

# Some notes about Kamilari tholos

I will present here only some issues that make the Kamilari tomb really important, and discuss them to understand why it is a key-monument of Minoan civilisation. In particular I will analyse some aspects that can give us a better comprehension of funerary rituals, as well as of the same tholoi. The tomb belongs to that group of tombs called "tholoi", or circular tombs, which is diffused especially in the Mesara Plain, in Crete. In truth, what is called Kamilari tomb is constituted by a group of three tholoi and not only one. However here I will speak essentially about the main tomb, numbered as 1 and also called tomb at Grigori Koryphi<sup>[1]</sup>.

The tomb was excavated during the summer 1959 by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Crete directed by Doro Levi, who also published the results<sup>[2]</sup>. The tholos is situated North from the town of Kamilari, not far from the sites of Phaistos and Knossos. This tomb probably was not part of the cemetery of one of these two important palatial sites, because it is located in a hill near the monument a survey found many sherds suggesting the presence of a settlement there. In fact tholoi were always built near settlements, generally the distance between them is around 200 m, and in a well visible position. Kamilari seems to be not different about this. The internal diameter of the tomb<sup>[3]</sup> is 7.65 m, with a wall's thickness of 1.70 m. The resulting external diameter is of about 11 m. Walls were constructed with roughly worked blocks, though made with larger stones on the inside face; they were cemented with a mixture of pebbles and earth.

The first interesting element is about the roof. No roofs survived in tholoi, and a large discussion has been done, and it is still continuing, about which type could have been used. Fundamentally there are two theses: one affirms that roofs were constituted by stone vaults; another says that other materials, such as bricks and wood, were used to build them. Kamilari has a particular place in the debate, since here it was found a large part of the roof collapsed. Evidently all this material is composed by stones that still maintain a regular position after the fall. This is the best evidence that support people thinking to roofs as vaulted in stones. Specifically Levi reported the evidence for up to eight rows inside the main tomb, while in the little tholos part of the same complex of that there were ten rows. A big stone found North, outside the circle, measuring 1.32 X 1.12 m has been interpreted as keystone of the roof, removed by looters in antiquity to enter in the tomb. This finding in addition to the large quantity of stones collapsed and their regular order suggested to Levi the possibility that the whole roof was stone vaulted. This was firmly believed by him, but subsequently many doubts arose. A stone vault is generally well accepted by researchers for the smaller tholoi, but not for the majority. The quantity of stones found inside the main tomb are in fact insufficient to cover the whole tholos with a vaulted roof and the stone identified as keystone of the roof's structure can be also something else, or a keystone of other structures comprised in the perimeter of the tomb. However it is evident that at least a part of the roof was vaulted in stone. The top of the vault could have been, as Branigan suggested, flat and removable in wood, to better permit the exit of smoke during the fumigations, or in any other perishable material. Levi noticed that some annexes of the tomb had no roof at all, or less probably a sophisticated structure in a perishable material of which nothing has remained. This hypothesis born looking to the level of the thresholds in the annexes:

