


ARCHAIC KNOSSOS, ARCHAEOLOGICAL NARRATIVES, AND CONSERVATISM IN CRETAN MATERIAL CULTURE

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This study addresses a longstanding historical and archaeological problem at the central Cretan urban centre of Knossos. This is the so-called ‘Archaic gap’, an apparent dearth of evidence for sixth-century BCE material culture across the extensively excavated city. The concept of a pronounced Knossian decline or recession at this time has been reaffirmed in recent years, with widespread repercussions for Cretan archaeology. By reconsidering ceramics from the Royal Road North and Unexplored Mansion excavations, as well as situating these deposits within their urban and regional contexts, I question the epistemological foundations of the Knossian gap and provide new directions for identifying sixth-century Knossian material culture. I propose that the apparent ‘gap’ is a product of several factors: (1) a relative disinterest in imports in sixth-century Knossos, (2) a dispersed, rather than densely nucleated, urban settlement pattern, and (3) a previously unrecognised conservatism in Knossian ceramics, where some of the ‘Orientalising’ styles traditionally dated to the seventh century were retained into the sixth. This phenomenon of conservatism differs in important ways from the ‘restraint’ or ‘austerity’ that has been previously proposed as characteristic of Archaic and Classical Crete.

INTRODUCTION

The transition from the Early Iron Age to the Archaic period in Crete was marked not only by the development of the city-state (*polis*), but also by profound shifts in the organisation of settlements and in the use of material culture (Gaignerot-Driessen 2016; Haggis and Fitzsimons 2020; Kotsonas 2021). The concept of a sixth-century Cretan decline from a seventh-century cultural and artistic floruit was first outlined in detail in the 1940s, most evocatively by Levi (1945; see also Demargne 1947), who described the pottery and metalwork of the late seventh century as ‘the last flight of imagination of the old civilization of Crete before it settles into the darkness of its exhausted, lethargic sleep’ (Levi 1945, 18). In the 1990s and early 2000s, the sixth century received monikers like ‘the Archaic gap’ (Coldstream and Huxley 1999), ‘the period of silence’ (Stampolidis 1990, 400; I. Morris 1998), ‘the best candidate for being a Dark Age’ (Coldstream 1991, 298; Prent 1996), a time of ‘laws without cities’ (Whitley 2001, 243), or even the period when ‘Archaic Cretan culture disappear[ed]’ (S.P. Morris 1992, 169). Some proposed that these changes were caused by the disruption of Mediterranean trade networks after Babylonia’s defeat of Assyria (e.g., S.P. Morris 1992, 169–72). Others focused on internal factors: the political weakness of Cretan city states, civil discord, or even a war between ‘Dorian’ and ‘Eteocretan’ ethnic elements in Cretan culture (Levi 1945, 18; Demargne 1947, 352–3). Most explanations emphasised isolationism, economic primitivism, and cultural backwardness. Cut off from the wider Mediterranean world, Crete remained stuck in an early stage of evolutionary development, a tribal aristocracy that would never approach the economic and political achievements of Classical Athens (e.g., Willetts 1955, 249–56).

Recent archaeological work on the island has shifted these older narratives. Excavations at Azoria and Itanos in east Crete have yielded Archaic civic and domestic architecture, artefact assemblages, and a funerary building (Haggis et al. 2007; 2011a; 2011b; Tsingarida and Viviers 2019). Significant progress has been made towards establishing various local Cretan ceramic sequences for black-gloss fineware of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE (Erickson 2010). Ongoing projects that combine archival study, analysis of previously excavated material, and new fieldwork at the important Cretan settlements of Prinias, Phaistos, Gortyn, Lyktos, Aphrati, and