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The Role and Individuality of Kamares Ware

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Kamares Ware, first found in the Kamares cave on the southern slope of Mount Ida, was first published in 1895 (Mariani 1985, 333–346). It immediately stood out from other Middle Bronze Age pottery from Crete with its polychrome decoration in white and red and, more rarely, yellow on a dark ground (Dawkins and Laistner 1912–13, 1–34).

A few years later, the same pottery appeared during early 20th century excavations at Knossos and Phaistos. The first systematic study was published in 1903 (MacKenzie 1903, 157–205), and the first relative chronology for Kamares Ware was created in 1921 (Evans 1921–1935). Evans used a tripartite system, MM I, II and III, and later added sub-phases to all three of the main periods. This system is, however, sometimes difficult to use because Evans was not always consistent in his classifications and adjusted his system as his excavations at Knossos progressed (cf. Evans 1921–35, I and IV, *passim*). More material appeared especially at Phaistos during excavations in the 1950's and 1960's. The excavator, Doro Levi, divided his finds into a first (later divided into a Phase IA and IB), a second and a third phase on the basis of the stratigraphy of the Old Palace at Phaistos (Levi 1951, 335–356; 1964; 1976, 15–28). In 1976, I suggested a system for the Kamares Ware with four different phases, based on stylistic changes and on the find-contexts and stratigraphy in the two palaces: Pre-Kamares, Early Kamares, Classical Kamares and Post-Kamares (Walberg 1976, 124–125).

Normally, only pottery of the style first found at the Kamares Cave and later mainly at the palaces of Knossos and Phaistos is called Kamares Ware, although some scholars have used the term for Middle Minoan polychrome pottery in general. Sir Arthur Evans used the term in particular for pottery dating from the MM II phase.

Even though the pottery from Knossos and Phaistos shows close similarities to other polychrome pottery from Crete, much of it has an individual style without parallels elsewhere. A number of palatial Kamares vases and sherds have turned up at other sites, but they stand out from the majority of the ceramics and represent “exports” from the palaces to these sites rather than locally made vases (Walberg 1983, 150–152).

There were a number of regional varieties of the first Kamares style, or Pre-Kamares (MM IA), when many of the characteristics of the Kamares pottery first appeared, and an individual style which can be distinguished from the others developed in Central Crete around Knossos and Phaistos (Fig. 1–4). We find “egg-cups” and conical cups decorated with a simple horizontal band and closed vessels such as jugs and bridge-spouted jars with diagonal bands, often creating the illusion of a twisting upwards movement (Walberg 1976, 42; 1978, p. 9). There is also decoration which seems to have been created from various parts of spirals on a black ground produced from a silicate type of iron, containing potassium as a flux. The first wheel-made vessels appeared, and red paint was used together with white (Walberg 1976, 75–77). In fact, the appearance of red color in the decoration is perhaps the most important criterium for distinguishing vases of this phase from earlier EM III vases (Walberg 1976, 76–77). During the excavations at Kommos south of the Mesara, on the south coast, P.P. Betancourt was able to make important stratigraphic observations. He found substantial deposits with ceramics of a phase that is clearly later than his Middle Minoan IA (Betancourt 1990, 28–30). This phase is termed MM IB and corresponds largely to a group which I described as belonging to a late phase of Pre-Kamares, but had been unable to define stratigraphically (Walberg 1976, 77; 1983, p. 150) and included in my Early Kamares phase.

In the next phase, the Early Kamares phase (MM IB–IIA), barbotine decoration (plastic relief in the shape of knobs, ridges and a variety which reminded Sir A. Evans of rough marine growths, so-called Barnacle Work (Evans 1921–1935 IV, 100–106) was used to create a contrast between smooth and rough areas. This contrast is often further accentuated by the use of different colors (Fig. 5–7). Many of the closed vessels, such as bridge-spouted jars, have a low maximum diameter and a shape which is more or less biconical (Walberg 1976, 42–43). The decoration shows more variety than before and more decorative motifs are used, including dots, petals, and whirls. Running spirals now encircle the whole vessel. There are also large spirals used alone as main decoration, usually one or two on each side of the vase (Fig. 5). The upper, most convex parts of the vessels are often accentuated, while the decoration on the lower part radiates upwards from the base (Walberg 1976, 73–74, 92; 1978, 17). White is the dominating color for the painted decoration both of vessels with barbotine decoration and for those with a smooth surface. In the vases with a smooth surface, red and yellow paint (Fig. 8) plays a more important role than in those with barbotine decoration (Walberg 1976, 77–78). There is less difference between the Early Kamares ceramics and Middle Minoan pottery found outside the palaces than in the previous and in the next (Classical Kamares) phase (Walberg 1983, 151). While in many cases the find-contexts at Knossos were disturbed by later building activities, there is a particularly good find-context at Phaistos for Early Kamares pottery between a secondary wall and a ramp, the so-called Bastione II. Varieties of this style have been found at the two palaces and at a number of other nearby sites in Central Crete, as for example, Haghia Triada and Kamilari (Walberg 1983, 92–94). The most important finds were made by P.P. Betancourt at Kommos, where well-stratified deposits were found above his Middle Minoan IB levels and below his Middle Minoan IIB levels (Betancourt's MM IIA, see esp. Betancourt 1990, 32). He made significant observations concerning the increased percentage of wheelmade pottery and the percentages of shapes. He also recognized the appearance of a new type of conical cups (Betancourt 1990, 30–33).