while the level increased during the life of the tholos, the walls remained at the same level. At the end the distance between the floor and the walls' top was too low to permit a roof. Since in later times there were some burials in the annexes as well, it is possible that also the circular chamber could have been without a roof. To support Branigan's thesis here it was found nonetheless some burnt pieces of wood, interpreted at the time of the discovery as timbers used by looters to enter. But also in that case, they could have reused the timbers of the roof. Less probably is that the stone identified as keystone of the vault was really this because it is strange to see a so heavy stone removed and placed so far, externally, instead of simply pushing it inside. The situation of the tomb permits also another inference about the roof: since so many stones were found inside, and still in order, it is strange that if the whole vault was done in stone nothing of the remaining part survived. Rethinking to the looters imagined by Levi, it would be absolutely bizarre to picture these removing half of the vault by hand and placing each stone outside the chamber, as for the keystone. The most convincing hypothesis for this tholos in my opinion is that it was built only a partial stone vault. The top of it was left "open-air" or covered in wood. In the case of a full stone vault, a possible occurrence, the rests of burnt timbers it would be difficult to understand the meaning of burnt timbers inside a chamber completely closed on the top and where people should enter with torches, while periodical fumigations for hygienic or ritual purposes were done. Wood in a similar place should have been avoided as much as possible. Also it is difficult to think to the timbers as support for the vault: why to build a roof, which tended to collapse? Probably the right solution is a partial vault stone, with or without a top in perishable materials. The fires would be much more controlled. In the case of an open-air top, the result would have been a circular opening looking directly to the sky and illuminated by the sun during the day and by the moon during the night. Similar solutions can be seen also in the contemporary Egyptian civilisation as well in many other ancient societies. For example, Egyptian pyramids have some canals that connect the funerary chamber to the external surface, and oriented to same particular positions in the sky. A simpler, but similar solution could have been adopted also here, with many ritual, magic or others symbolisms and meanings. One for everyone is the direct contact between corpses in the earth and souls (and / or gods) in the sky. The rotation sun/moon (day/night) could in this case be seen as part of the already recognised rituals<sup>[4]</sup> of fertility and vegetational cycle done in the tholoi. It has to be noticed that there were also some slabs in the walls, almost regularly ordered in this tholos, which can facilitate people who need to reach the roof. They were substantially interpreted as steps, to reach easily the roof or made during the building to facilitate the workers erecting the walls. Their interpretation is perhaps too centred on roofs, and depends on which theory to accept about the roofs. If we think to a removable roof, like that suggested by Branigan, people had often to reach the roof and so they would be explained. In truth we do not know what was their function, certainly they were not made casually, as their regularity suggest. But also thinking to them as steps, they do not help really in the discussion of roofs: too many are the reasons that could explain the necessity of climbing walls.

The tomb was built in the Middle Minoan I B period, a later moment for a tholos particularly in the Mesara. The others Mesara tholoi are typically of the EM period and do not survive long in the MM period. Exceptional is also the period when the tomb flourished: the third protopalatial phase, as MM III A was called by Levi comparing the pottery found with that from Phaistos. With a discontinuous use the

tomb was used last time in the LM III A2, practically in Mycenaean times. This tomb connects the ancient tholoi to the Mycenaean ones, even if new discoveries are demonstrating that tholoi were an ancient use originated probably in the Mesara, but soon exported to other areas of Crete and outside, with minor gradual changes that produced the Mycenaean tholoi. In Messenia for example tholoi seem to be common, and this region was always a traditional point of contact and exchange (economic but also cultural) between Crete and the mainland Greece. This means that the circular tombs solution was exported and used throughout the whole Bronze Age in the Aegean area. This explains why this type of tomb was still used during Mycenaean times, but not why it was built and employed in MM. It is necessary to look to the contemporary social situation to understand its deep meaning. Tholoi in the past (EM) were used by the first elite appeared among Minoans, a social class probably composed by a few extended families, or clans; possibly they were land owners, but surely they were able to organise agriculture. The members of this social elite built the circular tombs in a well visible position to demonstrate their power on the nearby land. They also used tombs as "houses of ancestors" to say that the land was their since ancient times and that now it was defended by the buried. In the MM period a new elite tried, successfully for what we know, to obtain the power, building palaces and extending their control in a much more productive way to the whole society becoming the only authorised to treat about virtually anything with the other communities, or better palaces. The original community become in this way dependent from the palatial elite. As we have seen, if palaces were the symbol of the new elite, tholoi were the same for the previous one. It is difficult to think to a sudden change in a so delicate and deep-rooted social context without any sort of fight. We do not know if there was a civil war, but surely we can understand this tholos as a challenge to the new elite. It is located in a well visible position, extremely near<sup>[5]</sup> to two palaces<sup>[6]</sup>, clearly stating that the old elite controlled the territory: too much to not irritate the palatial elite. In addition there is also a religious meaning involved in the tomb, the old elite in fact tried to dominate the society using also religion for political purposes and beginning a long tradition that continued for a long time, being reused by the new elite and the following, Mycenaean elite. As I said tholoi were connected with some rites and furthermore they were partially not strictly related to a funerary context. Palaces soon, if not from the origins, became a primary religious point. This was enough for the first period, and explains well why a tholos tomb was built there, in a so problematical position and historical moment. It remains the fact that it flourished at the end of the MM period, when it is expected to think that palaces had the full control. First of all, if the tholos survived till that time, it is clear that the palatial elite failed to fully submit the previous elite, that we can imagine gave always troubles to the palatial elite. But it is not a case if the tomb prospered during MM III A. In this period Phaistos was reduced to a heap of ruins by some natural<sup>[7]</sup> catastrophes, and in the following time the eruption of the volcano in Thera caused a so desperate situation that for long time the palace was abandoned to build a new one in Haghia Triada. This was a terrible chapter in the history of the palatial elite. It lost its power and never regained it completely because in LM Mycenaean people began the progressive, but inexorable, domination of the island. It was therefore the best occasion the old elite had to propose again its predominance. While the palatial elite was unable to rebuild a palace in the area, the tholos still remained there. Probably it was damaged, but it would be easier in the case to restore a tholos rather than a more sophisticated palace. As I said above the palace carried a special symbolism, precisely it was the primary symbol of the palatial elite. A palace in good conditions expressed

