ACHAIOS

STUDIES PRESENTED TO PROFESSOR THANASIS I. PAPADOPOULOS

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A SHRINE WITHIN THE SOVEREIGN COMPLEX ON THE MYCENAEAN ACROPOLIS OF SALAMIS

YANNOS G. LOLOS

INTRODUCTION

My contribution to this volume in honour of Professor Athanasios I. Papadopoulos, one of the senior prehistorians, for many years, in the Department of History and Archaeology at the University of Ioannina, aims at highlighting the form and role of a small sanctuary or shrine established inside a building of primary importance, i.e. an elite residence, on the Mycenaean acropolis at Kanakia on the southwest coast of the island of Salamis, where a systematic excavation, sponsored by the University, has been progressing, under the direction of the present writer, since 2000.

THE ACROPOLIS OF KANAKIA: CHRONOLOGY AND STATUS

Of all prehistoric island sites known in the Saronic and Argolic Gulfs, Kanakia on Salamis and Kolonna on Aegina display, in their material culture, the longest record of habitation that can be traced back to the Late/Final Neolithic period. Along with other settlement-sites in the island group of the Argo-Saronic area, like Kolonna and Lazarides on Aegina and Choriza on Hydra (ancient Hydrea), Kanakia appears to have emerged as the major urban centre on Salamis in the Late Mycenaean period, reaching its floruit in the Late Helladic III B period, i.e. in the 13th century B.C.

On the evidence of the pottery retrieved from the destruction/abandonment layers in all sectors of our ten-year excavation at Kanakia, the end of the habitation on the coastal acropolis can be securely placed at the beginning of the Late Helladic III C early phase, shortly after 1200 B.C., i.e. within the broader horizon of the collapse of centralized power, with its various manifestations, in the palace-states of Mycenaean Greece.

On the upper terraces of the coastal acropolis, an array of large compounds belonging to the sovereign or palatial building complex, demarcated by a peribolos wall on the north and south slopes and apparently planned and controlled by the local Late Mycenaean elite, have been revealed by the excavations of the University of Ioannina.

In these are included: the main palatial building (Building Gamma), of residential character (FIGS.1-3), occupying a large area and comprising a maze of rooms, passageways and other spaces, with a double megaron as a core; Building Delta; and the Eastern Complex, consisting of Buildings IA-IB-ID, with a main access through an unusual fortified gate, and functioning in association with Buildings Delta and Gamma; into its plan are incorporated working areas, storage areas and subsidiary rooms.

On the basis of the location, size and character of the acropolis, in conjunction with the evidence for its external relations and maritime contacts, this major Mycenaean settlement-site at Kanakia can be identified with Strabo’s “Old Salamis” (Geographica, IX.1.9), also known under the prosyonym of Kychreia from an inscription (I.G. II(2), 1035), of the advanced 1st century B.C., from the Acropolis of Athens. It can be regarded, with every reasonable certainty, as the seat of the naval kingdom of Salamis, well-known from epic tradition, i.e. from Homer and Hesiod, and flourishing under the legendary Aiacid dynasty and Ajax, son of Telamon.

BUILDING GAMMA: ARCHITECTURE AND FUNCTION

The main unit of the palatial complex (Building Gamma, in FIGS.1-3) is contiguous to Building Delta and extends on an E.-W. axis, on the saddle between the two heights, that form the mass of the acropolis at Kanakia. It covers, on present estimates, an area of 750 m² and comprises, up to now, 47 rooms and other spaces, most of which are seen to be arranged at five (5) successive levels. Its length exceeds 45 m., while its greatest width is 28 m.

Incorporated into Building Gamma are living quarters, including chambers with stone-built benches or beds, storerooms, auxiliary spaces and porter’s lodges at the two main entrances (east and north).

Of crucial importance with regard to the “ideological” prominence of Building Gamma is the twin megaron (FIG.1), in the deepest (western) part of the compound, consisting of two identical elements. Each one, measuring 14x4m. (inner dimensions), is further divided

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2 Marabea 2010b.
into a main hall (11x4m.), intended primarily for large gatherings and feasts, and a rear room or chamber.

A last dramatic development in the history of Building Gamma is no doubt the construction of blocking walls sealing its three (3) “defensive” entrances (east, north and south), immediately after evacuation, and certainly marking its abandonment, soon after 1200 B.C., and eventually desertion.

THE SHRINE: DESCRIPTION AND IDENTIFICATION

In 2007, during the clearing of a group of rooms close to the north entrance of Building Gamma, supervised by Dr. Christina Marabea, a small room, for which the older Greek word soúda would seem to be especially appropriate, caught our attention, on account of its placement in the north wing, narrowness and internal organization.

The room is set against the north exterior wall of Building Gamma, arranged on a N.E.-S.W. axis and flanked on its east side by a broad corridor or passage that gives access to the interior of the main building from the north (FIGS.1-2).

The room, under discussion, is oblong, roughly rectangular in plan, tapering towards the southwest end, with an entrance having a breadth of 0.90m. (FIGS. 1, 4-5). As regards its inner dimensions, its length is 3.50m., with a maximum width of 1.40m. on its northeast side. Its floor is covered with lime plaster, well-preserved in places (FIG.4). The room is divided by a double row of small stones into two parts, i.e. a main inner space and a porch, characterized by the existence of fixed installations (FIGS.4, 6): a carefully built low semicircular platform, probably an offering table, against its west wall, and an almost square limestone block, perhaps an altar or sacred stone (?), opposite it, close to the east wall.

There are several architectural and other features as well as further considerations pointing to the argument that this tiny room must have had a special (cultic) function within the main palatial building on the acropolis of Kanakia:

1. The position of the room within the north wing of Building Gamma (FIGS.1-2) is crucial, in close proximity to its north entrance and easily accessible from the corridor or passageway adjacent to it, immediately after entry.

