

MINOAN PEAK SANCTUARIES: REASSESSING THEIR ORIGINS

The Cretan peak sanctuaries are amongst the most interesting phenomena of the Minoan civilization. Although not exceptional for their location on the summit of mountains and hills, they are still a unique type of cult place in the Mediterranean world for their history, topography and place within the settlement pattern. Cretan peak sanctuaries have attracted much attention during the last fifty years, but it seems that theoretical approaches have dominated over the fieldwork and these two groups of research have not always communicated with each other. Field investigations concerning the chronological range, geographical pattern and topographical characteristics of peak sanctuaries have been undertaken only by a very few scholars.¹ Many crucial problems are still unsolved and among the most intriguing ones are the origins of peak sanctuaries in Crete. Were the peak sanctuaries the first extra-urban and non-funeral cult places in Crete? Were they founded from the very beginning as politically-controlled institutions or as the spontaneous expression of purely popular religion? Was the cult on the mountains proceeded by an intermediate phase with ritual places on hilltops on the edge of or very close to the settlement? Equally interesting is the fate of ritual after peak sanctuaries had been abandoned. Why are most of the provincial peak sanctuaries given up at the end of the Protopalatial period with only some continuing until the end of the Neopalatial period? Why are two dramatic events of the Cretan history, namely the destructions at the end of the Protopalatial and the end of the Neopalatial periods, reflected so sharply in the changes of topography of Minoan cult places? I will address here only the problems concerning the hypothetical origins of peak sanctuaries (leaving the subject of their decline for a forthcoming paper), but I will limit our discussion to the sites and evidence rather than models and theoretical explanations. Archaeological evidence on the subject is too scarce to explain everything, but it is rich enough to introduce new elements into the discussion on the history of Minoan peak sanctuaries before and after the period at which they flourished.

The Cretan peak sanctuaries have long been regarded as an phenomenon contemporary with the foundation of the first palaces.² This conclusion, however, was based on poorly published material, and it was revised by the recent excavations on Iouktas and Atsipades Korakias. The first certain evidence connected with ritual activity on the Minoan peak sanctuaries is now dated to the Prepalatial period (EM III-MM I), but it is very probably that Iouktas served as a cult place already in EM II.³ It seems that the idea of the cult place on a hill was born in Knossos, the oldest and largest settlement in Crete. The state of research on the earliest material from Iouktas (i.e. EM II-III), however, does not yet allow us to answer to

- 1 P. FAURE, "Cultes de sommets et cultes de cavernes en Crète," *BCH* 87 (1963) 493-508; ID., "Nouvelles recherches sur les trois sortes de sanctuaires crétois," *BCH* 91 (1967) 114-150; ID., "Sur trois sortes de sanctuaires crétois," *BCH* 93 (1969) 174-213; B. RUTKOWSKI, *Cult Places in the Aegean* (1972) 152-188; ID., *Minoan Peak Sanctuaries: The Topography and Architecture*, *Aegaeum* 2 (1988) 71-99; ID., *The Cult Places of the Aegean* (1986) 73-98; ID., *Petsophas: a Cretan Peak Sanctuary* (1991); A. PEATFIELD, "The Topography of Minoan Peak Sanctuaries," *BSA* 78 (1983) 273-280; ID., "Minoan peak sanctuaries: history and society," *OpAth* 18 (1990) 117-131; ID., "Rural Ritual in Bronze Age Crete: The Peak Sanctuary at Atsipadhes," *CAJ* 2 (1992) 59-87; L.V. WATROUS, "Some Observations on Minoan Peak Sanctuaries," in *POLITEIA* 393-403; K. NOWICKI, "Some Remarks on the Pre- and Protopalatial Peak Sanctuaries in Crete," *Aegean Archaeology* 1 (1994) 31-48.
- 2 J.F. CHERRY, "Generalisation and the archaeology of the state," in D. GREEN, C. HASELGROVE and M. SPRIGGS (eds), *Social Organisation and Settlement* (BAR Suppl. 47) 411-437; PEATFIELD (*supra* n. 1, 1990) 124.
- 3 PEATFIELD (*supra* n. 1, 1990) 125; on different interpretation of the "earliest" material from Iouktas see WATROUS (*supra* n. 1) 394.

