

MINOAN BAETYLS: BETWEEN FUNERARY RITUALS AND EPIPHANIES

Presso il 'tuo' muro, Clelia,
ho ricantato la strofe
agli *skoutelia*

Some years ago, re-analyzing the theme of the symbolic meaning of the baetyl in the Minoan world, P. Warren¹ has clearly reconstructed a “baetylic ritual,” stressing its ecstatic aspect, and he has reaffirmed the evocative and epiphanic value of the baetyl as “vehicle for possession by divine power,” in a context which stressed the idea of fertility. Going back to the history of the problem of the sacred stones, starting from Evans (of the oval stones or baetyls with a kneeling figure), he managed to gather an iconographic documentation on nodules, gold rings and stone seals, all of them related to neo- and post-Palatial periods. The English friend and colleague has also repropounded in his study, which remains the most complete on the subject, a catalogue of the few real baetyls rescued in archeological levels,² whose forms were not always homogeneous and with different grades of likelihood, starting from the oldest specimen, of the EM III in Vasiliki, up to the that of the house of the archaic period in Aghios Georgios in Lasithi, a catalogue which is not our purpose to analyze here. It will be enough, in our perspective, to highlight that none of them came from a funerary context, and that they were always single specimens and that their collocation – where the context did not rise doubts about it – varied from streets (as at Gournià), to palaces’ courts (as at Mallia), to sanctuaries (as at Philakopi). It is surely regretful that there are still perplexities about the oldest specimen, that of Vasiliki, put in a sort of small paved *exedra*, with remains of three small stones around it.³ But I think that Peter is right when he considers it as a baetyl.

Recalling the problem of the cults of stalactites, already mentioned at the beginning of the 30’s,⁴ the English scholar underlines the continuum which links the aniconic figures to the baetyls, reminding us, besides the well known LM IIIB Fetishes from the Little Palace of Knossos,⁵ also of the specimen from the Middle Minoan shrine in the settlement of Koumasa, which Xanthoudides had proposed to identify as a baetyl.⁶ With some references to the Phoenician world (we could add that of the tripillar shrine of Kommos)⁷ and to the cult of Cybele, besides the witnesses of the Greek and Roman literary sources (in primis the glossa of Hesychius *baitulos*), finally, Warren considers legitimate the use of the term for the specimen of the Minoan age, too, and identify in the Rhea of historical times “the direct descendant of the great Minoan goddess.”⁸

As far as I know, the additions of the last decade are not numerous. As far the iconographic documentation is concerned, it is important to quote the new reconstruction proposal which P. Militello has given for the fresco of the adoring kneeling woman (just beside a baetyl) in the hieròn of the Villa of H. Triada.⁹ Agreements with the baetylic hypothesis already expressed by Warren then came for the small clay’s symplegma found in the large

- 1 P. WARREN, “Of Baetyls,” *OpAth* XVIII (1990) 192-206. The english translation has been supervised by my friend Peter Warren that I would like to thank for the courtesy.
- 2 WARREN (*supra* n. 1) 202 ff.
- 3 WARREN (*supra* n. 1) 202-203.
- 4 N. PLATON, “Peri tis en Kriti latrias ton stalaktiton,” *ArchEph* (1930) 160-168.
- 5 *PM* II 520, fig. 198 (346).
- 6 S. XANTHOUDIDES, *The vaulted Tombs of Mesara* (1924) 50, pl. XXXIII (high, left, n. 1018).
- 7 J.W. SHAW, “Phoenicians in Southern Crete,” *AJA* 93 (1989) 165-183, fig. 4.
- 8 WARREN (*supra* n. 1) 206. About the problem of the baetyls in historical time: U. KRON, “Heilige Steine,” in *Kotinos. Festschrift für E. Simon* (1992) 56-70.
- 9 *Haghia Triada* I 250-253 and 280, pl. 2.

