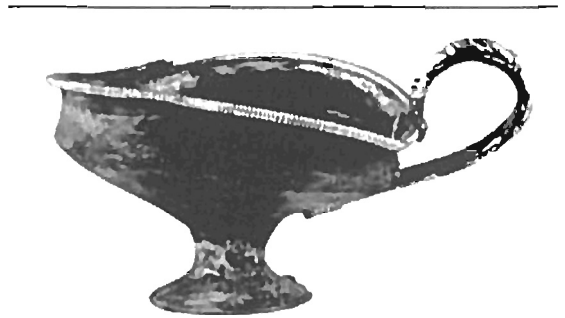
⁶¹ HUTCHINSON 1956; DIMOPOULOU-RETHEMIOTAKI 2005, 349.

⁶² DEMAKOPOULOU 1990, 290.

⁶³ DEMAKOPOULOU 1988, 68-69.



a



b



c



d

Fig. 11 – GOLD AND SILVER VESSELS: a) Silver cup with golden strip on the rim from Vapheio tholos tomb (after DEMAPOULOU 1988, 102); b) Silver kylix with gold-plated handle and rim from the Venizeleio necropolis at Knossos (after DIMOPOULOU-RETHEMIOTAKI 2005, 349); c) One-handed gold kylix from tomb IV of Circle A of Mycenae (after DEMAPOULOU 1990, fig. 238); d) Gold kylix with two handles as dog's head from Mycenae (after DEMAPOULOU 1988, 69).

For the rest of the vases mentioned in the Mari texts, the archaeological data from Crete and in general from the Aegean are not of help. No gold basins, no silver bowls (if we exclude the Todd treasure in Egypt, whose origin is controversial) – nothing in this category. On the other hand, numerous bronze basins are known, sometimes very large, of which we present some representations (Fig. 12)⁶⁴.

⁶⁴ MATTHÄUS 1995.

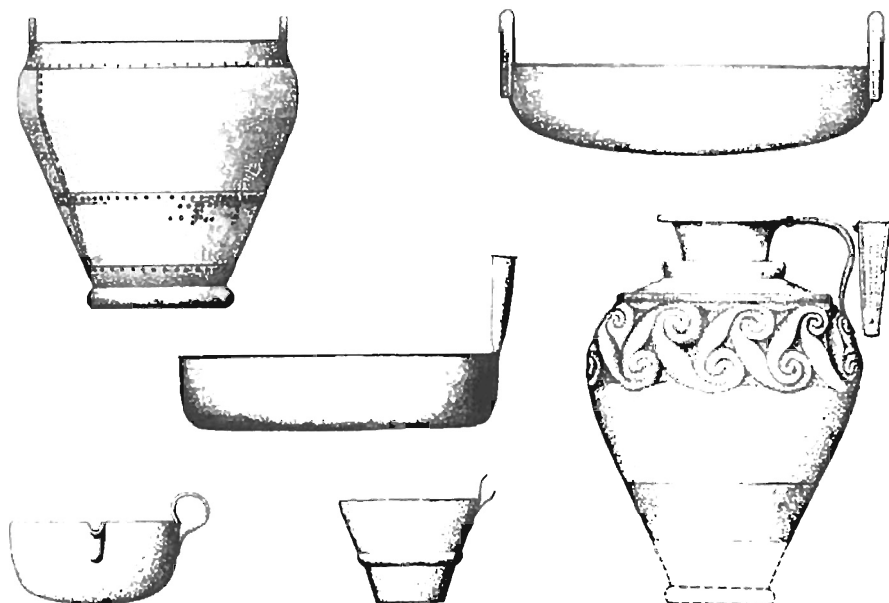


Fig. 12 – BRONZE CONTAINERS (not to scale): Exemplars of Minoan and Mycenaean bronze vessels dated to the beginning of the Late Bronze Age (detail *after* MATTHÄUS 1995, fig. 7).

Concerning the zoomorphic vase mentioned in the Mari texts, *rhyta* in animal shapes, both in pottery and in stone inlaid in jasper and rock crystal, are very common in the Minoan world; some were found also in the Levant⁶⁵.

CONCLUSIONS

‘Making visible the invisible’ is in itself a proposal certain not to be completely realizable. Especially as we are dealing with a fragmentary data set – sometimes controversial, nuanced and full of gaps.

The work of a historian (or prehistorian) proceeds slowly and accumulatively. One hopes for steady progress, through a continuing pattern of research in which philology provides the reasons and thinking behind ancient reality, whilst archaeology provides the colours and shapes as it quantifies and makes recognizable the images envisaged in the texts. Only through the joint effort of the two disciplines, supported by modern technologies and techniques, can we contribute to a historical reconstruction.

If the tone of the relationships between Mari and Crete during the XVIII cent. BC – made up of exchanges between individuals and groups and played out through

⁶⁵ DIMOPOULOU-RETHEMIOTAKI 2005, 153, 158, 193, 226; CALVET, GALLIANO 2004, 202: one of the two mentioned examples is an imitation.

small daily events – are destined to escape us forever, the textual data at least illuminates the appreciation the Mariote elite assigned to a piece of handicraft, partly perceived as exotic, but certainly sought after also for its aesthetic value. An ancient ‘treasure’ undoubtedly made up of precious vases for symposia and gift exchanges, but also of belts and boots, weapons and table knives: all designed to improve the appearance and increase the prestige of their owners.

Accessories may change with time, but human nature and vanities do not.

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ABSTRACT

In texts produced in the palace of Mari, some tablets list as 'Cretan' certain prestigious objects, such as leather goods, weapons and metal vases. Later texts from Ugarit mention Cretan merchants receiving tin in the course of their commercial activities. The Mariote texts are here compared with contemporary and later archaeological material found mostly in Crete but also on the Greek Mainland (as probable/possible imports from Crete), in order to understand the Minoan or 'made as Minoan' items that the Mariote elite looked for. By making concrete the items exchanged between Crete and Mari during the II millennium BC, one may both visualize the products of the handicrafts that were perceived as exotic and useful in elite gift-exchanges, as well as objects of personal use probably in great demand for their aesthetic values.

RIASSUNTO

Nella documentazione testuale del palazzo di Mari, alcune tavolette elencano una serie di beni "cretesi" di particolare pregio, fra cui oggetti di pelletteria, armi, vasi in metallo. Altri testi più tardi provenienti da Ugarit citano invece mercanti cretesi che ricevono quantitativi di stagno per le loro attività commerciali. La documentazione mariota viene messa a confronto con i materiali archeologici coevi e più tardi rinvenuti soprattutto a Crete, ma anche nel continente greco (come possibili importazioni da Crete), per tentare di identificare quali fossero i prodotti minoici o "fatti alla minoica" che le elite mariote ricercavano. "Rendendo visibili", per quanto possibile, gli oggetti che furono probabilmente scambiati fra Crete e Mari durante il II millennio a.C., si tenterà di dare forma e sostanza sia a prodotti di artigianato percepiti come esotici ed utilizzati negli scambi di doni fra elite, sia ad oggetti di uso personale particolarmente richiesti per il loro valore estetico.