

Regional Elite-Groups and the Production and Consumption of Seals in the Prepalatial period. A Case-Study of the Asterousia Region

Kostas Sbonias

Small-scale, local patterns are important for the understanding and explanation of social change. In particular, the study of the manufacture and exchange of pottery, lithic and metal objects has demonstrated how local patterns of production, supply and consumption can help us to understand regional interaction and socio-political complexity (Wilson and Day 1994; Day *et al.* 1997; Carter 1998; Knappett 2002; Relaki 2004). In this paper I will focus on the example of seal production in south-central Crete, specifically at Moni Odigitria and the wider area of the Asterousia. This will lead on to a discussion of the role of regional elites in the late Prepalatial period and the implications of patterns of seal production and consumption for social complexity in the wider region.

In the commonly held view, the Prepalatial Asterousia is an area with a dense settlement pattern of small communities, which was largely deserted as the process of urbanisation and political centralisation at Phaistos evolved (Blackman and Branigan 1977: 68–69; Branigan 1995: 35). Phaistos, being a powerful point of reference, takes the central role in discussions addressing questions of social complexity. The new excavations there point to MM II as the main period of growth and consolidation of the Palace, which was founded in MM IB (Tomasello 2001; Militello this volume). The western Mesara survey noted the urban nucleation of the regional population at the site of Phaistos in MM IA and saw the decrease of rural settlement as a result of land control by Phaistian elites (Watrous *et al.* 2004: 267–68). The survey results indicated marked settlement growth in the Protopalatial period, which was interpreted in terms of the development of a complex and socially diverse settlement hierarchy and attributed to the emergence of a Palace-based state (Watrous *et al.* 2004: 277–84). Yet what was the role of local kinship groups in this process? Was

there a gradual subordination to emerging regional polities, if and when they existed, or can we trace a more autonomous role for local elites, characterised by substantial economic, political and ideological power? By considering the peripheral area of the Asterousia, I will argue that local centres strengthened their position at the time of the emergence of the Palace at Phaistos. Such groups can be traced not only in the Mesara, but also in marginal areas where resources and population numbers were smaller in scale. This pattern is indicative of distinct nodes of power, operating at the local level, claiming a special status and acting as agents of change and innovation at the end of the Prepalatial and the beginning of the Protopalatial periods.

Social practice and power strategies will be here explored by considering the production and consumption of Minoan seals, a form of material culture with both economic and symbolic significance and a regular presence in burial contents (Yule 1980; Sbonias 1995; Karytinis 2000; Krzyszkowska 2005; Aruz 2008). Study of the Moni Odigitria material, ahead of the final publication of the burial assemblage (Branigan and Vasilakis in press), provided an opportunity to reconsider Prepalatial seals. A group of 52 seals came to light during the excavation (Sbonias in press), to which may be added the corpus of 218 seals from the Mitsotakis collection, which probably also originally derived from the Odigitria tombs (CMS V.1A [Pini 1992]; CMS V.3, 1 [Pini 2004]). The recent publication of the Lebena tombs by Alexiou and Warren (2004) offers comparative material from an undisturbed context and allows for comparison at the local level. In this way we may examine the structuring of this peripheral region, the access of local communities to regional networks and the integrative role of local elites.

Settlement patterns and local craft production

During the Prepalatial period, the Mesara, rather than being a unified unit, consisted of many diverse social landscapes (Relaki 2004: 182). The western Mesara survey summarised the pattern for the EM II period and the evidence for the emergence of a ranked society (Watrous *et al.* 2004: 233–52). In EM II there is a widespread expansion of tholos cemeteries in all parts of Mesara and the Asterousia and the increased importance of certain communities is attested in both the size of settlements and cemeteries and in the nature of the tomb contents. EM II Phaistos, with an estimated size of 3.3 ha (Whitelaw this volume) was larger than any of the sites in the surrounding region and overlooked, together with Ayia Triada, the two largest expanses of well-watered

fertile land in the western Mesara (Watrous *et al.* 2004: 234–35). The large size and rich contents of tombs at Ayia Triada, Platanos and Koumasa corroborate the elite standing of these communities. The local production of EM II bronze daggers was associated primarily with these larger communities, with signs of specialisation in distinctive types of daggers and alloying techniques detectable in some of the assemblages (notably Ayia Triada and Platanos/Koumasa) (Watrous *et al.* 2004: 242, 245; Tselios 2008: 134–48). The western Mesara and Kommos surveys offer additional evidence for the local settlement pattern in the western Mesara, which, apart from the village-sized site of Phaistos and the settlement at Ayia Triada (Laviosa 1973), included several hamlet-sized settlements and numerous farmsteads (Watrous *et al.* 2004: 237; Hope Simpson *et al.* 1995: 393–95; Whitelaw this volume for the lack of an integrated settlement hierarchy in such a small-scale system).

