

THE HOUSEHOLD SHRINE IN THE HOUSE OF THE RHYTA AT PSEIRA

Pseira, a Minoan town with an occupation from Final Neolithic to Late Minoan III, was investigated by a collaboration between the writer and Costis Davaras between 1984 and 1992.¹ The settlement was on a small island off the coast of northeast Crete. Its architecture was divided into irregular blocks of buildings that were organized around a town square, or *plateia*, and it was traversed by streets that provided easy access between different parts of the site. Pseira was a large and prosperous town with about sixty buildings at the height of its prosperity, in LM IB.

At the southern tip of the main peninsula that held the oldest part of the community was Block AF, a section of the Minoan town with a history going back into the Early Bronze Age. The northern building in Block AF was one of the latest additions to the area at the southern tip of the Pseira peninsula before the town's destruction at the end of LM IB (Pl. XXXIVa). It used the existing east wall of Building AU as its western outside wall, and it was constructed between Building AU (to the west) and other pre-existing rooms to the south. The new building had only four rooms, AF 8 and 9 on a higher terrace at the west, and AF 6 and 7 on a lower terrace at the east. The building had two doors. One led into AF 8 from the north, and the second one provided access to Room AF 6 from the east. No communication between the two terraces was possible at the ground floor level.

The two western spaces (AF 8 and AF 9) were divided by a mudbrick wall. The north part of AF 8 was very poorly preserved, partly as a result of the partial destruction of the building in LM IB and partially because later residents, from LM II-III, had lived in the ruins of the building and had cleaned out some of the rubble from the ground floor spaces.

On the lower eastern terrace, Room AF 6 was at the south. It had a door in the east wall that connected the space with a street that ran along the east side of the building. An interior door opened into Room AF 7 to the north. AF 7 had no other doorway.

Room AF 6 was a kitchen. It had a hearth at the southeast corner with a cooking pot *in situ* at the southwest corner and a bench along the southern wall. A mortar was in the bedrock in the northwest corner. Stones with smoothed faces from grinding were near the center of the room, and stone hand tools were present as well. Room AF 7 was found empty, and it may have been a storage room or pantry, a space for a wooden staircase, or both.

A substantial amount of evidence for cult activities comes from objects that fell into the downstairs rooms from the upper story. Among these objects were pieces of more than ten rhyta (Pl. XXXV). Some of them were local East Cretan products (PS 3656, 3660, 3661), while others were imported Knossian vases decorated in the Marine Style (PS 3659) and other related styles in the Special Palatial Tradition (PS 3668, 3662). Along with the rhyta were pieces of several other important clay vases, a marble chalice, many pieces of a bull-shaped vessel (Pl. XXXV, no. PS 3643), and small fragments of lime plaster from plastered walls. Two pithoi with Linear A inscriptions also come from this building (Pl. XXXVIa).² The building also contained a large number of cups.

This rhyton hoard is one of three such hoards from Pseira. The hoards are all from LM IB, and they have several points in common.

The best-known rhyton hoard from Pseira was found by Richard Seager in 1906 (Pl. XXXVIb-c).³ It comes from Building BQ, at the foot of the Grand Staircase that leads

1 P. BETANCOURT and C. DAVARAS (eds), *Pseira I-IV* (1995-1999).

2 C.R. FLOYD, "Fragments of Two Pithoi with Linear A Inscriptions from Pseira," *Kadmos* 34 (1995) 34-38.

3 R.B. SEAGER, *Excavations of the Island of Pseira* (1910).

up from the Pseira harbor into the Minoan town. The hoard has been recently re-published.⁴ The rhyta were made in several forms, but they can all be classed together as rhyta because of the presence of holes in the bases, made before firing, so that liquid would pour out steadily through the bottom as it was poured in at the mouth.

