

How have archaeologists used the concept of social ranking in the study of Minoan civilisation?

Minoan civilisation is the first to have been considered as "Western". It emerged in prehistoric times, at the end of Neolithic, and continued till the Mycenaean period, when it was used Linear B in which it was recognised the base of the future Greek language. Minoans are as a result of this vision the conjunction between a long period where humans lived essentially in a "primitive" state and the civilisation, as we know it. Even if this common view can be criticised from many points of view, it explains well how archaeologists, as well as everyone else, thought about it. It is a civilisation in which people tried to find some issues similar to our times and that appeared for the first time in this civilisation and that have no comparison in the contemporary societies. Palaces, for example, were considered since their discovery an evident confirmation of the presence among the population of a distinction based on social power, i.e. the presence of a social ranking. This is essentially true for what we know today, but Minoans were a complex society in which social ranking is not only evident thanks to palaces. On the other hand, previous and contemporary societies were not so "primitive" as someone could have thought. Egyptians are a clear example of a complex society contemporary to Minoans. However it is really interesting to analyse Minoan civilisation from the particular point of view of social ranking, because many concerns are still unclear. Probably we know better other civilisations^[1], even if in any case there are difficulties understanding a society chronologically so far from us. Palaces for a lot of time remained the solution of the problem^[2]; basically the only solution archaeologists were able to propose for a lot of time. This situation was consequently a limit in the comprehension of Minoans.

During the Early Minoan period Crete does not present evident traces of a social ranking. Archaeologists described the society in this period as very similar to the Neolithic one. Crete was imagined as an island with many local communities in which social power was in the hands of the elders, especially men. The society was in this hypothesis a patriarchal society. The society however was interpreted as egalitarian^[3] and thinking to the circular tombs, also called tholoi, in the Mesara Plain many have seen in these monuments a proof of what they were saying. The main characteristic of these buildings is that they are common tombs and it is impossible for us to distinguish among the burials. These tombs^[4] are object of an interrupted discussion since they discover for many aspects. None of these tholoi was discovered in its integrity, so no-one know exactly how they looked; they appeared suddenly in an early stage of the Minoan civilisation when no other civilisations adopted such a solution, nor are circular buildings known to be used for any other purpose at this time. They were used for long periods, with or without interruptions in the use, that reach in many cases the millennium. No definitive answers were given to these and many other questions, also because the excavations have not produced till our days the expected results. For this situation we must thank firstly looters and then the old techniques used at the beginning of twentieth century. In some cases the scientific community is still waiting for the publication of the excavations. However these are undoubtedly common burials, strictly related to a settlement and consequently to a community. The distinction among the individuals inside the tombs is impossible since the long use of the tombs does not permit to have significant elements to

understand the situation. In addition periodical clearances were done in almost every tomb: all the data about the earlier stages are definitively lost. On the other hand, we have some ideas about the later stages. It seems that these tombs were not used by the entire community, even if individuals of any sex and age were buried inside. Instead, probably they were used as tombs by extended families, a quite different situation from that thought. It is also suspected that these buildings were used to mark a territory as controlled by those families who were buried inside, giving to ancestors the role of guardians. Using the tholoi in this way it was possible for those who controlled the territory to be legitimate by them: we can easily imagine that there was a propaganda saying that a particular area is property of some families since the origins and possibly it was given by gods or mythological heroes to those ancestors, which are still there. As we can see the Minoan society was never egalitarian for what we know. The tombs supposed as proof of the inexistence of a social ranking are in this view instead the element of distinction in the community. The burials inside tombs are not well known, but it has been noticed that there was at least a difference among them: some corpses were buried in particular places of the tholoi distinguishing them evidently from the others.