In the Asterousia, despite the differences in scale and the smaller population numbers, we can also see the importance of certain localities. In the Ayiofarango valley, in the inland valleys and plateaus as well as in the Flysch zone along the coast from Kali Limenes to Trypeti, there is a scatter of small, isolated tholos tombs, short distances apart and situated adjacent to small pockets of arable land (Blackman and Branigan 1977; Vasilakis 1990). The overall picture is that of a dense spread of tholos tombs, each one associated possibly with a small number of farmsteads or nucleated hamlets (Sbonias 2006). Communal differentiation is indicated by the existence of two tholos tombs in some of the cemeteries (Moni Odigitria, Megaloi Skinoi, Skotomenou Charakas, Lebenia I and II, Kephali Odigitrias-Skanniari Lakkos) as well as by the more visible character and demarcation of some settlement sites (Blackman and Branigan 1977: 39–47). The recent survey at Moni Odigitria located four localities of Prepalatial habitation in the immediate area north, northwest and southwest of the Prepalatial cemetery (Vasilakis and Branigan in press). We have to wait for the final publication of the survey in order to consider occupation density in these areas. It seems though that dense agglomerated architecture is lacking from the area of the Moni Odigitria tholos graves. Scatters of houses with a low density of habitation were the usual form of settlement in these areas. According to Vasilakis and Branigan (in press) the survey results suggest for the late Prepalatial period a number of 6–12 households associated with these localities and a much smaller number for the EM I–EM II period, for which the distribution of the material was much more confined (for a comparison with Prepalatial Phaistos see Watrous *et al.* 2004: 238, 256; for estimates see also Whitelaw this volume).

What is interesting is that, despite their small size, the peripheral communities of the Asterousia region appear to have hosted craft production involving a range of artefact types and media with a variety of morphological and decorative characteristics (Wilson and Day 1994; Alexiou and Warren 2004: 192; Watrous *et al.* 2004: 241; Tselios 2008). In the early Prepalatial period fine painted vases were made in substantial numbers at a number of locations and could well be associated with the communities of Lebena Gerokambos, Ayia Kyriaki or Moni Odigitria. In addition, Warren has suggested, in the case of the Lebena tombs, that there was local exploitation of fine stones for vases and beads (Alexiou and Warren 2004: 192). In terms of EM II seal production, the evidence from the Asterousia supports the existence of several locations producing simple seals made of soft stone and particularly bone (Sbonias 1995: 74–81; Krzyszkowska 2005: 60–63). The use of simple linear motifs represents a shared and widespread tradition of seal manufacturing and not the style of particular production groups. Nevertheless, within the region there are indications of local seal manufacture, visible especially in the assemblages from Ayia Triada and Platanos, where signs of exclusivity and repetition in the choice of motifs, shapes and styles may be discerned (Sbonias 2000: 281–82). The large quantity of bone seals at Moni Odigitria (Figure 9.1), in almost all the variants and shapes of this group, suggests another focus of local manufacture with close similarities in several aspects to Ayia Triada (Sbonias *in press*). In the Lebena tombs bone seals decorated with hatching are also well represented and probably also locally manufactured (Alexiou and Warren 2004: 192). Thus, in spite of their simple character, seals during this period suggest a dispersed picture of craft production in the Asterousia, involving multiple localities of craft activity and many outlying, but economically thriving, local communities.

Late Prepalatial ivory seals and power legitimisation strategies at the regional level

If we turn to the fine ivory seals of the EM III/MM IA period (Sbonias 1995: 84–102; Krzyszkowska 2005: 63–68), we see a more complex picture. The artistic quality and the high level of skill involved in the production of these seals, the relative standardisation of seal shapes, syntax and motifs, their repetition and duplication and their concentration at certain sites (Figure 9.2), all indicate that manufacture was in the hands of specialists. The use of ivory, an imported material which reflects privileged access to resources, and the likely prestige

