Differentiated Privilege:

Villas and Palaces in the Neopalatial Cretan Aristocracy

The so-called “Minoan villas” of Neopalatial Crete have been an object of contention since Evans coined the term in 1928. It is clear from their shared architectural features (pier-and-door partitions, wall decoration, substantial storage areas, etc.) (McEnroe 1982, Nixon 1987, Niemeier 1997) and archaeological record (high-quality and imported pottery, worked and unworked metal, stone vessels, writing) (Nixon 1987) that they were the sites of aristocratic activity, versions of which also took place at the palaces. By comparing the forms that these activities took at the villas and the palaces, it is possible to hypothesize about the relationship between the palaces and the villas, and therefore also the organization of the Neopalatial aristocracy within the Minoan socio-political and economic framework. Working under the independent-state model of Neopalatial Crete, wherein the island is seen as divided into competing regions under the control of a palace, I find that these two lines of evidence indicate that the villas constituted an aristocratic stratum below but strongly connected with the palatial rulers. The villas were crucial to the functioning of the Neopalatial economy as local centres of taxation and recordkeeping, although literacy was most likely controlled by the palaces, by analogy with models of literacy in other Bronze Age Mediterranean civilizations (Trigger 2003, Baines 1983). Thus though the villas functioned largely independently as centres of recordkeeping, their access to literate individuals was ultimately dependent on the will of the palaces. Furthermore, while there is strong evidence that public religious activities took place at both the villas as well as the palaces, the sorts of rituals which took place at both locales varied. At the villas the ritual focus was on the shrine-rooms located within the structures, while at the palaces it was on the central court and their association with the peak sanctuaries (Hitchcock and Preziosi 1997). Thus the palaces seem to have maintained a monopoly on peak sanctuary worship, while allowing other forms of worship to take place at centres of lesser importance such as the villas. Overall, these lines of evidence suggest that the villas represent a substratum of the Neopalatial aristocracy, participating in public life under the purview of the palatial rulers. This model agrees with recent evaluations of redistributive economies on Crete (Christakis 2011, Earle 2011, Galaty 2011, Nakassis et al. 2011).

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