Burials can say more about a social ranking in Minoan society, for example the tombs found in Mochlos show clearly a difference among the buried since there are many particularly rich tombs near others noticeably poorer. In this case, the economical possibilities were cause of a difference. But archaeologists had no difficulties to understand the situation in this, as well in other similar cases about tombs. Another interesting point, still discussed, is the appearance of palaces and especially their origins. A question that "tormented" many archaeologists was about eventually buildings that already in ancient times, i.e. in the EM period, were used to administrate the territory and social power. Palaces in fact are very complex buildings where each area had a role in the activity done there. I will speak about palaces later, now I want to analyse if some structures, predecessors of palaces could have really existed, and in the case what we can say about them. Archaeologists strongly suspect that such buildings existed and were built where actually we can see the palaces. It is clear that palaces were built and rebuilt many times, and each time a rebuilding was done all the previous ruins and structures were destroyed or modified to suite the new building. Only in one case, Phaistos, a cement stratum covered some ancient structures, but those were of the first phase of palaces, in MM, not in EM. Malia instead is an interesting case because the explorations of the most ancient sections began in recent times and is still continuing. Here there are no modern reconstructions such as in Knossos that make things difficult, and in addition it is a smaller palace than both those mentioned above. During a research carried out in 1985, it was found a foundation deposit^[5] dating to the latest period of EM. This is already interesting, because it means that buildings that can properly be called palaces were built at an early stage, before of when it was supposed. We know that foundation deposits are present only in palatial contexts because this rite was imported from the Near East where it is largely attested and every time in conjunction with palaces of kings or seats of important administrative persons. The rite was modified only in the following times. The same deposit discovered in Malia is strictly comparable with those in Near Eastern, at least for the presence of a teapot^[6], a particular shape of jug recognisable in some reliefs such as one from Lagash, done for king Ur-Nanshe and dated around 2500 BC. The most interesting thing is however that another foundation deposit from Malia was recognised. It was discovered in 1923 but at the time it was not correctly understood. The current date for the materials found is EM II. The structures in which

the deposit was found are of the same date and were recognised, thanks also to a study of the plan of the palace, as a building enclosed to the later palace. A teapot was present also in this case. Since it is possible to recognise some continuity in the building process as well as in the rite, this means that an administrative building existed already in the Early Minoan II period, an extremely early period for the Minoan civilisation. Since there is no administrative building without administrators, and these normally have a higher social status, we can easily suppose that it was a society in which someone had a "social power" and consequently the society itself was well structured with a social differentiation. Social ranking is therefore part of Minoan society since the beginning, and probably there was also a connection, in the memory of Minoans, with Near East habits. We need to remember that the population of Crete probably came in ancient times from that area. The fact that the same orientation of walls was maintained, according with many cases of evidence in the same palace of Malia, stresses once more the possibility that the buildings were used for the same purposes.

The presence of a so developed and structured social ranking, possibly with connections with the situation in Near Eastern, during EM is not well studied. Responsible of this situation is primarily the fact that the discoveries, which give suspects and proofs, are quite recent at least in their correct understanding. The studies of Aegean antiquities always considered the aspects of social power and ranking but they were limited by the interpretation of palaces as first true appearance of a complex and advanced social system, more similar to that existing in the European modern countries rather than to ancient systems. As I said above, Minoans were, and are, considered the first "Western" society appeared in the world. It is true that the Minoan society soon evolved in an original manner beginning the development of the modern European society, but on the other hand certainly it can be compared only with ancient cultures. And nothing permits to say that Minoans were a new civilisation that appeared in the history suddenly, from the "undistinguished mass of primitive people in the obscure prehistory^[7]", without any connection with the other contemporary civilisations, and moreover developing a completely new society. The recent studies about Mesara tholoi and the early phases of palaces are making light in a society more highly developed and connected with the others than presumed, where palaces are not so surprising as we imagined.

Many aspects, such as economic situation^[8], historical position of family, appurtenance to the religious caste, and any other characteristic that permits to obtain a social power differentiated the components of Minoan society. Bureaucracy and all the various professional figures behind it were already necessary in that society since EM. During Middle Minoan, with the advent of palaces in their maturity, things changed also deeply in the Minoan society. We can recognise some older elements combined, while new appeared, others survived and others disappeared. Minoan palace was not the seat of a king with its administration for what we can understand. This does not mean that there was not a king with its administration, but that things are more complex. Palaces are the evolution of the pre-existent local administration, and therefore if we can see a prominence^[9] of Knossos in the later period, during the first stages of life of the system probably each palace controlled its own area and monopolised trade with the other areas and palaces in Crete and outside. Only at a later moment, we do not know when and why, Knossos reached the supremacy. The techniques improved however, and already at the end of EM and beginning of MM the production of pottery became more standardised and fruitful. This means that there was a change also in society and in the ranking system

