

INTRODUCTION

“coming events had already cast their shadows before them”

Sir Arthur Evans, describing the late Prepalatial period at
Knossos in *The Palace of Minos*, vol I: 127

Generations of scholars studying Bronze Age Crete have grappled with the question of how societies change. Since Sir Arthur Evans’ excavations at Knossos in the early twentieth century, countless research agendas have revolved around combing the archaeological record of the island for signs of what drove the emergence of palatial society between its shores some four millennia ago. Construction of the island’s first “palaces,” monumental complexes characterized by sprawling blueprints centered on an open court, has traditionally been dated to circa 1900 BCE, in the Middle Minoan IB period (MM IB). Following the work of Evans, it has been assumed that erection of these buildings went hand-in-hand with the formation of nascent sociopolitical states administered from within their walls. Yet working out how the power underlying these social formations initially coalesced, and the particular nature of that power (religious? agricultural? coercive? passive? hierarchical? heterarchical?), has been a challenging and hotly debated topic. Much attention has fallen upon the period immediately preceding the construction of the palaces, the end of the so-called “Prepalatial period” in the late third and early second millennia BCE, in search of evidence for significant alterations in the circumstances of social life. Theories concerning this moment have varied

widely. Some have argued that the very notion and practical underpinnings of complex palatial society were imported pre-formed from the Near East. Others have attributed the changes on Crete to internal upheavals that precipitated marked and rapid revolutions in social organization. Stressing the human component, some point to competitive display between multiple elite factions as the locus of social reconfiguration, while still others look to figures who gained power over staple wealth production by harnessing agricultural labor. Despite working from a diversity of perspectives, each of these theories build toward a common point, reaching their culmination in the dawn of the first palatial period. The shadow of the first palaces and the urge to understand their coming-into-being has thus hung tenaciously over interpretation of the late Prepalatial period, at times engulfing it whole, making the hallmark of archaeological analyses the identification of points of dramatic social alteration.

In recent years, however, a strong countercurrent has begun to take form in the scholarship, challenging the established perspective that Prepalatial Crete was marked by considerable social change. Various scholars have argued that Prepalatial social life in fact was characterized by remarkable continuity, with local communities, centered on settlements and cemeteries, providing the long-standing basis of social organization and activity throughout the period. Moreover, the very fundamentals of a dramatic transformation to palace-based society have been shaken by studies indicating that the palaces did not emerge *en masse* in MM IB, but were in many cases preceded, in the very same locations, by large-scale architectural complexes dating back to various moments in the early second and later third millennia, during Middle Minoan IA and Early Minoan III, or even Early Minoan IIB (see Pelon 1983, 1999; Schoep 2004; Todaro 2009a; McEnroe 2010: 41–43).

Such studies importantly refocus analysis of the Prepalatial period on that period itself, stymieing the tendency to gear interpretations toward the projected telos of the palaces. Moreover, they force us to recognize the apparent persistence of many dimensions of social practice throughout the long Prepalatial period and to problematize the significance of such conservatism. Indeed, in a rush to identify marked points of social transformation, not only have we likely failed to recognize the impressive perpetuation of Prepalatial lifeways, but we have also potentially contorted data in a desire to see alteration. That said, alongside considerable continuity in many aspects of social life, undeniable evidence of change during Prepalatial does exist, especially in its later phase. One need not conjure the specter of the later palaces to appreciate certain definite and significant social developments during the prior period, including performance of new scales and varieties of collective activity and production of novel types of socio-symbolic material culture, each of which would have contributed to real, in some cases dramatic changes in social

experience. How then, do we productively reconcile such seemingly contradictory impressions of Prepalatial social dynamics?

What we need is an analytical perspective that does not set social continuity and profound change at odds, nor merely acknowledges them as coincidental, but instead integrates the simultaneous evidence for both into a unified understanding of social action and relation. Hence in the pages ahead, I develop an alternative approach to late Prepalatial social dynamics that rethinks the underlying nature of change in this period, seeking its impetus within quietly performed and often neglected practices of sociocultural innovation. Through this lens it becomes possible to appreciate that fundamental developments did take form in people's interactive experience, but they came about by means of ongoing, rhythmic creative processes in daily life.