key questions concerning the very beginning of this cult place. How substantial is the EM II material and what does it consist of? If it is not related to ritual activity, what kind of site was Iouktas at that period? Which phase of the EM II period is represented? Is there continuation between EM II and EM III-MM I? Was the EM II site limited to the very area around the chasm, where later on an altar was built, or was it extended over a larger area? Was the earliest pottery accompanied by pebbles or was this element introduced later in the MM I period? The geographical characteristics, first and foremost the dominance of Iouktas over the area around it, and the visual relationship between the settlement at Knossos and its mountain sanctuary, must have been the prime factors for choosing the place. These were also the factors very important for the location of all the other peak sanctuaries. Although it has been suggested that the differences in the location on a peak or hilltop, or even any other elevated point "lay more in topographic and ritual circumstances than in basic intention,"⁴ the excavated evidence seems to indicate that this "basic intention" was also different. The inner arrangement of early peak sanctuaries in Crete shows a very individual character of cult and ritual ceremonies, although we have to agree that the peak sanctuary was only one element of the same religion expressed at the same time in other types of cult places elsewhere in the island. If Iouktas was indeed the first peak sanctuary in Crete it may have become the model site of its type and all the other similar cult places may have followed its most important features including not only the outer appearance, but also the inner elements essential to the practice of the cult. Although later building activity considerably changed the peak of Iouktas, it is not difficult to reconstruct the most characteristic natural elements of this spot at the time when this cult place was founded. A precipitous slope on one side and a chasm, being a central and focus point of the sanctuary, may have been such "essential features." Whereas a cliff or steep slope was easy to find elsewhere, on other peaks, the chasm may have been more difficult and it may have been replaced by shallower crevices and an artificial object (a pot or basket). A very modest arrangement of provincial Pre- and Protopalatial peak sanctuaries followed probably the original, and also very modest, appearance of Iouktas. It is hard to see any palatial involvement until a relatively late phase of the peak sanctuaries.⁵ The location and character of ritual in the early (Prepalatial) peak sanctuaries may have reflected very early Minoan belief systems, but the question is how early?

It was suggested recently that ritual places, which might have been the predecessors of peak sanctuaries, existed in Crete already in the Final Neolithic.⁶ Such a hypothesis, if proved, would place the origins of this type of sanctuary much earlier, and would show the links between the Final Neolithic and Protopalatial population in Crete; a very tempting hypothesis and, considering the history of settlement in Crete, a very plausible one. To support such a hypothesis we need, however, to find an uninterrupted continuation of tradition of cult practices (if not sites) on the heights from the Final Neolithic through EM II-III - a period of about one thousand years which constitutes almost unknown phase of the Cretan extra-urban and non-funeral cult places. The existence of Final Neolithic ritual sites on mountains and hills could stimulate farther research on filling the gap, but is the evidence for the Neolithic "peak sanctuaries" unquestionable? Below I would like to make a short analysis of this evidence.

First, I will discuss the site in field 23 of Branigan's Lamnioni survey (Pl. VIIa-b: S). According to the surveyor the site was located on "the flat summit of a steep-sided hill which stands over 50 m above the basin floor. It is very exposed and windy, a long steep climb from the nearest water source."⁷

4 J.C. VAN LEUVEN, "Problems and methods of the Prehellenic naology," in *Sanctuaries and Cults* 12.

5 A. KARETSOU, "The Peak Sanctuary at Mt. Juktas," in *Sanctuaries and Cults* 145.

6 A.A.D. PEATFIELD, "Atsipades Korakias," *The British School at Athens, Annual Report of the Managing Committee for the session 1990-91* (1992) 26; see also the paper by C. MORRIS and V. BATTEN on the Atsipades Korakias pottery, given during the 8th International Cretological Congress, Herakleion 1996 (in print); K. BRANIGAN, "Prehistoric and early historic settlement in the Ziros region, eastern Crete," *BSA* 93 (1998) 58.