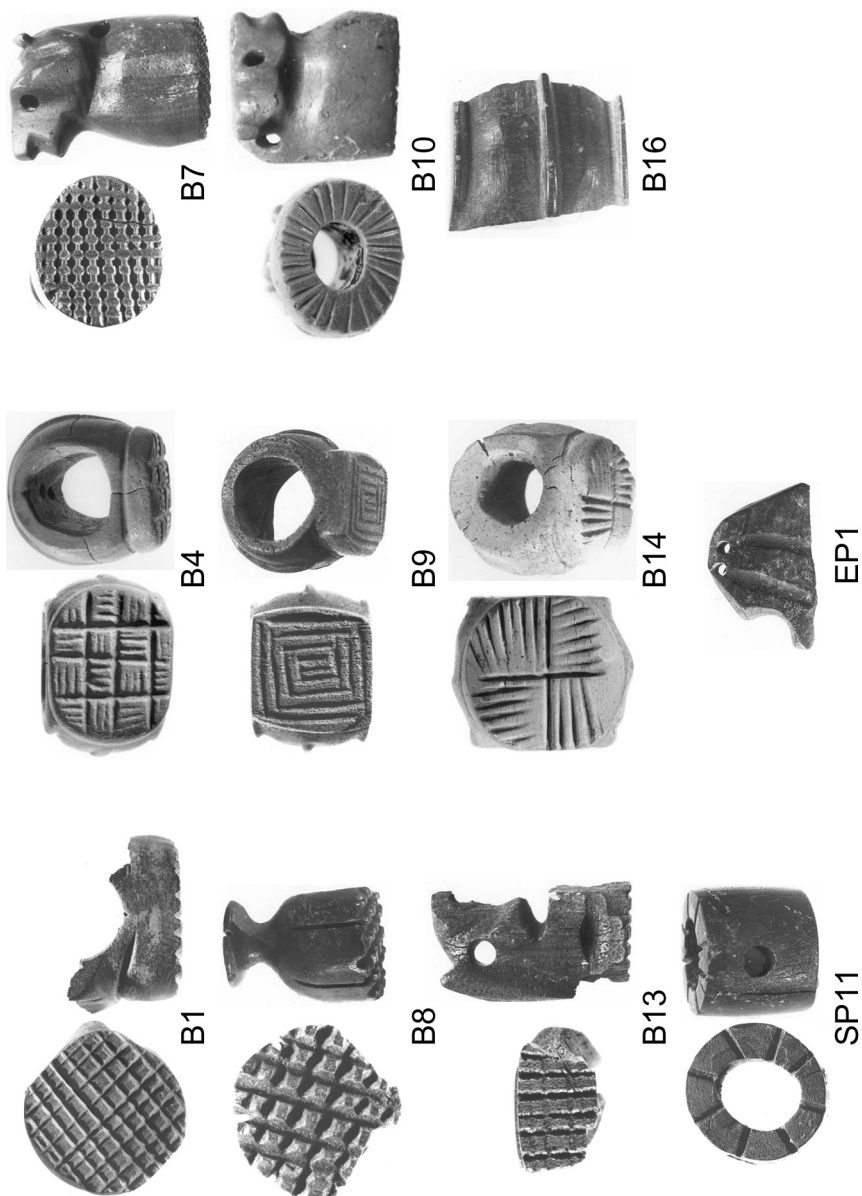


Figure 9.1. Early Prepalatial bone seals from the Moni Odigitria excavation.

character of the seals themselves indicate the production of high-value goods for limited consumption. In terms of iconography, certain sites show special preferences (*e.g.*, Ayia Triada for Meandroid patterns; Platanos, Marathokephalo and Archanes for motifs of the Parading Lions/Spiral group; see Figure 9.2), but usually all large seal assemblages contain several iconographic groups, either manufactured locally or imported as prestige objects (Sbonias 2000: 283–88). In general, a pattern is evident of closely linked centres of production at different sites, operating within the same tradition and style, as reflected in commonalities of style, syntax, shape and iconography.

If we consider the distribution of fine ivory seals in the Asterousia region, a slightly different picture emerges, when compared to the wide distribution of local seal production in the EM II period. It seems now that some of these outlying local communities were more clearly embedded in networks that take in the wider region of Mesara, in a more dependent economic structure, while others in the western Asterousia retained their role as local foci of craftsmanship (Figure 9.2). Peripheral sites in the Asterousia (*e.g.*, Ayios Kyrillos, Krotos, Drakones, Siva Lebena I and II; for bibliography see Branigan 1992: 143–48), at Porti and Kalathiana in the wider Mesara area or at Kyparissi in north-central Crete (Serpetsidaki 2006) have all produced isolated ivory pieces of a quality and style that is comparable to the ivory seals found in the major assemblages of Platanos, Ayia Triada, Archanes and Marathokephalo. In the Lebena tombs, for example, contrasting patterns can be observed in the seals from EM II and EM III/MM I contexts. In the lower level of the Lebena tombs (Lebena II, IIa and III), a large number of simple soft stone and bone seals was found, which could be of local manufacture. In contrast, seals from the upper level of Lebena I and Lebena IIa are all different (CMS II.1 [Platon 1969] nos. 182, 187, 194, 205, 207; Alexiou and Warren 2004: 153–54), a sign perhaps that they are not local products but isolated imports from workshops located elsewhere. Furthermore the occurrence of ivory seals in these contexts is rare. The same is true for other small, peripheral communities, such as Porti (CMS II.1 nos. 351, 353, 354), Drakones (CMS II.1 no. 3), Miamou-Korakies (HM 3134, ivory seal of the Parading Lions/Spiral group), Krotos (HM 3014, large ivory seal of the Parading Lions/Spiral group; Vasilakis 1983: 355), Ayios Kyrillos (HM 2318), Siva (CMS II.1 no. 369) and further east Viannos Galana Charakia (CMS II.1 no. 446). Even if we take into account looting or incomplete excavation, it seems that ivory seals are typically rare in small communities. This indicates a more prestigious framework for the pattern of use and ownership of seals in EM III/MM IA period and a broader distribution of precious items in several minor communities. These were dependent, at least in