My approach foregrounds a question: how did people at this time foster innovative means and experiences of social relation, in its practical, symbolic and spatial dimensions? To answer this I investigate three crucial developments evidenced in the archaeological record, each of which would have impacted social life at a different level: an increase in the importation and working of exotic foreign materials; the formation of broader scales of social collectivity that integrated long-standing small communities; and the development of novel symbolic means for expressing social similarity and connection.

The material focus of my analysis is an extraordinary corpus of artifacts deeply entangled in each of these developments: a group of seal stones found at sites across Crete that were fashioned of imported hippopotamus ivory and engraved with the island's earliest iconography. As signifiers of social identity, seals stand as a powerful form of material culture that lends itself to social analysis. I investigate three aspects of this particular group of seals, each pertaining to a way in which the objects would have subtly engaged persons in novel forms of social relation across the Cretan landscape: 1) *Craft*: Based upon extensive study of the objects, I argue that these seals were manufactured primarily by traveling craftspersons, who worked the rare ivory with their hands while forging paths with their feet that connected the small communities they visited. 2) *Identity*: Through a revisionary reading of the semiotics of seal use, I explore how these seals and the clay impressions rendered by them would have signified social identity from two venues: seals as they were worn directly on the body of the human sealer, and impressions as they moved away from that human to independently engage with other persons in other contexts. 3) *Symbolism*: In tandem with the physical interaction involved in seal use, these seals were engraved with an unprecedented iconography, reproduced on seals across the island, which provided Cretans with an innovative material means to symbolically link their social identities with those of distant others.

Through these foci, I unpack the rich social dynamics implied within this group of objects, laying bare the ways in which the lived world of early Crete

was changed at multiple levels through the repeated, creative work of both common figures, such as craftspersons, and an uncommon material culture, like the seals. Furthermore, the analysis of this group of seals allows me to identify similar creative social dynamics at play within other contemporary evidence, in arenas ranging from ritual life to architecture. In each instance, my focus is on lived processes of innovative social action, querying the particular ways in which the shape of social relations was altered by the ongoing work of people and objects alike.

This approach brings an essentially new perspective to the problem of social change on Crete at the turn of the second millennium BCE that makes several key contributions: First, it recognizes agents of social change in unexpected places – in people performing repetitive “traditional” work and not simply in the hands of “elites,” in collectives of actors and actions versus in singular figures and revolutionary events, and in people and objects alike. It rethinks the nature of social change as arising from ongoing rhythmic practices, perhaps unassuming in their momentary instances but capable of effecting profound change. By emphasizing developments in the form and scale of social relations, it draws attention to the spatial dynamics of social change that altered as people created new scopes and varieties of connection in the landscape. Finally, social change conceived as creative action is shown to have permeated the entirety of people’s lived experiences within a shared social space, rather than being something isolated to certain spheres of activity. Hence innovation is identified in evidence as diverse as the small imagery of an iconographic seal motif and footpaths worn in between sites, in the skilled movements of a craftsman’s hands and in collective gatherings at ritual sites. By rethinking the nature of social change in these terms, it becomes possible to sidestep the standard accounts of the transformations in late third millennium BCE Crete by recovering a new level of social agency in the quiet work of creative social practices.

PLAN OF THE WORK

My discussion progresses in three sections, organized into five chapters: 1) contextualization of the study and initial analysis of the lived sociocultural environment of late third millennium Crete (Chapter 1); 2) examination of the principal material evidence, the corpus of seals and impressions, and the craft practices that brought them into being (Chapters 2–4) and 3) conclusion of the study, providing a detailed synthetic discussion of the various topics treated in the preceding chapters and articulating a fundamentally reconceived understanding of social change during the period (Chapter 5).