tholos tomb of Kamilari, which, in the past, Levi had proposed to identify as that of a human figure drinking from a small fountain.¹⁰ As far as the real baetyls are concerned, S. Hood has published a second specimen from Gournià (that he had already mentioned to Warren),¹¹ while a rectangular block beside a bench inside VIII room in the rural villa of Pitsidia, does not present the morphological characteristics of a baetyl, although the place has been interpreted as a domestic sanctuary.¹² On the other hand a find of great interest is the trapezoidal altar where a baetyl was incorporated, a discovery made by Th. Iliopoulos at Kephala, Vasiliki, inside a sacred complex of outstanding importance probably dating back to LM IIIC and in use till the Protogeometric period.¹³ This extraordinary *omphalòdis bomòs* is a precious chronological link between the data of the Second and those of the First millennium B.C., logically supporting the connections proposed by Warren.

A new perspective is now opened by our findings in the last excavation campaigns in the area of the necropolis of H. Triada, where, for the first time, we could demonstrate the involvement of the baetyl in the funerary sphere and acquire precious details of the nature of some funerary rituals. Continuing with the approach, which we have followed in H. Triada since 1977, to re-excavate what had been already excavated, we decided to restudy the large tholos and the connected building group, brought to light in 1904¹⁴ (some of them afterwards re-buried). A study of the Stefani notebooks had, in the first place, allowed us to ascertain two lower strata of depositions, neatly divided by a level of sterile earth: the older dated back perhaps to the end of EM I and to EM IIA, the most recent to EM III and especially to MM IA. A third stratum of depositions, at a higher level, contained isolated furniture of the protopalatial period (MM IB–MM II).¹⁵ A double architectural phase (probably all in the MM IA) was distinguishable for the so-called annexes,¹⁶ destined to hold the pottery necessary for the ritual or for the offering and, later, transformed into ossuaries.

The full cleaning of the monuments has allowed us, first of all, to recover a section of the masonry on the North side of the tholos, to ascertain exactly the inner diameter (8.70 m), and to delineate an eleventh room in the annexes area and to isolate a pair of supporting walls on the uphill side (Pl. LXXIIa).

Bringing back to light the small rooms near the tomb, on the South side (the so-called *camerette*), and analyzing the adjoining area (disturbed by five or six previous soundings, but also by dumpings and pits dating back from the LM I to the Venetian and Ottoman ages), we could reconstruct an architectural (and ritual) succession through five or six phases all dating back to the MM IA, succession which, until now, has no parallels in the whole island.

Of the small rooms on the south of the tholos (1–10 group),¹⁷ with red stucco floors and walls, some had been found completely empty by the Stefani, others, instead, were entirely full of pottery, among which the prevalent shape was the small jug with barnacle or *à la barbotine* decoration, MMIB, and there were also materials of MM IA.¹⁸ It was certain that the rooms were constructed while the pottery of this last phase was already in use, when, cleaning the cavity between a partition of two of them, we were surprised to find a deposit of a dozen of MM IA vases, missed by the first excavators. A sort of deep trilobate handleless cup is

10 WARREN (*supra* n. 1) 201, n. 46; now D. LEFÈVRE-NOVARO, this volume. About the hypothesis of the excavator: D. LEVI, "La tomba a tholos di Kamilari presso a Festòs," *ASAtene* 39-40 (1961-62) 69, fig. 85 ("una specie di fontanina cilindrica svasata verso la bocca a stretta vasca").

11 S. HOOD, "A Baetyl at Gournia?," *Ariadni* 5 (1989) 17-21.

12 D. CHATZI VALLIANOU, *ArchDelt* 44 (1989) *Chron* B'2, 439. I thank N. Cucuzza for the suggestion about the datum of Pitsidia.

13 T. ILIOPOULOS, "A Preliminary Report on the Discovery of a Temple Complex of the Dark Ages at Kephala Vasilikis," in *Cyprus-Dodecanese-Crete* 301-313.