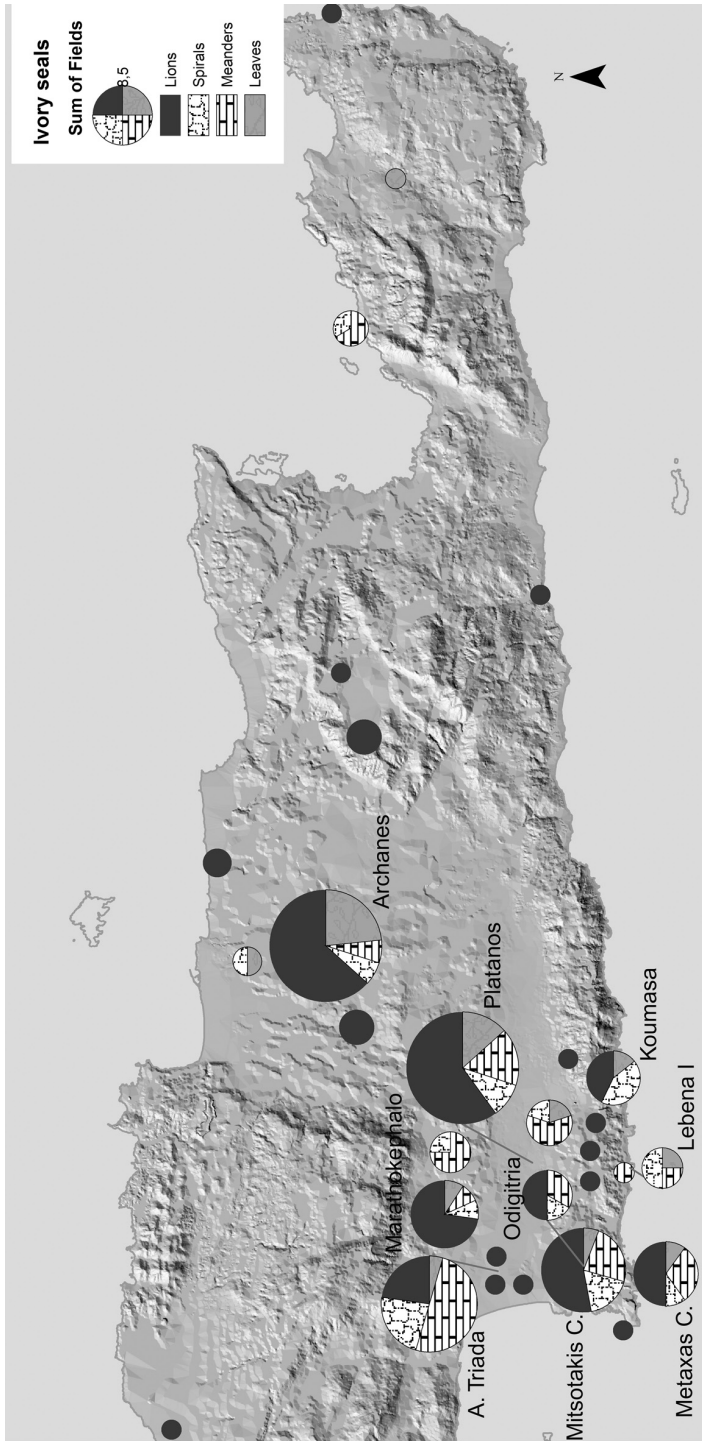


Figure 9.2. Distribution of the ivory groups of the Late Prepalatial period (EM III-MM IA).

terms of seal consumption, on certain large communities, which in quantitative terms dominate seal production (Figure 9.2), but also the production of other MM IA elite goods, such as daggers (Watrous *et al.* 2004: 257).

In quantitative terms, sites such as Ayia Triada, Platanos, Marathokephalo and possibly Koumasa, as well as Archanes in north-central Crete, seem to have dominated the production and consumption of ivory seals (Figure 9.2). In the western Asterousia Moni Odigitria also stands out in quantitative terms and seems to have been part of this network (Sbonias *in press*). In terms of intensity of production, however, it seems that seal manufacture remained at a low level. This is not surprising since seals seem to have played an active role in the negotiation of social identity during this period (Karytinis 2000: 130–33) and their manufacture must have been controlled by social factors. In general the spatial distribution of different styles and different iconography reveals not one but several localities which seem to have dominated the production and consumption of ivory seals and whose interactions and relations formed a complex system of power legitimation at the regional level during EM III/MM IA. Within this framework Moni Odigitria in the western Asterousia retained or strengthened its character as a regional focus, participating in the conspicuous consumption and power legitimation strategies practised by kinship groups in the wider region of south-central Crete.