In the initial chapter, I begin by situating the scope and terms of the present study within scholarly discussions of late Prepalatial Crete and the nature of the

transition to “palatial” society on the island. Here I discuss the tension in current scholarship between the opposed interpretative poles of revolution and continuity for this period, and position my study as a critical response to this debate, which, instead of subscribing to a pre-existing viewpoint, rethinks the underlying nature of the changes in question. During this period, social change is productively framed as a matter of innovative developments in the nature of people’s lived relations across the island, through which new scales and varieties of community came into being. Henri Lefebvre’s notion of “social space” provides the theoretical groundwork for considering developments in the interactive dynamics of people’s relations, which I combine with current approaches to community based in anthropological and material culture studies. Here I also delineate my analytical focus on lived creative practices in their somatic and spatial dimensions, recognizing this as the level at which social innovations actually would have taken form. To describe such processes of responsive, generative activity, I utilize the term “social craft.” In this way, the skilled creative work of human hands and tools that constitutes craft stands as a focus of my analysis, both in itself and as an analogy for considering a broader spectrum of transformative practices (intentional and unintentional) through which social relation on early Crete was reformulated.

The remainder of Chapter 1 is comprised of a detailed discussion of the sociocultural context of late third millennium BCE Crete employing the theoretical notions just introduced. This section is organized around an examination of three elements of the Cretan socialscape: the dynamics of social and exchange relations between communities, establishment of common ritual sites and practices, and the construction and visitation of building complexes that accommodated large-scale gatherings at various locations around the island. I work with recent studies on each of these topics, drawing out evidence of novel activities and material forms that would have engaged the people of Crete in unprecedented experiences of social relation. I argue that, through such experiences, people’s lives became integrated (symbolically and practically) into new scales and varieties of community.

In Chapters 2, 3 and 4, I turn to analysis of the material culture that constitutes the focus of the book, a group of stamp seals referred to as the “Parading Lions” group that was manufactured on Crete during the late third and early second millennia BCE. Seals on Bronze Age Crete were used like stamps to create impressed symbolic motifs in lumps of moist clay that “sealed” closures on objects. In so doing, these impressions signified social identity, will and control. While all seals and impressions were powerful social objects in this way, the Parading Lions group embodied multiple crucial innovations in seal design that enhanced their role in social interaction yet further. In order to assess these innovations, Chapter 2 opens with a description of seals manufactured on Crete in the preceding phase of the Prepalatial, placing them within

the social environment of the time. We see that during this early phase seal craft and use were primarily local affairs, occurring within hamlets and villages where intracommunity relationships were paramount and imported objects would have been recognized and valued for their difference from local traditions. This discussion provides a baseline against which the Parading Lions seals are compared.

In the context of discussing the early Prepalatial glyptic, I develop a novel understanding of the lived semiotics of seal use, framed by a consideration of a seal's two "venues of signification": the first constituted by the seal as an object worn on the human body; the second by the seal's engraved sealing surface, which had the potential to generate impressions in clay, socio-symbolic objects in their own right. This problematization of the semiotic dynamics of seal use provides the analytical groundwork for assessing the remarkable developments in seal design embodied in the late Prepalatial Parading Lions group. The Parading Lions seals departed from earlier Cretan seals in two principal respects: while earlier seals were rendered of locally available materials like steatite and bone, the Parading Lions seals were fashioned from cylindrical sections of imported hippopotamus teeth; and while earlier seals were primarily engraved with generic motifs of crossed lines, the Parading Lions seals carried exquisite iconographic motifs depicting tiny lions, each of which clearly belonged to the same shared iconographic tradition while at the same time being unique – and hence differentiable – in its fine details.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to a close analysis of the implications of these innovative aspects of the Parading Lions seals and impressions. First I consider the foreign dimensions of the seals. Both the hippopotami from whose teeth the seals were crafted and the lions that were engraved on their sealing surfaces were creatures unknown in the Cretan landscape, who undoubtedly had an aura of exoticism and even fantasy within the minds of the island's population. Instead of waging an interpretation of the particular symbolic meaning these beasts held for the Cretans, I consider their significance in combination and as elements of the total objects of the seals and impressions, objects whose use actively embodied a tension between nearness and closeness. The ivory seals would have been worn prominently in a position directly on the bodies of their possessors, while the clay impressions carrying the stamped lion motifs would have had the potential to move away from the human sealers, extending the scope of their social interactions. In this context, I argue that the hippopotamus ivory and the engraved lions contributed to the seals' signification of the various new scales of social distance being experienced by the Cretan population at that time.