14 E. STEFANI and L. BANTI, "La grande tomba a tholos di Haghia Triada," *ASAtene* 13-14 (1930-31) 155-251.

15 M. CULTRARO, *La grande tomba a tholos di Haghia Triada: una revisione* (Diss., Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene, 1994).

16 See *contra* M. CULTRARO (*supra* n. 15) who links the later phase of the annexes with the last depositions in the tholos.

17 J.S. SOLES, *The prepalatial cemeteries at Mochlos and Gournia and the house tombs of Bronze Age Crete, Hesperia*, suppl. XXIV (1992) 116-119.

18 STEFANI and BANTI (*supra* n. 14) 172-181. See also A. ZOIS, "Festiaka," *ArchEph* (1965) 72-75.

particularly elegant, with simple decoration in white and red on black (Pl. LXXIIb). The small rooms in question, probably like the annexes, were used as votive deposits, destined to preserve the furnishings or the paraphernalia necessary for specific ceremonies connected with the use of the tomb.

A third group of small rooms (*a-c*) to the west of the previous one, but with a different orientation, was also excavated by E. Stefani, and mentioned in a couple of lines in the report of the excavation, probably because empty.¹⁹

On the basis of the findings both in the annexes and in the small rooms 1-10, M. Cultraro, taking up some suggestions from the first editor, has recently attempted to reconstruct the rites in honour of the dead, identifying the main one as that of the libation (documented by the great number of small jugs and conical cups, the so-called *skoutelia*).²⁰

Our investigations began from these data and acquisitions, in 1997. Firstly, a further small room (*alpha*) was discovered in a bad state of preservation, on the south side and between the two groups 1-10 and *a-c* (Pl. LXXIIa). It represented probably the oldest building, followed only the tomb, apparently isolated and incompatible, topographically speaking, with the other two groups of small rooms. Its foundations lay in EM strata (with materials both of Pyrgos and H. Onouphrios style), but some MM IA fragments can be date this small room *alpha* back to the beginning of this latter period. In any case it is reasonable not to affirm anything about its function.

Bringing back to light the three small rooms *a-c*, we were able to establish that they were placed on a older structure, preserved for more than 7.50 m, which could perhaps have reached a length of more than 11 m, if it could be possible to reverse the dimension of the south side on the northern half of the wall; it was about 1 m thick with a height up to 50 cm on the two rows. Inside this structure, which is surely of MM IA date, there were fixed two rounded stones, fallen towards the inner side of the wall, about 50-60 cm high²¹ (Pl. LXXIIc, LXXIIIa). These stones, which we believe can be identified as baetyls, were about 2 m apart from each other, and they were both on the west side of the wall, whose alignment was, in turn, 18.60 m distant from the centre of the tholos.

Their position led us think, symbolically, of the jambs of a door, which could recall those of the entrance (even if narrower) of the adjacent tomb. If this suggestion were right, we could even suppose that the baetyls delimited a real boundary “threshold” between the living and the dead world.

A consequent hypothesis is that believers and relatives gathered, probably on particular occasions, in front of the wall with the baetyls, a sort of Minoan “weeping wall,” remembering not theirs sins, but their dead.

There they would have celebrated some ceremonies in honour of the dead: staying on this side of the wall and looking toward the tomb, they could anyhow indicate the boundary between life and death (a boundary, as known, ambivalent and complementary in several prehistoric societies, widely connected with the fecundity-fertility sphere, and the baetyl is indirectly associated with it). It is important to stress, from a chronological point of view, that such a ritual in front of the wall with the baetyls would be documented only from the second level of depositions in the tomb, MM IA and furthermore, not from the beginning of this phase.

The furnishings used for these ceremonies, judging from the abundance of the pottery found in the spaces outside the tholos (both in the old and new excavations), were probably stored in the different groups of rooms set round the tomb.