7 BRANIGAN (*supra* n. 6) 57.

A number of sherds were recorded on the very summit, mostly outside the strange construction, the function of which could not be identified by Branigan, and on the slopes to the south and to the west. Having the problem with the interpretation of the site 23 in Lamnioni Branigan wrote "Taking all the evidence into account - location, structural, pottery distribution - we believe that this site (L23A) is not likely to have been used for domestic occupation but is more likely to represent one of the small hilltop ritual locations which began to appear in the pre-palatial period."⁸

Farther on, when writing about the sherds found on the terraces below the summit, Branigan wanted them to represent "occasional activities...related to the (ritual?) activities on the summit." Is this assumption justified? To answer to this question we have to analyse three factors which led Branigan to his conclusion.

1. Location. Branigan pointed that it was different from that of three other sites of the same period, discovered in the same valley. The site, however, should be analyzed against the general background of the Final Neolithic settlement in Crete. The setting of Lamnioni 23 is not extraordinary. It is in fact very typical for some, probably the latest, phase of the Final Neolithic.⁹ Until recently only a few such sites were recorded: Faistos and Gortyn in the Messara were amongst the best known, but not unique. The East Siteia Plateau is particularly rich in Final Neolithic defensible sites. Endichti, above Adravasti, has already been misidentified as a peak sanctuary, but according to MacGillivray and Hood, it belongs to this group of sites.¹⁰ Hilltop Final Neolithic settlements were identified at Zakros Gorge Kato Kastellas, Xerokampos Castello, Mavros Akrotiri, Goudoura Castello, Ziros Rizoviglo, and Petsofas. Defensible sites on hills were not just an East Cretan phenomenon. Extensive sites of this type were recorded at Koutsounari Karfi and Anatoli Pandotinou Korifi, along the southern coast. A great number of defensible sites of FN date were also identified along the southern coast of Western Crete (Gianniou Plati, Sellia Castello, Kastri and Kefala, Vraskas Lakoudia and Paleochora Nerovolaki).¹¹ The location of all those sites is very similar to Lamnioni 23 and all of them were settlements. The number and topographical characteristics of these sites indicate that in some phase of the Final Neolithic the settlement pattern in Crete was shaped by threat and conflicts. The high location of the FN site does not indicate, therefore, its special, non-domestic function. The exposed and windy location is characteristic for many settlements on the Cretan hills. The location of Lamnioni 23 is not extraordinary even within the Lamnioni valley. A very extensive Final Neolithic site occupies the hill 764 which dominates the valley on its west (Pl VIIa: N).¹² Sherds and chipped and ground stone tools are scattered for a distance of c. 200 m along the whole ridge c. 30-40 m in width. The site on the hill 764 belongs to the largest settlements of this date in the Siteia Peninsula and the site of Lamnioni 23 must be analyzed in the whole settlement context of the Lamnioni valley, including the hill 764.

2. Structure. The arrangement of Lamnioni 23 is very similar to other sites of the same date in Crete. The afore-mentioned settlement of Rizoviglo consists of the higher citadel and lower settlement below. Both may have been encircled with walls the construction of which may suggest a fortification rather than a terrace. The latter conclusion is based on other examples of fortification walls identified around several FN settlements in Crete. I can mention here Goudouras Castello and Vraskas Lakoudia. A very good example of a small Final Neolithic settlement, similar to Lamnioni 23, can be found in Damnioni (West Crete) (Pl. VIIc: N). Here, a rocky summit standing above the small proper settlement, was defended by a stone wall, which formed a fortified citadel. The terraces to the south and west at Lamnioni 23 were also occupied by the settlement, and thus the site is bigger than suggested by the plan published in Branigan's paper.

8 BRANIGAN (*supra* n. 6) 58.

9 K. NOWICKI, "Final Neolithic Refugees or Early Bronze Age Newcomers? The Problem of Defensible Sites in Crete in the Late Fourth Millennium B.C.," in *MELETEMATATA* 575-581.

10 FAURE 1969 (*supra* n. 1) 176 and A. MacGillivray and S. Hood personal communication.

11 NOWICKI (*supra* n. 9).

12 BRANIGAN (*supra* n. 6) Fig. 15.

3. Pottery distribution. The bizarre distribution of the sherds on the summit of Lamnoni 23 can be explained in the same way as a very similar pattern on the summit of Rizoviglo. Both sites were destroyed by illegal excavations and a trench or rather a hole was dug inside of some kind of stone structure. The preservation of that part of the site has nothing to do with its original character. In Rizoviglo, it seems that there was a similar construction on the peak, but here, in contrast to Lamnoni, there may have been a MM ritual site, as it is suggested by substantial number of MM I-II pottery.