Vases of the following phase (Fig. 9–12), the Classical Kamares phase (MM IIA–IIB–IIIA), were found at Knossos and Phaistos and at a number of sites in Central Crete such as the large circular tomb or tholos at Kamilari, the Kamares Cave and the harbor sites of Gournia, Palaikastro and the harbor site of Kommos on the south coast (Walberg 1983, 93, 95–96, 123–124,

131–134). Sporadic examples have also been appeared as “exports” to other sites on the island. There is much more use of color than before. White, red, yellow and orange shades are used in a variety of combinations. The most prevalent variety of polychromy in Classical Kamares vases is white as the dominating color with a few red, orange or yellow accents (Walberg 1976, 78–79). There is also plastic and relief decoration (Walberg 1976, 40–41). The shapes are usually ovoid or globular and softer and more rounded than before (Walberg 1976, 43). The walls of some vases are egg-shell thin, and the production was based on a more detailed technical knowledge (Betancourt 1985, 66, 69, 96). The motifs are more dynamic than before, whirling and radiating (Fig. 11–12). Together with the softer shapes they create new and more well-balanced overall effects (Walberg 1976, 93; 1978, 10–12), cf. Fig. 10. There is a greater tendency to elaborate motifs in Classical Kamares. Elements of non-representational motifs are combined in new ways to represent plant and animal motifs as well as human figures (Fig. 11). These elements often reappear in the same combinations, such as petaloid loops, J-spirals and dentate bands for floral motifs and J-spirals arranged around a central circle for cuttlefish (Walberg 1986, 29–35, 139–140). Many of the vases seem to be unique. The difference between Classical Kamares pottery and other ceramics is much more marked than before. At Malia, however, a group of vases has many characteristics in common with ceramics from Knossos and Phaistos and is clearly influenced by the Classical Kamares style from these two palaces (Walberg 1983, 120–121).

The Post-Kamares phase (MM IIIA–IIIB) shows a number of exaggerated tendencies in shapes and decoration, cf. Fig. 14. Closed vessels are often elongated or have strong contrasts between convex and concave curves (Walberg 1976, 93). The decoration tends to be found only in the upper part of the vessels. New decorative elements are introduced (Fig. 13), and old motifs are often painted in a sketchy, impressionistic way (Fig. 14), especially plant motifs (Walberg 1976, 124; 1986, 76–81). Such motifs give a “natural” impression, but they are still composed of non-representational elements, and the standard combinations of such elements are still clearly distinguishable. Certain combinations of elements have come to stand for crocus, lilies, palms, etc. and are now fixed in the vase-painter's repertory. They are later taken over in Late Minoan and Mycenaean ceramic decoration (Walberg 1986, 36). Polychrome decoration plays a less important role, and many vases are decorated with white paint only on



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Figs 1–3 from D. Levi, *Festòs e la Civiltà minoica*, Rome 1976, Pls. VIb, VIIb, VIIc;
 Fig. 4 from L. Pernier, *Il Palazzo minoico di Festòs*, Rome 1935, Pl. XIII.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

Figs 5–8 from D. Levi, *Festòs e la Civiltà minoica*, Rome 1976, Pls. IXa, XIIa, XIIIb, XIXb.

black ground (Fig. 15). Red accents appear sparingly and are most often found in representational motifs (Fig. 16) (Walberg 1976, 79). The Post-Kamares style is more widespread and appears all over the island (Walberg 1983, 152). At Kommos, Post-Kamares pottery appeared under a large part of the LM I settlement. The site seems to have suffered from an earthquake destruction which covered the Post-Kamares material (Betancourt 1990, 37–41). In a following phase, pottery which was transitional Middle Minoan III/LM IA appeared, characterized by changes in older shapes, the introduction of new shapes, new, especially floral motifs and new dark paint (Betancourt 1990, 41–48).