The integrative role of local elites at the Prepalatial/Protopalatial transition

This picture suggested by the distribution of fine ivory seals should be regarded as a continuation of social processes happening in the EM II period and immediately thereafter. The use of ivory as a seal material is first attested in a few EM II contexts (Panagiotopoulos 2002: 64; Krzyszkowska 2005: 63) and culminates both in terms of quantity and craftsmanship in the succeeding period. That said, however, the use of ivory is not associated with the major expansion of the Archanes-Phourni cemetery in MM IA. Seals in local materials are found in the later buildings of the cemetery (*e.g.*, Tholos B, Burial Buildings 3.5.6 (a mixed context), 9.18 and the area between 8 and 9) from MM IA onwards (Karytinis 2000: 128). Also the appearance of seals bearing signs in a recognisable script, the so-called Archanes script group (Yule 1980: 170; Sbonias 1995: 107–13) is associated exclusively with seals made of bone and occasionally soft-stone. It would seem that at sometime within MM IA ivory

was replaced by local materials (*e.g.*, soft stone, bone, white paste), a change probably related to the supply of ivory as a raw material (Sbonias 1995: 69–70, 102–3). This change of materials was accompanied by new principles of syntax and style which characterise the end of the Prepalatial period and probably also the transition to the Protopalatial (Sbonias 1995: 102–21; Krzyszkowska 2005: 68–76; for seals found in MM IB and MM IB–II contexts see Dimopoulou 2000: 28; Niemeier 2005: 3, pls. 7–8; CMS V.3, 2 no. 476). Ossuary d, an undisturbed, closed context of the late Prepalatial period in the Moni Odigitria cemetery, offers a good example of these co-existing seal traditions. Of the 22 seals found there 17 are white pieces (Figure 9.3, O1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11–17, 19–23) and 5 are made of bone and decorated with Hieroglyphic signs of the Archanes script group (Figure 9.3, O6), single rosettes (Figure 9.3, O8), a stylised goat (Figure 9.3, O2) and segmented linear patterns (Figure 9.3, O18). There are no ivory seals present, indicating that at the end of the Prepalatial period local preferences in the choice of materials favoured white paste, bone and soft stone (Figure 9.3, B2 and SP2, from mixed contexts).

Considering the distribution of the different styles at the end of the MM IA period, which probably continues into MM IB, a more concentrated and exclusive pattern can be observed, in which the western Asterousia area with Moni Odigitria as an obvious focus takes a prominent role (Figure 9.4). In this peripheral area a new soft, white material, which was glazed and fired, is associated with a new engraving technique and relief decoration on the bodies of the seals (Pini 1990; Sbonias 1995: 113–18; Krzyszkowska 2005: 72–74). This was used to define the style of a certain region encompassing Moni Odigitria (*i.e.*, 18 seals from the excavation and 24 from the Mitsotakis collection probably originating from the Odigitria tombs) and also the wider Kali Limenes area (seals from the Metaxas collection published in CMS IV [Sakellarakis 1969]). The remaining 35 known white pieces were found in small numbers (1–4 seals) at other sites across southern, northern and eastern Crete, reflecting a trickle of such seals into other communities along an existing socio-economic network (*e.g.*, isolated white pieces at Platanos or Archanes) or a pattern of small outlying sites that were dependent, at least in terms of seal consumption, on the western Asterousia (*e.g.*, isolated white pieces at Kouses, Figure 9.4). The adoption of the Egyptian scarab form and the manufacture of scarabs in Minoan style, as well as the use of a glazing technique imitating faience, indicate a link with Egypt (Pini 2000: 112; Phillips 2008). The introduction of a foreign technology and iconography marks out the prominent position of Odigitria during this period and indicates the key role played by local elites in the adoption of innovations.