In my opinion neither the location, nor the archaeological evidence on the surface, allow us to interpret Lamnoni 23 as a ritual site. Probably, it was a hilltop settlement (typical for that period) with some defensive characteristics including a fortification wall. If such Neolithic settlements had any ritual structure or cult area within them, it is impossible to judge because of lack of any excavated example.

The second site, only tentatively claimed to have been a possible ritual Final Neolithic site, is the MM I-II peak sanctuary on Atsipades Korakias (Pl. VIId), excavated in 1989 by Alan Peatfield and Christine Morris.¹³ The excavators noted that the Final Neolithic or EM I material did not contain all the elements one might expect for standard domestic debris (no bones and no stone tools), and the range of pottery shapes was very limited. This opinion was criticised by Watrous, who suggested that the early material from this site (as well as other peak sanctuaries) “resembles occupation debris.”¹⁴ I would like to discuss briefly two points which led the excavators to their conclusion, 1) the location and 2) the material. The location of Atsipades is indeed much more dramatic than Lamnoni 23, but is it enough to exclude a habitation or other, non-ritual function? As in Lamnoni, we have to put the Atsipades Korakias case on the general background of the Final Neolithic settlement, first and foremost in the vicinity of the site. The area south of the Agios Vasilios valley yielded a great number of Final Neolithic and perhaps EM I sites located on high hills and mountains (Gianniou Plati, Sellia Kastri, Sellia Castello, Sellia Kefala, Kerames Tseroni).¹⁵ All of them are extensive settlements with abundance of pottery and chipped stones, as well as ground stone tools, recorded on the surface. These large settlements, were accompanied by very small sites, also located on the peaks and edges of the cliffs (Drimiskos Agios Georgios, Sellia Kabana and Myrthios Kirimianou). Topographically the latter are similar to Atsipades Korakias. What concerns the early material from Korakias, it is not restricted to the pottery only. On the surface of the very peak there is an abundance of chipped chert stones similar to those noted at Final Neolithic sites in the Lefkogia-Kerames valley.

The interpretation of these small Final Neolithic sites is difficult, but they may represent short-living/seasonal camps or isolated households. Such is one probably explanation, but the possibility of a special, and perhaps ritual character of those sites cannot be rejected altogether. Perhaps the Final Neolithic Atsipades Korakias belongs to this category of sites. Why they were located on the summit of knolls and mountains is hard to say. No one of them has been excavated.

The presence of Neolithic material underneath the Middle Minoan I-II peak sanctuary does not need to indicate the same function of the place in these two separated periods. The Final Neolithic settlement pattern was characterized by a great number of defensible or hilltop habitation sites. It is nothing extraordinary that sometimes, such an early site was reused later for a different, including cult purpose. To illustrate such a situation we can mention Petsofas (Pl. VIIIA). This well-known peak sanctuary was situated on the northernmost peak of the Petsofas massif (P). Only c. 200 m to the south, on and around the middle peak of Petsofas, there is a Neolithic site (N) which covers an area c. 40 m in diameter. The site seems to have been missed by all the archaeologists working at the peak sanctuary. The repertoire of pottery, and chipped stones (including obsidian), suggest a habitation site. Why it was located on the