It is logical to suppose that they had started storing such furnishings in the rooms directly beside the tholos (in the so-called annexes). When the tomb became full with bones, the rooms were transformed into ossuaries and the new pottery had to be stored elsewhere.

19 STEFANI and BANTI (*supra* n. 14) 152, fig. 3.

20 M. CULTRARO, “Le brocchette dei vivi per la sete dei morti,” in *Πεπραγμένα του Η' Διεθνούς Κρητολογικού Συνεδρίου, Ηράκλειον, 9-15 Σεπτ. 1996* (in press).

21 South baetyl: 0,50 x 0,63 x 0,26; North baetyl: 0,59 x 0,45 x 0,20.

In the course of MM IA, because of a probable landslide of the slope, a good half of the wall with the baetyls was filled in with earth. The three small rooms *a-c* were built, immediately after, on the southern half of it, and one of the baetyls was incorporated in the outside north-western corner of the new structure (most likely, this baetyl was left in sight together with the other). These new rooms have to be considered functionally equivalent to the so-called annexes, namely as small chapels for deposits inside the cemetery area. Gradually, the available space for the depositions in the three rooms *a-c* ran out, and probably the stored furnishings had to be moved, and other small rooms were built (the group 1-10), still in the course of MM IA. The furnishings already stored in the rooms *a-c* were probably put inside this new group. But, in this case as well, the space was soon filled up, and they probably began to clear out the contents of some of the rooms 1-10, to give space to the pottery of the more recent period, namely, MM IB. The furnishings to be moved, all of MM IA, were probably stored and protected in a ellipsoidal pit, purposely arranged behind the southern half of the wall with the baetyls already filled in with earth. The identification of the digging and the complete removal of the pottery contained within it, have allowed us to recover 217 inventoried vases (complete and fragmentary), whose forms are vital for ascertaining the nature, the articulation and evolution of the ritual. We have already mentioned that it comprised some libations, and that the furnishings for the purpose were then stored in the proper places (sequentially, in the so-called annexes, in the small rooms *a-c* and in the group 1-10). The typology of the recovered vases in the new deposit tells us that the ceremonies had to be much more complex than simple libations.

The shape most represented, including the bases, is that of the conical cup (*skouteli*), whose number in the deposit was of more than 500 (Pl. LXXIIIb). Almost the same number of items (about 120) consists of small jugs (with a typical pattern with an ellipsoidal shield on the shoulder) (Pl. LXXIIIc) and to small shallow bowls (Pl. LXXIIId). It is possible in this way to guess at the existence of an ideal liturgical set composed of a small jug, four *skoutelia* and a small shallow bowl.

However, there is a varied typology of vases for pouring (besides the small jugs, there are 'teapots,' small tankards, side-spouted jars and even the so-called sauceboat, of Helladic derivation) (Pl. LXXIIIe-g, LXXIVa). We wonder if containers so functionally different were used to pour (or to mix) only one kind of liquid; we also wonder about the meaning (only typological and decorative?) of motives inside the ellipsoidal shield present on the shoulders of the small jugs (stylized shrubs, stars, zigzags, oblique strokes, etc.). The presence of such shapes also in the levels of the settlement allows to state that the vase did not have ritual purposes only. The simple containers such as the *stamnoi* (Pl. LXXIVb) would have had a different function from that of the small and bigger open-spouted jars. As far as the shapes for drinking are concerned, to the widespread *skoutelia* we must add bowls and small cups with crinkled lip (Pl. LXXIVc), which could also indicate, with their clear qualitative and quantitative difference, distinction (of rank?) in the owner believers.