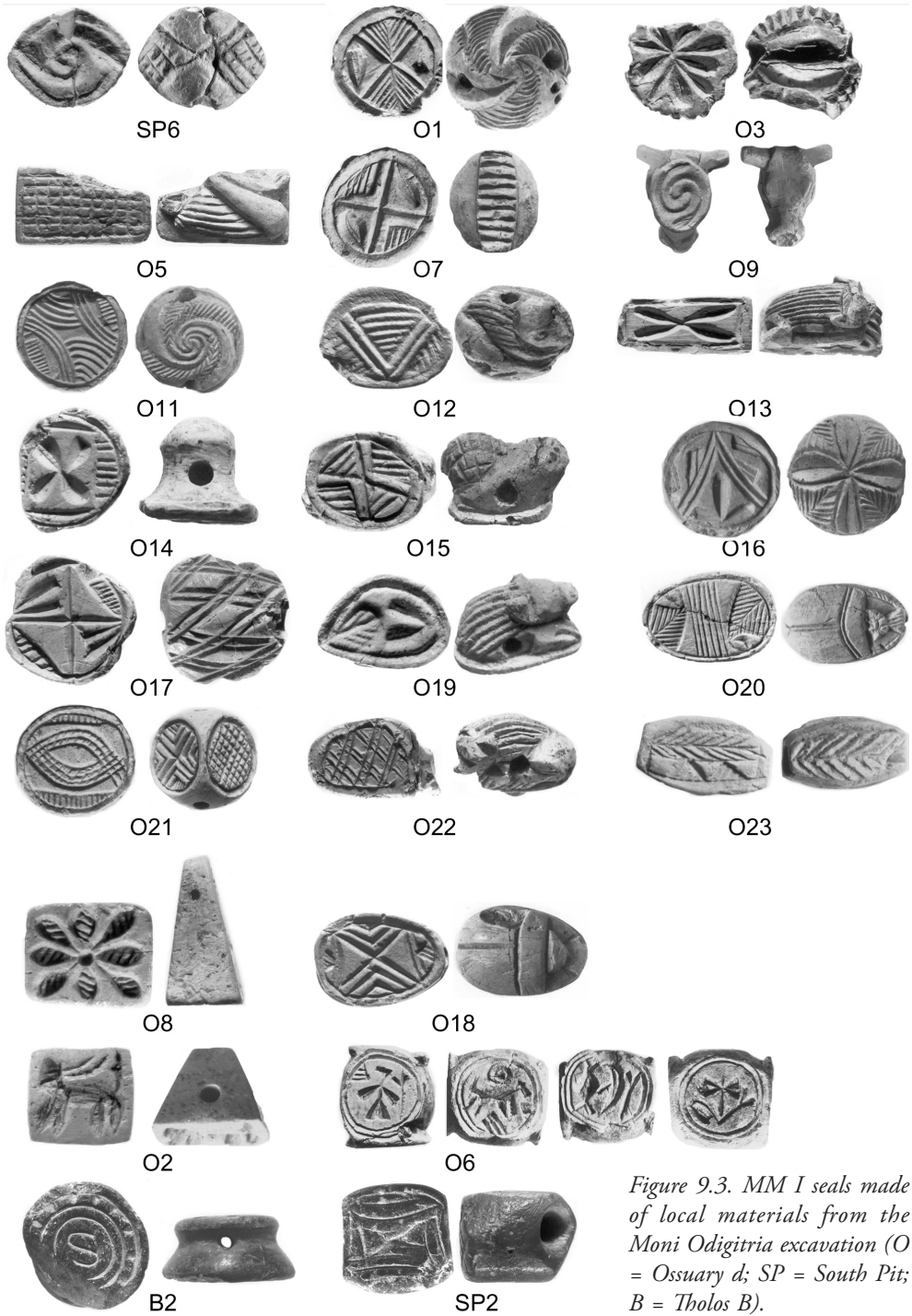


Figure 9.3. MM I seals made of local materials from the Moni Odigitria excavation (O = Ossuary d; SP = South Pit; B = Tholos B).

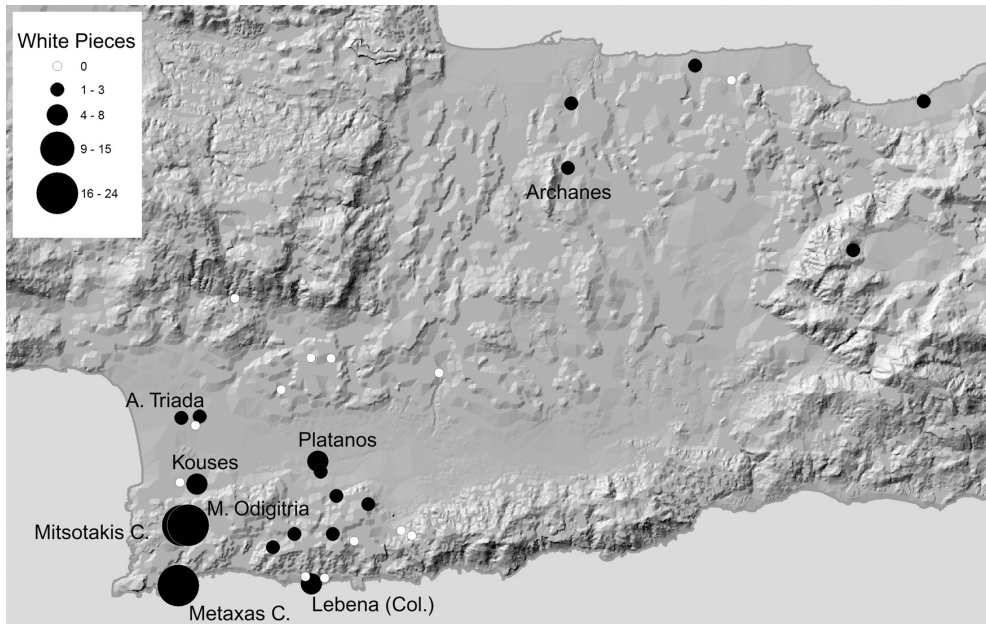


Figure 9.4. Distribution of the 'White Pieces' Group.