13 MORRIS and BATTEN (*supra* n. 6).

14 L.V. WATROUS, *The Cave Sanctuary of Zeus at Psychro* (1996) 73.

15 The same phenomenon was recorded by WATROUS (*supra* n. 14) 73.

height of Petsofas, and why at that very spot, close to the steep western slope of the mountain (which resembles the later peak sanctuary), is difficult to say. It is, however, only accidental that the later peak sanctuary was located not on the peak occupied during the Neolithic, but on the neighbouring one, otherwise we would have another example of a Final Neolithic deposit underneath a Minoan peak sanctuary. A similar situation, where a Final Neolithic settlement is located underneath and close a much later Middle Minoan peak sanctuary, is the site of Anatoli Pandotinou Korifi (Pl. VIIIb). Both, Petsophas and Pandotinou Korifi warn us to be careful when interpreting early material from other peak sanctuaries. This skepticism, however, does not apply to the EM II material from Iouktas. Here the earliest phase (in contrast to Atsipades Korakias) is not separated from the earliest certain “ritual” phase of the site by a long gap in use. The peak sanctuary on Iouktas must have been founded by the inhabitants of Knossos, and it may have expressed, therefore, a very important aspect of the Knossian religion. Was the same religion, however, ruling all over Crete? We still do not know how homogenous was the Cretan population in the EM II-III period, i.e. after very dramatic changes which took place at the turn of the Neolithic and the very beginning of the Bronze Age. We can only hope that the excavation in Iouktas will be completed, and the earliest material (including that from the deepest layers of the chasm) will be carefully published. It seems that Iouktas is the best site to bring the answer to the question when the Minoan peak sanctuaries came to existence.

In spite of this “negative” verification of the Final Neolithic predecessors of the Minoan peak sanctuaries, it is still very plausible that this type of cult place may have originated much earlier and undergo much longer evolution than it was previously thought. As I have tried to show, many of the hilltop Final Neolithic sites were settlements, temporary camps, and other habitation places. High location and remoteness from the arable land and water is not enough to interpret these sites as ritual places. I do not want to say, however, that such identification is impossible. Very small sites with the proportion of some material (pottery, chipped stones, shells, bones) much higher than average, may have had some still unknown specialized function and amongst them may have also been ritual. The two theories discussed here, one linking the peak sanctuaries with the foundation of the palaces,¹⁶ and the second seeing them as development of ritual associated with the Early Minoan tholos and house tombs,¹⁷ were more speculative than based on any archaeological evidence. The fact that we know so little about Early Minoan religion and cult places in Crete does not justify artificially created models. The Final Neolithic brought to Crete a completely new settlement pattern. There were lots of changes, but also lots of continuity through the EM I and II periods. Only a few sites were properly investigated and published. Apart from two settlements which were purely EM (Myrtos Fournou Korifi and Debla) the remaining evidence comes only from the fragments of EM sites much destroyed by the later activity. The settlement pattern during the Final Neolithic, and the EM I and II periods is very superficially known. It is very probable that the FN and EM settlements possessed their own shrines, even better differentiated in their plans than that of Myrtos Fournou Korifi. It is possible, too, that by the Final Neolithic there were already natural ritual sites located away from the habitation places. We should look for them, we should investigate and eventually excavate them. The possible sites exist and the Atsipades Korakias Final Neolithic layer is still worth of such tentative classification.

The peak sanctuaries in their “classical” (EM III to MM II) form may have been only one type of the high ritual sites. The idea of hilltop shrines, being only a topographically slightly different version of peak sanctuary, refreshed recently by Branigan¹⁸ and Watrous,¹⁹ is worth more detailed analysis and discussion. The hilltop shrines as a type of sanctuary different topographically, but not structurally from peak sanctuaries, existed indeed in the Pre- and Protopalatial Crete. The site of Korakomouri, situated in the close vicinity (but

16 CHERRY (*supra* n. 2).

17 PEATFIELD 1990 (*supra* n. 1) 124f.

18 K. BRANIGAN, *Dancing with Death* (1993) 101f.

19 WATROUS (*supra* n. 1).

much lower than the “high” peak sanctuary on Zakros Vigla), published by Schlager,²⁰ and a very interesting site on the top of a low promontory of Trochilas (the Faneromeni Akrotiri) (Pl. VIIIc), west of Siteia, leave no doubts that there were such “low” peak sanctuaries, which following Watrous’ typology, could be called “hilltop shrines” to differentiate them from the higher peak sanctuaries. Amongst these lower hilltop shrines we should also look for the predecessors of the EM III-MM II peak sanctuaries. The fact, however, is that many settlements and farmsteads of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age date were located on the hills and without excavations it will be very difficult to prove their cult function. Until that is achieved the earliest phase of the peak sanctuaries must be still dated to the EM III-MM I period with the remark that the phenomenon started on Iouktas probably already in EM II.

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20 N. SCHLAGER, “Korakomouri,” *JÖI* 64 (1995) 1-24.

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Pl. VIId Peak Sanctuary on Atsipades Korakias.
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Pl. VIIb Anatoli Pandotinou Korifi: Peak Sanctuary (P), Neolithic Settlement (N).
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