The new datum seems to be, together with the rite of the libation, the consumption of food (fruits, bread loaves, or other things, but not meat, as animal bones are lacking in the deposit). It is difficult to interpret, in this connection, the report by the older excavators who claimed that human bones were put together with animal bones (even a horse jaw!) in room H of the so-called annexes.²² The shapes of cooking pots identified by us in the deposit (non-tripod pots and smaller pots, milk jugs, several pieces of backing plates) let us suppose a simple boiling or heating of the liquids, and toasting or baking of bread loaves. We have also to mention a fragment of a big vessel with an open spout at the base, a kind of squeezer (together with some miniature specimens) (Pl. LXXIVd), which opens further, even if uncertain, perspectives about the use of liquids. As far as the miniature specimens are concerned, it is necessary to remember that remarkable differences exist also among the small jugs or the small open-spouted jars and even among the 'teapots,' so that it is fair to suppose that such differences marked the presence of children together with the adults. The very few specimens of *skoutelia* used as lamps could recall the idea of darkness.

22 STEFANI and BANTI (*supra* n. 14) 152; F. HALBHERR, *Notebook XIII* (1905) 12.

The last depositions left in the small rooms 1-10 date back, as said before, to MM IB; therefore, they coincide with the few depositions of the upper stratum of the tholos and also with the first moments of life of the Phaistos palace: the last devotees who stored some furnishings in the small rooms 1-10, namely, were also the witnesses of the growth of the new political-administrative structure.

But a further episode, of great ideological value, would have involved the two baetyls left in sight. In the course of MM II a paved rectangular space was constructed, unfortunately in bad condition because of a sounding by Halbherr and a Venetian pit. Since the southern wall of this space had one of the two baetyls incorporated in it, and reached the northern limit of the small room *a*, it is probable that the second baetyl, too, around which there are traces neither of slabs nor of walls left, was incorporated in the centre of the other wall along the paved area (the northern one). We should have, in this way, a space of 4.50 x 2.50 m (of more than 11 m²), with a wall at the rear to the west side and with a supposed entrance to the east, probably hypaethral, with the paving's slabs on a double level (with a stagger of few centimeters) (Pl. LXXIVe-f). In the centre of the paved area, corresponding with the difference of level, a rectangular slab presented the characteristic pattern of the series of small hollows along the edges with one in the centre, letting us think of an offering table. We should have, therefore, a sacred space, delimited by a simple parapet and with two very old baetyls incorporated in its sides, but with a significant inversion of orientation. In order to look at the baetyls and at the back of the *hieròn*, now one had to have the tomb behind, with a change of the function of the area and of the forms of the rite. The small shrine with the baetyls and the offering table in the centre of the paving have been substituted for the wall with the baetyls, in relation to the ceremonies for the dead. In the new area the believers could look at and worship the baetyls with a theophanic purpose, but could also ignore the tomb (now used for single depositions only). Therefore the same baetyls are no longer the marks of an insuperable threshold of the hereafter, and the ritual has lost its funerary connotation to take on that connected to the divinity and to its epiphany, so well documented (in a vaguely orgiastic context) by the scenes collected by P. Warren. The chronology MM II of the *hieròn*, corresponding to the highest development of the Protopalatial structures, would allow us to rely the changing of the cult and the ritual to an institutionalization and to a strong control of the cult activities exercised by the political power.

The paved area with the baetyls of MM II, until now unique of its kind, is a "public" chapel, no longer connected with rites in honour of the dead; consequently, it does not need further space for the deposition of the furnishings after the ceremonies. The change in the symbolic value of the baetyl, which seems to be documented by the new excavations at H. Triada, has probably to be linked to the deep economic, socio-political and ideological changes which marked the birth and the establishment of the Minoan Palaces.