The following objects came from the deposit:

1. A basket-shaped rhyton decorated with double axes
2. Two piriform rhyta decorated with dolphins
3. Several other rhyta
4. A jar decorated with ivy
5. A lid decorated with double axes
6. A bull-shaped vessel
7. A triton shell.⁵

Few details of the context for this hoard were published by Seager when he excavated it, and the architecture of Building BQ is too poorly preserved to reconstruct the plan. Only part of one room is still preserved because of topographic changes that have taken place since antiquity including a rise in sea level and considerable erosion at this part of the site. One can only say that the building was at the beach, that it was destroyed in LM IB, and that at the time of its destruction the hoard of fancy ceramics was in storage with some vessels nested inside others.

The third rhyton hoard comes from Building BS/BV (Pl. XXXIVb).⁶ This structure is the largest building known from Pseira. It occupies the entire northern side of the town square. The building, which may have been the home of the town's ruler, was destroyed along with the rest of the town in LM IB. The vases in the hoard were very fragmentary. They came from the western wing of the building, in an eroded deposit that fell on both sides of the structure's west wall. The deposit included substantial numbers of sherds from LM IB, showing that most of it came from the use of the building rather than from ceiling or walls, but stones and other material from the construction of this building were mixed with the deposit as well.

The following objects were in this second rhyton hoard:

1. Pieces of seven rhyta, including one cup rhyton
2. A horn from a bull-shaped vessel
3. A base for a marble chalice (Pl. XXXVIId-e)
4. Several tripod offering tables (Pl. XXXVIId-e)
5. A complete triton shell.

The three rhyton hoards have several points in common. In all cases, the hoards were found inside buildings within the town. They all included several different types of rhyta. All three hoards also included a bull-shaped vessel. Triton shells were present in all three contexts. Stone chalices were present in two of the hoards. Bits of lime plaster were present in the House of the Rhyta and in Building BS/BV, and in the latter case three-dimensional modeling and traces of red and blue paint indicate they were part of relief frescoes. The contexts all suggest religious associations and ceremonies involving exotic objects.

The situations in Building BS/BV and Block AF are particularly interesting because they were excavated in modern times with careful recording of the contexts. In both cases, it was

4 P.P. BETANCOURT and E.S. BANOÜ, "The Pottery, Building BQ," in P.P. BETANCOURT and C. DAVARAS, *Pseira IV* (1999) 134-136.

5 D.S. REESE, "The Triton Shell, Building BQ," in P.P. BETANCOURT and C. DAVARAS, *Pseira IV* (1999) 136.

6 C.R. FLOYD, *Pseira III. The Plateia Building* (1998) especially 208-209.

clear that the objects were originally upstairs. In BS/BV, the objects were all in a room above the extreme western side of this large building. The room had apparently had a plaster floor as well as painted walls.

In Block AF, the ceremonial objects had fallen from above along with many large stone slabs that had been used to pave the upper floor. They had fallen onto both ground floor terraces in this small building, indicating that the ceremonial spaces were over the entire part of the upstairs area, not just in one small upstairs room. In this case, apparently much of the entire upstairs area contained ceremonial objects.

In both AF and BS/BV, the upstairs had been lavishly decorated with plastered walls that apparently included wall paintings. For AF, both a wall with mud plaster covered with whitewash and a surface with lime plaster can be recognized, and for BS/BV two separate plastered surfaces are recognizable, one of which had relief frescoes. The buildings had obviously both received special care in their decoration.

In the House of the Rhyta, one of the most remarkable architectural features is the large and well-equipped kitchen. In fact, this is the only kitchen discovered on the ground floor of a building at Pseira (in BS/BV, the kitchen was upstairs, as it may have been in many Pseiran houses). One can note that the kitchen in AF 6 could not communicate with the ground floor rooms AF 8 or AF 9 because they were on a higher terrace and separated by a wall, and one must suppose a ladder or wooden staircase, perhaps in AF 7, would provide access to the upper floor. Without communication, the dining area cannot have been in either AF 8 or AF 9, and the kitchen itself had no room for a dining area: a bench and the hearth filled the south wall, a mortar was in the floor at the northwest, the center of the room had a permanent quern set into the floor, and doors were in the other two walls. The dining room must have been upstairs, along with the exotic cult objects, and the kitchen was deliberately kept separate from whatever activities took place in the upstairs space. Probably the kitchen provided food for the worshipers, and it was surely large enough to provide for more than the residents of the small building itself.