Looking beyond the Asterousia region, a locally centralised pattern in the organisation of production can also be observed, associating certain large sites with their own distinct styles. During this period a workshop producing elaborate seals in soft stone, decorated with ladder and spiral ornaments, wavy meanders, interlace and whirls (Yule 1980: 211–12; Sbonias 1995: 118–21; Krzyszkowska 2005: 74–76), should be mainly linked to Platanos (Figure 9.5). Isolated seals of this group appear at several sites in the Asterousia region (*e.g.*, Koumasa, Lebena II and III, Krotos and Christos). This central area of the Asterousia range seems to have had a stronger link with Platanos than with the western part of the Asterousia (*i.e.*, Moni Odigitria, Kali Limenes), where the tradition of the white pieces is dominant. However, isolated pieces of this style are also found at Moni Odigitria (Figure 9.3, B2 and SP2), demonstrating access to seals from other workshops within the regional network. The same is true for seals of the Archanes script group, which is related principally with Archanes (Figure 9.5; Sbonias 1995: 107–13. Schoep 1999: 265–66). Here we see the introduction of script signs in association with other repetitive motifs on the other seal faces, an innovation used also to demarcate a regional style. Isolated pieces in this style are exported, possibly as prestige items, to other large communities, as is the case with the single inscribed seal from Moni Odigitria (Figure 9.3, O6), showing

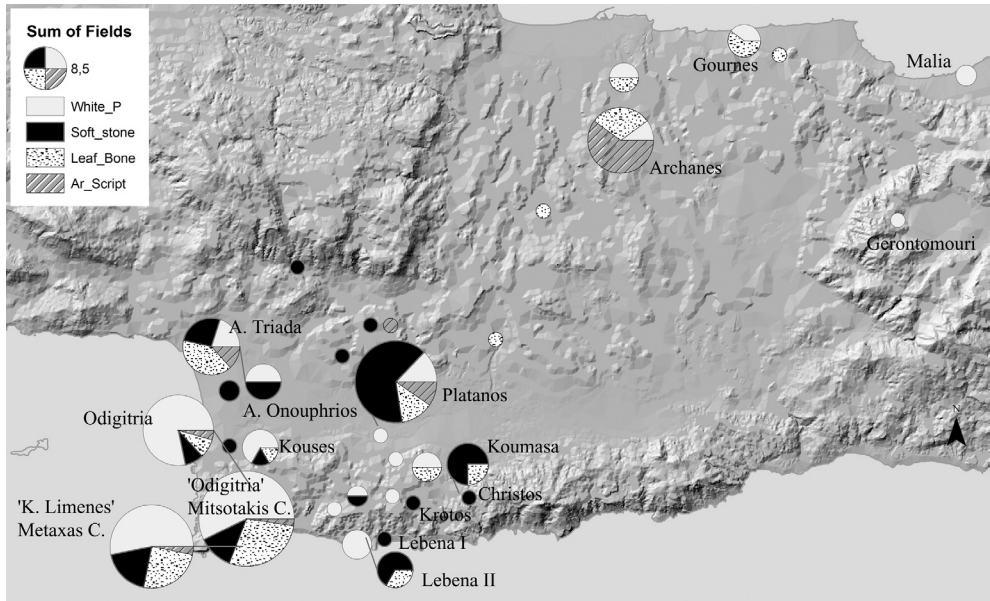


Figure 9.5. Distribution of the MM I seal groups made of local materials (white paste; bone; soft stone).

that this community had access to and could participate in the elite networks of north-central Crete. This pattern of production, involving groups at certain large sites, implies a more locally centralised pattern in the organisation of production as well as integration at the micro-regional level. The considerable amount of seal production at Odigitria indicates an even more intensive involvement in the production and consumption of high culture by members of certain elite groups. These groups, through the introduction of new techniques (white paste, glaze, tubular drill) and ideas (script signs) mark themselves out as agents of innovation in an attempt to reinforce their high social status, as has also been argued by Ilse Schoep (see Schoep 2006: 46, 57).

Thus at the end of the Prepalatial period, the pattern of seal production and consumption offers indications of heterogeneity, not unlike the heterarchical dimensions of complexity recently noted for other regions of Crete (Haggis 2002; Schoep and Knappett 2004; Schoep 2006). In south-central Crete several communities appear to have been involved and these retained their special status during the EM II and EM III–MM IA periods and show prosperity and expansion during the MM IA–MM IB transition. In the Mesara region we can notice the growth of Phaistos and the absence of outlying settlements

in the area around it, as recorded in the Western Mesara survey, as indicating nucleation of settlement at Phaistos (Watrous *et al.* 2004: 253). The diminishing role, in terms of seal production and consumption, of Ayia Triada, which at the end of the Prepalatial period is no longer associated with its own glyptic style (*e.g.*, compare the distribution of ivory groups in Figure 9.2 with the production of seals in local materials in Figure 9.5) and the disappearance of Marathokephalo, which was associated with a remarkable consumption of ivory seals in the EM III/MM IA period (cf. Marathokephalo in Figures 9.2 and 9.5), might be related to the growth of Phaistos in the western Mesara. In the central Mesara Platanos with three tholos graves in its cemetery testifies to the existence of a sizeable community. Further north the Archanes cemetery is expanding in MM IA through the construction of new funerary buildings. At Moni Odigitria a well built square building of MM I date, ca. 100 m² in size, was added to the settlement pattern of the late Prepalatial period (see above). Here the recent survey also indicated nucleation and a clear demarcation of the main settlement in the succeeding Protopalatial period, when one of several Prepalatial foci of habitation, situated 350 m northwest of the Moni Odigitria cemetery, grew into the main settlement (Vasilakis and Branigan *in press*). In the western Asterousia the nucleation at Moni Odigitria may be related to signs of gradual abandonment at several tombs and settlements in the Ayiofarango and around Kali Limenes in MM I–II (Blackman and Branigan 1977: 68–69). This strengthening of particular communities at the end of the Prepalatial period and during the transition to the Protopalatial and their association with the production of distinctive styles of seal, might reflect the integrative role of these communities at the local level as well as the absence of a strong impact from Phaistos in the wider Mesara and Asterousia region (for Phaistos see Todaro 2009: 141–43).