Starting again the works in the sector of tholos A, we gathered, finally, further new elements about the religious aspect of the island. We have carried out the cleaning, drawing, and restoration of a wall about 13 m long, made of roughly polygonal stones, found by the late Cl. Laviosa in the 1970's and leaning, at the east end, on the circle of tholos A²³ (Pl. LXXIIa). It has been possible to ascertain that this wall was placed upon the stones of the tomb's circle, and, consequently, it had been constructed when the tholos was already in ruins (Pl. LXXIVg). So it could not be considered a simple terrace wall connected with the tomb structure. A lucky sounding behind this polygonal wall has allowed us to date it back to the Protogeometric age. It is possible, therefore, that the structure delimited an open space for a meeting place and for particular rituals; it is highly probable that the nearby tholos, already in ruins, suggested a cult for the ancestors. The circumstance is even more significant when we consider that with the end of LM IIIC the offerings (namely sphinxes, centaurs, and other imaginary beings,

23 C. LAVIOSA, "Saggi di scavo ad Haghia Triada," *ASAtene*, XLVII-XLVIII (1969-70) 414-415, figs 1 and 10.

besides a large number of bovid figurines) were no longer put outside, in the votive deposits of the so-called Piazzale dei Sacelli.²⁴ This possible ritual space near the tholos would document a different cult from that of the Piazzale dei Sacelli, the former substituting for the latter, although there was not a settlement context (as, in fact, in the 12th cent. B.C.).²⁵ The believers and peasants of the surrounding area went back to worship, after more than a millennium, the dead: the same dead commemoration in which the baetyls had played an important part.

Vincenzo LA ROSA

24 Now A.L. D'AGATA, *Statuine minoiche e post-minoiche dai vecchi scavi di Haghia Triada (Creta), Haghia Triada II* (1999).

25 See V. LA ROSA, "Spigolature vecchie e nuove da Haghia Triada," in *ΕΙΛΑΠΙΝΗ. Τόμος τιμητικός για τον Καθηγητή Ν. Πλατόνα* (1987) 383-387; ID., "Osservazioni sul centro di H. Triada in età TM IIIB e C," in L. ROCCHETTI (ed.) *Sybrita. La valle di Amari fra Bronzo e Ferro* (1994) 75-80.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Pl. LXXIIa Haghia Triada. General Plan of the Tholos A and the adjoining area, after the new excavations (with indication of the chronological phases) (B. Salmeri).
- Pl. LXXIIb Deep trilobate handleless cup HTR 2890 (neg. SAIA C/63567).
- Pl. LXXIIc General view of the wall with the baetyls; in the foreground, the shrine MM II (with paving's slabs); on the left, the group of small rooms *a-c*; on the right, on the back, the pit with the pottery deposit MM IA. From North/West (neg. SAIA C/65414).
- Pl. LXXIIIa Reconstructive sketch of the wall with the baetyls (G. Montali).
- Pl. LXXIIIb Conical cups (*skoutelia*) HTR 3030, 3040 and 3008 (neg. SAIA C/65590).
- Pl. LXXIIIc Small jugs HTR 3026 and 3029 (neg. SAIA C/65284).
- Pl. LXXIIId Small shallow bowl HTR 2951 (neg. SAIA C/65335).
- Pl. LXXIIIe 'Teapots' HTR 2957 and 2971 (neg. SAIA C/65329).
- Pl. LXXIIIf Side-spouted jar HTR 2983 (neg. SAIA C/65658).
- Pl. LXXIIIg Small tankard HTR 3097 (neg. SAIA C/65664).
- Pl. LXXIVa 'Sauceboat' HTR 3079 (neg. SAIA C/65507).
- Pl. LXXIVb 'Stamnos' HTR 3000 (neg. SAIA C/65469).
- Pl. LXXIVc Small cups with crinckled lip HTR 3088 and 3014 (neg. SAIA C/65665).
- Pl. LXXIVd Vessel with an open spout at the base HTR 3039 (neg. SAIA C/65252).
- Pl. LXXIVe Small shrine (with paving's slabs) which incorporated the two baetyls in the MM II period. From East- North/East (neg. SAIA C/65397).
- Pl. LXXIVf Reconstructive sketch of the wall with the baetyls and of the small shrine (G. Montali).
- Pl. LXXIVg Wall made of roughly polygonal stones partially placed upon the stones of the tholos A tomb's circle. From North/East (neg. SAIA C/67271).