the strength and the power of that elite; in addition, from a religious point of view, it could have meant that its inhabitants "had the favour of gods". On the other hand, this last point was almost certainly used by the "agrarian" elite<sup>[8]</sup> to contrast the palatial one. A palace destroyed and with the impossibility of restoration could have been interpreted as a signal of gods that changed their mind about the governing elite and at the same time the evidence of a failure in the government, especially in a critical situation. The solution? To return to the old traditions, according to the ancient elite, in this view. And this explains the flourishing in this particular time of the tholos.

Inside the tomb, archaeologists discovered around 500 conical cups (skoutelia), the same quantity of mixed vases, 70 stone vases (generally small), around 20 seals, various parts of necklaces, bronze ornaments and many daggers, which all together represent well the findings in the whole complex. Most part of these objects has been dated to the III protopalatial phase (MM III A) in base of stylistic comparisons with other materials especially from Phaistos. Among all these, which represent the various typologies that are possible to find in the whole complex of Kamilari, two types are particularly interesting: the conical cups and the daggers, those that were considered as secondary by Levi<sup>[9]</sup>.

Many conical cups<sup>[10]</sup> were found outside the tholos on and near a stone slab, now fragmented and measuring m 0.98 X 0.80. This was called by Levi "Recinto delle offerte", Offerings' enclosure, which constitutes one of the paved areas of the tholoi. They were placed overturned, with the mouth down, and this means that they were used for a ritual. In fact there would be no reasons to place hundreds of cups, all similar, all in the same position, one near the other. They were untouched by looters because roughly made; also there was no precious object among them or traces of any other object. Conical cups, especially in MM, were a typical vessel for ritual libations, since there are many discoveries of similar assemblages even if in other contexts than a tholos and in different areas. Kamilari is nonetheless the best place to understand that Minoans used tholoi for rituals because there is a strict connection between paved areas, which are special areas in the tomb vicinity because paved, and an indication of rituals. Conical cups were used evidently during funeral rites for a libation, probably done in one of the annexes, by few persons, typically two or three, probably strictly related to the dead. Then they were left outside the annexe in a special section of the tomb, in an overturned position, down on the ground, probably to permit to the drops of the remaining liquid to reach the earth. Of course it was possible also the use of something not liquid, but in any case liquid must have been present<sup>[11]</sup>. This has a double meaning: it is a fecundation ritual (something enters inside something else, and earth for a society of farmers needs to be fecundated) and a regenerative ritual (from the death of a man to the fecundation of earth, and the following regeneration of both nature and humanity). Branigan attempted also to count bodies using these cups since the bones were already found mixed and then soon lost<sup>[12]</sup>. He found that 400 or 500 bodies could have been buried in Kamilari, thing that is not so surprising if we consider the millenary use of the tomb.

Apart from conical cups, Kamilari helped also to fill in the gap archaeologists had about the MM III style of pottery in the Mesara. I want also to speak a little about the three figurative clay models found here that were decisive in the knowledge of the ancient rituals that were done in the tholoi. The first, classified F 2632, comes from the annexe alpha and it is high 10 cm and large 15 cm. It has a rectangular shape and

represents an offerings' scene in a small sanctuary, perhaps a part of the same tomb. Seated near the wall there are four stylized figures, in front of four little altars. In front of them, looking to them, there are two figures, disposed each one in front of an altar presenting offers not well recognized. La Rosa thinks that two "horns of consecration" during excavations were in the origin part of the sanctuary. It has been interpreted as an offering done from people to gods, or dead' shadows and dated to the LM III A period.