adopted. In fact while before a craftsman had a good position in the society, being a member of the exclusive class of producers, than he became one in the mass that did a work as the others, a figure that can remember what happened to workers with the modern industrial revolution. In truth before what we could call a "prehistoric industrial revolution", or better an improvement in the techniques of production, the artisans had the exclusive knowledge of these techniques, and the availability of goods was dependent by their ability of working, and consequently the economy was largely dependent by them. In this period, pottery changes and less "artistic" ceramics produced more quickly appear. The craftsmen lost their restricted knowledge and therefore importance because anyone became able to do their work. Those who control the productive system are normally privileged, and in this situation the bureaucrats, people in palaces were in these circumstances. They organised the productive system trying to maximise the production while still trusting the trade were able to know which good to produce and in which quantity. Of course this situation applies to the whole range of goods, not only pottery. This last is the best known by us, but certainly other improvements were done. Palaces suggest for example better technologies in architecture too. In this way those who controlled the territory in the "old" manner lost their power gradually. The eventual possession, or at least control, of the land became insufficient to have a strong social power, because all the structures and goods were dependent by the palaces and they controlled the trade too. The traditional elite who acquired the power from agriculture and that in the Mesara Plain produced those characteristic circular tombs declined under the new power of the palatial elite. This has been studied for long time and now is currently accepted by archaeologists, what is less accepted and discussed is the reaction of the previous elite and generally the relationships between the two elites especially when the new one was young and with a scarce experience while the other was considered traditional. In my opinion there was a real fight between them, as the Kamilari tholos proves. The traditional elite in MM built this tholos, when palaces acquired their power. It is a big one and important for many reasons. I want to remember in particular an aspect that introduces a big issue: the presence of a series of models showing a group of dancers and a supposed offering scene among others. These are probably to be dated to a later period, Late Minoan, but they refer to a key element: religion and the control of this fundamental component in the society. Tholoi are in some way related to religious rites, how is not important for our purposes, but it is vital to stress the relation between the old social elite and religion and its rites. Evidently at least partially the old elite understood the importance of this element and did something to control it. The control of a territory without the control of religion, or at least of its influence in the society is not complete and subject to a rapid decline. This was why many religious elements were imported in the palaces. A well-known hypothesis supposes that in the palaces there was not a king, but a priestess. A sort of oligarchy, who owned the power, would have controlled her. Some seals in fact illustrate a goddess that gives something, a symbol of power probably, to a priestess. For the whole Middle Minoan period this "fight" continues, seeing the palatial elite as winner. This element is nevertheless fundamental to understand social ranking at that time and also the control of social power and organisation.

One of the major troubles in the studies of Minoan civilisation was the idea of a society strictly involved in religious matters^[10], and the same thought of a priestess as king in the palace follows this suggestion. We have recognised at this point a low level class, constituted by simple farmers and then also of workers under the control of the palatial bureaucracy, two different elites, one in decline and one in growth, and

an unclear sacerdotal class. This last was evidently connected with palaces in MM, but still had relationships with the traditional elite while, at the same time, it seem independent^[11]. Probably there was not at the time a clearly defined and recognised class of priests but each one was able to propose himself or herself as priest, of course with the help of one elite or belonging to one elite. Other professional priests could have been possible, for example as priest of one particular god or goddess, but they had a marginal position in the social life, when it was clear they were independent or sided towards an elite. In any case they had a privileged position.

Minoans thus used religion as a mask for political fights and interests and this deceived many skilful archaeologists and still today is a danger. Consequently social ranking was evident in the palaces' era since the first studies done but badly interpreted. The society was imagined as divided in two or three classes or levels: the simple population and workers; the palatial elite and the religious class when considered separate from the palatial elite. The buildings, as well the objects, studied by archaeologists were accordingly divided in no more than three types: settlements and cemeteries; palaces and everything connected to them and finally everything that was cultural or ritual. This view of Minoan society and this reading of social ranking in that civilisation affected also the basilar study of all the findings, even if most part of materials still need to be published, or interpreted in a more correct and thoroughly way, as for example the stratigraphical museums of Phaistos and Knossos^[12] suggest.