2. Its autonomy within the arrangement of rooms and other spaces of the north wing of the building is particularly noteworthy, with its narrow entrance unusually approached and perhaps symbolically demarcated by a low ramp.

3. Its small size is indeed striking. Its narrowness and internal arrangement preclude its use as a living quarter, a working area, or even a place for storage.

4. The special treatment of its floor and also of the floor of the adjacent passageway, through the application of lime plaster, is an element of cleanliness, refinement and differentiation in relation to the surrounding rooms. Actually, this is one of only a few areas inside Building Gamma to have been embellished with a white floor – the others being the state halls of the north and south megaron, with hard white stuccoed floors, and the rear room (thalamos) of the north megaron, with a white washed floor.

5. Its bipartite, somewhat intricate, form is peculiar, consisting of an inner secluded space, perhaps an adytum, and a front part furnished with specialized fixtures (FIG. 6), which may be claimed to have been associated with ritual activities. It is also of interest that the low semicircular construction in particular is closely paralleled by a stuccoed semicircular platform, attached to the west wall of the long hall of the north megaron (FIG.1).

A problem is posed by the scarcity of movable finds from the room in question. The room is likely to have been virtually emptied of its cult objects and other valuable contents during the evacuation process and prior to the intentional blocking of the three (3) entrances of the central palatial building.

From the destruction/abandonment layer inside the room come the following finds: a quantity of potsherds of LH IIIB2-IIIC: early date, three possible stone implements and a complete bronze strip, found in situ on the low platform in the front part, almost in touch with the west wall (FIGS.7-8).

To these may be added a miniature clay figurine of the Phi type (H. 5cm., in FIG.9), that lay amidst fallen stones immediately east of the room’s entrance, just above the floor of the adjacent passageway. It may be assigned to E. B. French’s first group of miniature Phis and finds close analogies in versions of the “cocoon” type from Mycenaean cult buildings see Whittaker 1997, 17-20.

For variations in the details of the fixed installations (platforms or other features) in Mycenaean cult buildings see Whittaker 1997, 18-19 (with references).

A similar well-cut block is found on the right side of the entrance of a much later cult building (Building C) at the site of Mitrou in East Lokris (van de Moortel 2009, Fig. 3, 7-8). My thanks are due to Prof. A. van de Moortel for drawing my attention to this feature.
sites on the Greek Mainland and from the Sanctuary of Aphaia on Aegina.

Of greater value for the interpretation of the function of the area in question is the bronze strip (FIGS.7-8) that was placed on the low platform, as a votive offering, by the last tenants of Building Gamma.

Thin bronze strips or bronze blade cut-outs, of votive character, are well attested at earlier Minoan peak sanctuaries in Crete and also at Agios Georgios tou Younou on Kythera and Troullos on Keos. With regard to the Mycenaean Mainland bronze strips are reported to have been found in deposits in the Room 18 (Alcove) and Room 19 of the Temple Complex and in one of the Service areas (Area 36) of the Cult Centre at Mycenae, while bronze plates are stated to have been among the contents of a deposit, with possible cult associations, close to the south entrance of Room 3 of Megaron B at Dimini, in the area of Mycenaean Iolkos.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

1. Following a contextual approach and taking into account all the available evidence, the tiny room in the north wing of Building Gamma may be identified as a small sanctuary or shrine. It is, no doubt, one of the foci, or perhaps the main focus, of official cult practiced by the elite residing in the building and certainly reflecting their system of beliefs.

2. With regards to its small size, the shrine in Building Gamma can be compared to rooms/structures of cultic character at major Late Mycenaean centres: Room 93 in the Palace at Pylos, Rooms 117, 110 and 110A in the Unterburg at Tiryns, the East Shrine at Phylakopi in Melos; also Building C, of advanced LH IIIC date, at Mitrou in East Lokris (the latter probably intended for funerary cult).

3. The shrine under discussion, being fully incorporated into the plan of Building Gamma, is one of several instances of cult rooms functioning within large compounds of palatial or non-palatial character. Known LH IIIC-IIIB occurrences on the Mycenaean Mainland include: the shrine in Room XXXII of House G at Asine; Room A at Agios Konstantinos, Methana; the shrine in the largest room of House K, and also Room 1 and the area around the kerno of the south of Room 3 in Megaron B at Dimini.

4. Quite unlike the more homogeneous architectural expression of cult in Neopalatial Crete, the shrine in Building Gamma may be taken to illustrate, once again, the complexity and wide variation in size, orientation, architecture/lay-out and internal arrangement of cult spaces in Late Mycenaean Greece.

5. Within the wider context of the identification of the material remains of cult, it may be noted that the main features of the newly-discovered Salaminian shrine fall into the framework of potential archaeological correlates (or “criteria”) to religious ritual, as proposed by C. Renfrew and re-worked by A. D. Moore and W. D. Taylour with reference to the Temple Complex at Mycenae, and still in the centre of current theoretical debate concerning the archaeology of cult and religion.

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FIG. 1. SALAMIS, KANAKIA. PLAN OF BUILDING GAMMA, AFTER THE CLOSE OF THE 2008 CAMPAIGN.


FIG. 3. SALAMIS, KANAKIA. GENERAL VIEW OF THE NORTH WING OF BUILDING GAMMA, FROM EAST, WITH UNEXCAVATED PART IN THE FOREGROUND (2009).


FIG. 5. SALAMIS, KANAKIA, BUILDING GAMMA. VIEW OF THE SHRINE, FROM NORTHEAST (2007).

FIG. 7. SALAMIS, KANAKIA, BUILDING GAMMA. BRONZE VOTIVE STRIP, AS FOUND (2007).

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