The building also had an unusually large amount of storage. A large deposit of pithos fragments was in a deposit at the north of the block, with fragments of at least six or eight large pithoi. The pithos deposit was just north of the building where it had been deposited by a combination of the building's partial destruction in LM IB and the actions of the LM II-III residents when they camped out in the ruins of the building for a short period at the end of the Bronze Age and cleared the rubble out of Room AF 8 to make a crude living space. These pithoi, including two examples with Linear A inscriptions, represent one of the rare instances of literacy at Pseira. They also indicate a considerable amount of storage for such a small building.

It is here suggested that the House of the Rhyta was one of several buildings that played a role in the religious life of the community at Pseira. That role probably involved feasting, with food prepared in the large ground-floor kitchen, kept deliberately away from the more formal and sacred activities that took place upstairs. Cult practices involving large numbers of rhyta continued into successive periods in the Late Bronze Age, as is demonstrated by an interesting religious structure at Ras Shamra with 15 rhyta, including Mycenaean and Minoan examples.⁷

The activities involved rhyta as well as other objects. New light has recently been shed on the use of rhyta by the analysis of the contents absorbed by the clay of an example from LM III.⁸ Chemical traces suggesting barley, beer, and wine indicate the vessel was used for alcoholic beverages, and the straining, flavoring, or funneling of a sacred beverage from one container into another is a likely activity. The consuming of alcoholic beverage in connection with feasting fits well with the evidence for the large amount of storage and the large size of

7 J. MALLET, "Le temple aux rhytons," in M. YON (ed.), *Ras Shamra Ougarit III, le centre de la ville, 38e-44e campagnes* (1987) 213-248; M. YON, "Les rhytons du sanctuaire," *ibid.*, 343-350.

8 G. WALBERG, "164. Rhyton," in Y. TZEDAKIS and H. MARTLEW (eds), *Minoans and Mycenaean. Flavours of their Times* (1999) 171.

the kitchen that could be used to prepare a meal for consumption in connection with the other cult activities. It is worth mentioning that the building, like most Minoan structures, held many cups, both undecorated and decorated.

Of the sixty buildings that were present at Pseira in LM IB, we now have evidence for a special cult activity involving bull-shaped figurines, triton shells, chalices, and groups of rhyta in three different structures. One can suggest that several spaces in a Minoan town were set aside for the special religious observances of the community that involved several rhyta of different designs. Since the objects in Building BQ were definitely in storage, one can also suggest that these observances were periodic, taking place at special times during the year, and that the cult objects would be stored until the appropriate time for the ceremonies. That these ceremonies involved groups of worshipers is suggested by the large number of ceremonial objects as well as by the need for large-scale storage and a substantial kitchen. It is also clear that either separate ceremonies were used for different parts of the population, or the objects from several locations were carried, perhaps in a procession, to a central meeting place where the communal part of the ceremony would occur. In either case, part or all of the ceremony must have involved the upstairs space in the northern building in Block AF. The religious deposit in Block AF and the other rhyton hoards from Pseira make a good contribution to our information about Minoan ritual, even though we still have little knowledge of the essential details of the belief-system.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Pl. XXXIVa	Plan of the House of the Rhyta at Pseira.
Pl. XXXIVb	Rhyta from Building BS/BV.
Pl. XXXV	Rhyta from the House of the Rhyta.
Pl. XXXVIa	Pithos fragments with Linear A inscriptions.
Pl. XXXVIb-c	Rhyta from Building BQ.
Pl. XXXVI d-e	Clay offering table and marble chalice from Building BS/BV.