From the end of Middle Minoan, with the beginning of the so-called Second Palace Period, the social conflicts between the two elites we have recognised before become even more secondary while gradually new social contrasts were emerging. Certainly a system of dependencies was built among the palaces, with Knossos becoming the main centre of Crete. In addition, the catastrophes^[13] that destroyed the palaces were surely occasion of a general dissatisfaction, which probably led to open hostilities between elites and population. The palatial system however survived for long time, even if at the end it was controlled no more by Minoans, but by Mycenaean people. Probably the new elite used again religion for political purposes^[14], as there is no evidence of non-natural destructions and the religious role of palace still continued.

It can be useful at this point to think to the book that at the present time constitutes a good introduction^[15] to the prehistoric civilisations of Greece: Dickinson's "The Aegean Bronze Age". This is a textbook especially oriented for students as first reading to the subject. Here, already from the contents table, it is clear that all the studies of Aegean archaeology are centred mainly on three topics: the various types of materials, religion and connected topics such as burial customs, and economy. This last subject is focused considering firstly the types of materials normally found in the settlements and subsequently interpreting what their presence or absence mean during the different periods, and secondly speculating about trade starting from the diffusion of materials. Only in the conclusions it is tried a deeper analysis and interpretation of all the materials to describe the Minoan civilisation. But at the end, example this among many others possible, a hypothetic question about "what were palaces?" will still remain unanswered. And this is neither a secondary issue nor an absolutely obscure issue.

The study of a prehistoric society is never easy, but in this case it should be possible sometimes to relate materials, and structures, to the society in a wider way with not many doubts. As we have seen, it is possible to rethink Minoan civilisation from a social point of view. Minoan society was really complex; it evolved during its time and produced much more social classes and levels than previously suspected.

Furthermore the interactions among these probably were extremely variable, with fights and alliances resulted from the political conveniences of the time. Palaces were far from being simple seats of chiefs or other powerful people. They were dynamic and complex organisations, later engaged in a series of dependencies among themselves, that controlled the local economy, the trade with the other areas in Crete and outside, and the local territory at least in two ways: through the use (and control) of religion and through the control of food^[16]. The society was also at the same way complex, for example Linear A archives suggest that there were people able to write in palaces. This means that there were many different functions, and therefore social levels, inside the palatial administration, and maybe also external workers had different statuses according to their specific work. It seems that a hard work is waiting archaeologists.

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Notes:

^[1] Such as the already remembered Egyptians or the Mesopotamic civilisations.

^[2] Palaces were considered as the signal that there were at least two social classes. In truth palaces can say more if well interpreted.

^[3] At least for the Mesara Plain communities.

^[4] They were also interpreted as ossuaries, but the difference has no effect on our purposes.

^[5] Minoan foundation deposits were the argument of my thesis, from which I took some notices. The only description of the Malia's deposit is by Pelon - reference.

^[6] It is a particular ceramic vessel so-called for its shape that remembers a teapot. It was a jug, not a teapot in modern sense.

^[7] Here I am interpreting and mixing some common senses about the humanity during prehistory and about the mythological view of the born of our civilisation. These things fortunately were common in the past, but still today someone could have similar view even if everyone denies. For example, during World War II the superiority of Europeans was for many a fact. And today, outside the scientific community, the association between the words "prehistory" and "primitive" is not rare.

^[8] For example the already remembered tombs of Mochlos suggest a social ranking caused by this difference.

^[9] Colin MacDonald, curator of the excavations in Knossos, has described Knossos as "*primus inter pares*" among the other palaces.

^[10] Like a theocracy.

^[11] Peak sanctuaries are old traditional cult areas never clearly controlled by one of the two elites, at least for their distance from the towns.

^[12] In these museums, more storage rooms than exhibitions, the most part of materials are unpublished if not also unstudied. Of course in Crete there are many more materials that wait to be published, especially in the local museums.

^[13] Here I am referring to natural catastrophes such as (but not only) Thera eruption.

^[14] Trying to impose their control of Crete as "the will of gods", for example. Minoans were evidently sensible to religious matters.

^[15] This book could be considered a "*summa*" of the studies in Aegean archaeology and for this reason it is useful to understand the approach of archaeologists towards "social" in Minoan civilisation.

^[16] Branigan identified the *kouloures* as granaries and apart from this he stressed the early evidence that the palaces had an important storage function.

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