Next I turn to an analysis of the unprecedented iconography of the Parading Lions seals, which I treat as a socio-symbolic phenomenon. The iconography of this group is not only the earliest carried on Cretan seals, it is arguably the

first iconographic tradition of any kind on the island. Seals engraved with this iconography have been discovered at sites across the island, attesting to its extensive social and geographic scope. Given that prior to the Parading Lions group the majority of seals made and used on Crete were engraved with generic motifs of simple crossed lines, the initiation of the practice of inscribing them instead with elaborated motifs marks a profound reconception of the signifying potential of such objects. In this case the Cretans abandoned the long-standing custom of generic seal motifs in order to forge an iconography that was held in common between persons in communities across Crete, thereby transcending by symbolic means the confines of the small local communities that had long been the basis of social life on the island. Moreover, given that seals and impressions signified social identity, the decision to link the motif of one's own seal to those used by other persons stands as a momentous social decision, whether or not it was viewed as such at the time. Put in other terms, I argue that with this iconography people were developing and reproducing consistent material means to hold aspects of their social existences in common with people beyond their established spheres of regular interaction. The Parading Lions seals and their impressions thus can be understood as objects involved in an actively *incorporating* social effect, integrating persons into a formative social collectivity that had a new extent and character. This integration powerfully combined symbolic and practical means of relation.

Drawing on the preceding problematizations of the Parading Lions objects, Chapter 3 culminates in a fundamentally new reading of the relationship between seals and the impressions rendered by them, and of how each signified social identity. Traditionally seal impressions have been understood to replicate the symbols engraved on seals, reproducing them as movable objects and thereby extending the signification of the seal. Drawing on Lefebvre's discussion of the socio-spatial dynamics of mirror symmetry, I argue that contrary to the traditional understanding of seal use, impressions did not replicate the symbols of their parent seals but instead constituted their inversion. A consequence of this fact is that we must recognize the remarkable independence of the impression from the seal, as an object defined by its difference and separation from the seal and the human sealer, which had its own interactive social trajectory and hence embodied a distinct social identity.

Chapter 4 focuses on the crafting of the Parading Lions seals. I begin with an exploration of the creative work of the craftsperson, arguing that the productivity of these figures is not only traditional but also improvisational. Drawing on the work of anthropologists including Tim Ingold and Richard Sennett, I develop a notion of craftwork that involves the ongoing, rhythmic activity of mindful hands, which gives rise to innovation through the process of repetitive but responsive practice. I then turn to the glyptic data from Crete, assessing

how the seal carvers responsible for the Parading Lions seals subtly effected dramatic changes in the socio-symbolic role of seals through developments they made to a long-standing craft. Based upon extensive analysis of casts of all known Parading Lions pieces, I argue that in most cases these seals were likely produced by itinerant craftspersons who would have traveled for various aspects of their work: to obtain materials like ivory, perhaps to train in the craft, and to produce and provide seals to persons within multiple communities. My assertions arise from a combination of the objects' depositional data with my identification of discrete subtraditions within the corpus of engraved motifs. Stylistically these subtraditions are defined by clusters of variable attributes, including: particular conventions utilized for depicting lions' manes; patterns used for border motifs; preference for particular composition types (e.g., circular versus linear); depth of engraving; inclusion or exclusion of specific secondary design elements; and different internal organizational schemes. It is also possible to discern evidence of interaction between separate subtraditions that likely reflects contact between seal carvers, identifiable in select microfeatures reproduced between otherwise discrete groupings. These factors together indicate a dynamic mobility at the level of the manufacturing of the seals and not just in the subsequent moving of finished products. The individual subgroups are delineated in the Presentation of the Subgroups (Appendix).