Conclusions

On the basis of the evidence presented above, it would seem that at the end of the Prepalatial period and during the transition to the Protopalatial local elites in the western Asterousia were exercising substantial economic and ideological power and seeking to legitimate their own political status. Other parts of the Asterousia appear to have been embedded within similar integrative structures linked to the Mesara region. Platanos seems to have played a central role in the middle part of the plain and possibly also part of the Asterousia mountains.

In MM IB Phaistos was influencing the western Mesara and probably also the Monastiraki area (Schoep 2001: 92–93), but had no significant impact on settlement patterns elsewhere. These local foci of power do not suggest a pattern of emerging regional centralisation, but rather seem to act in a competitive and more autonomous way. During the period of the emergence of the Palace at Phaistos, it would seem that a large, regional and, centrally structured polity, integrating the communities of the plain, coast and mountains, did not exist in south-central Crete. This is in accordance with the results of recent excavations at Phaistos, which indicate that it is only in the advanced Protopalatial period (MM II) that the Palace experienced significant growth and consolidation (see papers by Todaro and Militello this volume; Todaro 2009), involving larger scale mobilisation of agricultural surpluses (see Knappett and Schoep 2004: 28–30 for similar observations for East Crete). At the Prepalatial/Protopalatial transition, during the timespan associated with the production of MM I seals in local materials (see above), we see instead a landscape of distinct localities, each of which claimed their own power and acted as agents of change and innovation, even in areas that seem peripheral and small scale such as the western Asterousia mountains. Access to external, long-distance trade networks via the southern coast by agents related to these local elites might have been one factor influencing the distinct position of the western Asterousia area (see Schoep 2006: 48–49 and 52–57 for the exploitation of long-distance contacts as a strategy to increase social power). The evidence from the seals supports Schoep's argument that elite forms, activities and practices during this period were to a large extent connected to elite groups that lack any clear palatial connection (Schoep 2006: 57–58).

In contrast, for MM II there is no sphragistic evidence to suggest that these local elites in the Asterousia-Moni Odigitria region retained their special status. The tradition of the 'White Pieces' Group, and its special technique, disappears and its imagery does not find a continuation in the repertoire of the MM IIB sealings from Phaistos. The traditions of other local stylistic groups of the late Prepalatial period (*e.g.*, the imagery of the Archanes script group and of the group of soft stone seals decorated with spirals, wavy meanders and interlace and mainly associated with Platanos) seem to continue, transformed into new styles in the advanced Protopalatial period. Sealstones dated to the MM II–III periods, that is steatite prisms of the Malia Workshop Complex and Subgroup (Yule 1980: 212–13), Hieroglyphic seals (Yule's Hieroglyphic Deposit Group in Yule 1980: 215–19), seals with tectonic ornament (Yule 1980: 220–21), seals with centred circles and other drilled motifs (Krzyszowska 2005: 86) and MM

II–III seals with decorative and pictorial motifs (Krzyszkowska 2005: 88, 91) represent new glyptic styles, whose iconography can be partially traced back to the late Prepalatial iconographic traditions (*e.g.*, Sbonias 1995: 109–111 table III, 119), but which do not seem to be distinct products of local workshops. Isolated pieces are found in the cemeteries that continue into the Protopalatial period, but these do not constitute local production, but rather seem to have been supplied within a regional framework (*e.g.*, CMS II.1 no. 5 from Ayia Irini, CMS II.1 nos. 86, 90 from Ayia Triada, CMS II.1 nos. 145–146 and CMS II.2 no. 26 from Koumasa, CMS II.1 no. 366 from Porti, CMS II.1 nos. 247, 275, 301, 304, 334, 347, 349 and CMS II.2 no. 25 from Platanos). The disappearance of distinct local sphragistic styles in the Mesara and the Asterousia by MM II and the incorporation of their traditions within a palatial context, as reflected in the MM IIB sealings from Phaistos, indicate a strengthening of supra-regional structures. Local elites might have continued to play a role (see Relaki this volume), but the integration of communities takes place at a wider regional scale. Prior to this, however, in MM I, at the point of transition to the Protopalatial period, the emergence of strictly defined, centrally structured regional polities is not visible in south-central Crete.

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