These groupings of Kamares pottery are, of course, not only based on stylistic observations, but also on find-contexts and sequences of superimposed strata found especially in rooms and areas of the palace of Phaistos. The foundation trenches there contained material belonging to the Pre-Kamares phase (Walberg 1976, 97, 104). A cavity between a ramp leading up from the West Court and a wall was at one point filled up with pottery different from that from the foundation trenches. The ramp seems to have been part of the original palace structure, and the wall appears to have been secondary (Levi 1976, 160–170). Consequently, the filling (*Bastione II*) represents a phase when the palace had been inhabited for some time and must, consequently, be later than the foundation trench. The ceramics from the filling clearly differ in shape and decoration and represent the Early Kamares phase. Similar pottery was found in a wooden chest below a Classical Kamares floor in the northern wing of the old palace at Phaistos (*Vano 11*). Obviously the chest must predate the construction of the floor (Levi 1976, 361–364). Other areas with Early Kamares ceramics at Phaistos also were filled in and built over by later floors.

Ceramics of Classical Kamares type were found at Phaistos on a number of floors. In some rooms, two Classical Kamares floors appeared separated by concrete (*astraki, calcestruzzo*) (Levi 1976, 43–69, 83–120). The decoration of the vessels from these two floors was in many cases the same or similar, which at an early point lead some scholars to believe that the floors represented fallen-in upper stories (Platon 1968, 1–58; Zois 1965, 27–109, esp. opp. p. 32; Walberg 1976, 106). However, in a destruction, upper floors and concrete layers are likely to form a heap of fragments on the floor below rather than distinct layers, and it is much more likely that the floors represent subsequent phases of occupation. The second Classical Kamares

phase may have been short and have represented only a partial reoccupation during which the ceramic style did not change noticeably. Vases of the same style as from these two floors at Phaistos have also been found in a few contexts at Knossos, but the material is limited. Concrete has been reported from Knossos, but it is unclear if there were several different strata or just one, and nothing is known about the extent of the area where concrete was found (Evans 1921–1935 III, 287, 319–321, 356). E. Fiandra and A. MacGillivray tried to reconcile Evans's sequence at Knossos with the Phaistos stratigraphy by equating architectural and ceramic phases at Phaistos (Fiandra 1962, 112–126 and MacGillivray 1998, 16), but this is difficult in view of the similarity between the ceramic material from the first and the second floor levels, separated by *astraki* at Phaistos. Relatively little Middle Minoan material was found at Phaistos in strata above the Classical Kamares floors. Much of it may have been removed in connection with the building of a new palace above the remains of the old one. However, a third stratum, identified by the excavator as a floor level, was found at 1.22 m. above the second concrete-covered floor, and it contained pottery of the Post-Kamares phase (Levi 1960, 81–121, esp. p. 101; 1964, p. 7, Fig. 14). There is clear evidence of successive constructional phases (cf. Fiandra 1961–1962, 112–126) associated with the four different stylistic groups of Kamares pottery, especially at Phaistos. Thus, the palatial Kamares style has a recognizable pattern of development, corresponding to stratigraphic sequences.

A similar sequence of four phases of Middle Minoan pottery plus a MM III/transitional LM IA can be identified at other sites, but the style at these sites differs considerably from that Knossos and Phaistos. Regional differences are found in different parts of Crete (Walberg 1983, 2, 123–134, 141–143, 150–152; Floyd 1997, 314–315).

The similarity between the ceramics from Knossos and Phaistos, especially of the Classical Kamares phase, is striking. In 1976, I came to the conclusion that they must have been produced in palatial workshops with very close ties to each other, and that it is impossible to attribute Kamares vases to one or the other of these two sites (Walberg 1976, 122–125; 1987, p. 12 pace exception of MacGillivray 1987, 278). I also found parallels between pottery from the Mesara, especially Kamilari, Haghia Triada and Kommos and the palatial pottery from Knossos and Phaistos (Walberg 1983, 92, 93–96, 150–152). A discovery which supported this conclusion was published