The second model, classified F 2634, was found between the annexes alpha and beta. It is high 17.5 cm while the diameter of the base is 15.8 cm. Here there are represented four male figurines dancing hand by hand. On the base there are four "horns of consecration". A broadly model comes from Palaikastro. It is evident that dance was used in rituals.

The last model, classified F 2633, was found in the same position as the second and measures 7 cm (high) while the diameter of the base is cm 13.5. This model is fragmented and therefore it is more difficult an interpretation. In this, a female figure handling a pestle is seated with another not well recognizable around a table. A third figure near what could be a door is observing them. There are also here the "horns of consecration" and birds in the scene, both attributes of a Minoan goddess. It seems a scene of preparation of food, possibly to be offered. We could in this way imagine three moments of the ritual: the preparation of offerings, the offer and the dance. They constitute the most complete figuration of funerary rituals till now and are of course essentially for the knowledge of religion, and in particular of the rituals done in burials. Since the tholoi were connected with the most ancient rituals and religion, we could imagine that these models, even if made really in a later period, at least remember the old rites of the origins of Minoan civilization. But they are also symbol of a religiosity and devotion never forgotten, that certainly characterized Minoans and maybe gave it an identity.

From the publication till now, this tholos was very generous with archaeologists, helping to discover and understand many aspects of Minoan civilisation. And new researches could tell us more. Certainly it is the most important source of knowledge about rituals connected to burials.

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### Notes:

<sup>[1]</sup> The other tombs are: tomb number 2 or at Mylonà Lakko and tomb three. I will call simply "tomb" or Kamilari tomb the main one, since it is the most important for our purposes, and with their full name the others, when I will need to refer to them.

<sup>[2]</sup> Levi nonetheless focused his attention especially on Middle Minoan pottery.

<sup>[3]</sup> The diameter is particularly regular.

<sup>[4]</sup> I will speak later about these rites. For our aims, it is sufficient to think to the figurative models found in this same tomb.

<sup>[5]</sup> About 1.5 Km from both the palaces of Phaistos and Haghia Triada.

<sup>[6]</sup> Only Phaistos existed at the time of the building, Haghia Triada became the substitutive palace for Phaistos in LM when the rebuilding of this needed too much time. However Haghia Triada already in MM was built and existed as a palatial villa, an important administrative centre. The presence at the same time and one near the other of two administrative places can be explained by the importance of the area. Mesara Plain was enormously important for agriculture, which gave the origin to the first elite. Around the middle of LM the two palaces coexisted, but they divided between them the administrative functions. This is suggested especially by the presence of an archive in Linear A in Phaistos and one in Linear B in Haghia Triada but with the significant absence of a corresponding archive in Linear B in Phaistos.

<sup>[7]</sup> A series of earthquakes announcing the eruption of Thera is currently affirmed as almost certain by geologists. If there were also some concurrent or subsequent human causes of destruction, it is not known, nor it is open to suspicion with a degree of sureness.

<sup>[8]</sup> The first elite, originated by the control of agriculture as I said.

<sup>[9]</sup> Levi was concerned about the styles of pottery, and about architecture. As we will see, conical cups and daggers are not interesting from this point of view, but they can tell us a lot about Minoans. However the decision of Levi affected their publication: he summarised their description while described in detail the other objects, sometimes in detail each one. This situation will be a limit for our discussion.

<sup>[10]</sup> In the whole tholos complex archaeologists discovered at least 500 conical cups, but many others could have been present, since there are a lot of sherds.

<sup>[11]</sup> Sometimes under the pottery stratum of the cups there are still traces of humidity. This was not reported however in the specific case of Kamilari.

<sup>[12]</sup> There was an attempt of recompose some bodies, but it failed. The archaeologists at the time decided therefore to rebury the bones without carrying out any other analysis. This was done for ethical concerns but we have lost a possibility to better understand the Minoans.

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