The book's concluding chapter, Chapter 5, synthesizes the various topics treated in the foregoing portions of the study by explicitly returning to the notion that powerful innovation can arise from repetitive creative practices. This idea runs as a current throughout the book, gradually breaking down the divide between those interpretations that identify profound social changes in late third millennium Crete and those that assert that the nature of social life underwent little alteration. Here in the conclusion I provide a detailed discussion of how both of these perspectives are in fact partially right, although stuck in a false dichotomy, since it is the rhythmic and innovative nature of social life that must be understood as the primary source of change in this period. To this end, I consider the people whose actions were manifest in the seals and impressions, both the figures who made them and those that used them. I begin by unpacking the path-breaking social dynamics embedded in the work of the traveling craftspersons who manufactured the Parading Lions seals. These persons would have developed their craft out of centuries-old seal carving practices, using their tools in novel ways to work the surface of the imported ivory and to engrave the fine details of the new iconographic motifs. Their work would have become mobile as they were impelled to make regular journeys in order both to obtain the ivory at specific locales and to find sufficient demand between multiple communities for the now quite valuable objects they produced. Through such responsive, recurring praxis these

craftspersons brought into being highly innovative pieces of material culture that engaged the Cretan population in a new type of socio-symbolic relation spanning the boundaries of local communities. At the same time, through their realized travels from one village to another, the seal carvers also would have fostered new scales of social interconnection in the flesh, spreading news and stories and thereby forging a new sense of mutuality and social simultaneity.

This discussion of the rhythmic, quietly productive social dynamics of the seal carvers' craft lays the groundwork for a careful consideration of similar dynamics in the broader lived world of the period. I contextualize each aspect of the Parading Lions objects – their crafting, use and unique materiality – in discussion of other contemporaneous evidence. In terms of their crafting, I investigate how the paths worn in by the seal carvers' journeys would have coincided and interwoven with the pathways being forged by others traveling beyond the boundaries of small communities. Notably such fellow travelers would have included persons making their ways to newly constructed large-scale buildings where regional gatherings were held. Likewise, people would have ventured out of their local communities to assemble at the peak sanctuary sites first founded in this period, where they appear to have engaged in ritual activities involving deposition of symbolic and votive material.

I argue that activities at these new and socially charged places in the Cretan landscape are also important to consider in relation to the use of the Parading Lions seals. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, the Parading Lions seals would have signified and enhanced the social identities of their possessors from a position directly on their bodies, where the ivory pieces were worn like pendants. Social gatherings involving persons from multiple small communities would have been occasions during which seal owners were likely to have prominently displayed and potentially used their seals. Such objects may have formed part of the accoutrements of eminent figures and could have been utilized in negotiations connected to the formation of new scales of social relationship, for example to seal oaths between representatives of different communities. In these contexts, a distinctive tension appears to have been manifest between social distinction and comparability, placing emphasis both on the individual social actor and on his or her integration into a larger social body. Individual possessors of the Parading Lions seals, who used their objects in the flesh to perform acts of sealing, would have engaged not only in cooperative but also in competitive activities, asserting their varied wills and claims in the midst of the diverse negotiations of collective social life. Yet it is extremely significant that these assertions were premised in an expression of similarity, constituted by the deliberately shared iconography and style of the Parading Lions group. Events at regional venues similarly would have provided spaces in which members of multiple smaller communities could come together, articulating their distinct identities while simultaneously fostering an experience of social

comparability through their copresence as peers. Such events would have formed part of the new temporal and spatial rhythm of formative supralocal communities that encompassed various local populations. The repeated actions implied by these events, the journeys made on footpaths leading from small sites to gathering places, the corporeal performance of rituals, the collective imbibing of food and drink as a means of forming new social bonds and perhaps the use of seals to secure new agreements – each would have subtly contributed to the gradual development of novel varieties of social experience as Cretans formed relations at new scales.

We should expect that such significant alterations in social experience were confined neither to certain places and formal events, nor to the experience of “elites.” These changes would have quietly permeated the lived experiences of the wider population in smaller moments and other places, through their relations with things and people alike. In essence, it would have reformulated Cretans’ sense of the social space in which they lived as it expanded to encompass the existence of distant others. As people’s lives were set in relation to one another through innovative practical and symbolic means, new scales of community took form that incorporated the populations of multiple small settlements and gave rise to new dimensions of collective social experience.