in an article some years ago (Day and Wilson 1998, 355–356). On the basis of petrographic analysis of the clay, they suggested that the Kamares pottery from the two palaces actually comes from a single workshop located in south-central Crete, and that the pottery used at Knossos was not produced at or near the palace but was made in the Mesara area. There does, in fact, seem to be evidence for pottery production within the palace area at Phaistos (Levi 1976, 510). Kilns datable in MM II have been found at Phaistos and Haghia Triada (Tomasello 1996, 27–37, esp. 29–30; Carinci 1997, 318–319). Was the Kamares pottery manufactured within the palace of Phaistos rather than at some unknown site on the nearby Mesara plain? A common origin would explain the close similarity of Classical Kamares vases from Knossos and Phaistos. Vessels for food and drink as well as ritual vessels were sent from the Mesara to Knossos instead of vice versa according to Day and Wilson. Is it possible that all of them were made in one palatial workshop at Phaistos and sent from there to Knossos? Another technical factor also points to production in the Mesara. According to W. Noll, only Kamares Ware from Knossos and Phaistos is decorated with a specific type of white paint made from steatite (soapstone) or talc, a magnesium silicate, as opposed to paint based on calcium silicate used for Middle Minoan pottery from other sites (Noll, Holm and Born 1971, 615–618). Noll later suggested that a fine powder was produced from cutting and grinding the stone, perhaps originally discovered in connection with the production of stone vases. The intensity of the white paint derived from steatite would have been stronger than that made from calcium silicate. Three out of six known steatite deposits have been located in the Mesara area (Noll 1991, 161–169). A recent Laser-Induced Breakdown Spectroscopy (LIBS) analysis undertaken at Temple university with other surface analytical techniques such as Proton-Induced X-ray Emission (PIXE) spectroscopy found a dramatic difference in magnesium content of the white paint used on Kamares Style pottery from Kommos as opposed to East Cretan pottery from Palaikastro (Ferrence, Melesanaki, Stratoudaki, Stambouli, Anglos and Betancourt 2000, pp. 186–193; Swann, Ferrence and Betancourt 2000, 714–717). The pure white paint made from steatite, which made the palace ware unique, may have influenced the palatial elite to monopolize the production of the Kamares Ware. More analysis of ceramics from sites other than Knossos and Phaistos is, however, needed to support this theory.

Day and Wilson also presented the interesting theory that Kamares Ware was “symbolic of hierarchy and power in the Protopalatial period”. To be sure, Kamares Ware was used in ritual contexts, and some of it was presumably made for this purpose. If the Kamares Ware was a symbol of hierarchy and power, some questions immediately come to mind. Is there anything in the shape or decoration of the Kamares pottery which suggests the greatness and power of the palaces? Although the decoration in many cases is unique, Kamares motifs generally do not seem to convey a specific message. Two vases from Phaistos are decorated with scenes representing women dancing, perhaps performing some ceremony, but they seem to be unique. Also animal and plant motifs such as octopus-motifs, argonauts, fish, shells and lilies have been thought to be Minoan religious symbols, since these motifs are found in rooms and areas with installations suggesting religious or ceremonial activities. However, the majority of the Kamares vases are decorated with non-representational motifs, and these motifs are not repeated often enough to suggest that they were religious symbols or symbols of power. The shapes of Kamares Ware are found in a variety of contexts and are not restricted to areas which seem to have had a ritual function.

This leaves the possibility that the vases in themselves were a status symbol and conveyed the message of power solely by their specific palatial style. However, if that were the case, one would expect more Kamares Ware to have been found at local sites. If the palaces of Knossos and Phaistos exported Kamares vases with ostentation in mind, this seems to have taken place within the frame of “gift exchange” between the palaces and other important sites and the creation of a useful network rather than to impress the local Cretan population in the country-side.

If we look more closely at the find-contexts of Kamares Ware outside Knossos and Phaistos, we find that it appears at sites near the two palaces (Kamilari and Haghia Triada) and at harbor sites (especially Kommos), but also to some extent at Gournia and Palaikastro, along the coast where it could have been intended for export outside Crete (Walberg 1983, 95, 123–124, 131–134). It is true that relatively small quantities were found at these harbor sites, except for Kommos, but the vases may have been loaded directly onto ships in the harbors. If Noll, Wilson, and Day are right about the origin of the Kamares Ware (as the analyses undertaken by Ferrence and others also suggest), Kommos may have been the main harbor from which Kamares Ware was distributed, while some vases



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

Figs 9–12 from D. Levi, *Festòs e la Civiltà minoica*, Rome 1976, Pls. XXXa, LVIIc, LXVI, LXXIII.



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

Figs 13–16 from D. Levi, *Festòs e la Civiltà minoica*, Rome 1976, Pls. LXXVIII, LXXVII, LXXXIVb, LXXXIVc.

may have been sent on to East Crete for further export. In any case, the distribution of Kamares Ware does not seem to reflect a hierarchic system within the island of Crete. The question of what was contained in the exported Kamares vessels remains uncertain until residue analysis is undertaken. The exported Kamares vases may have been attractive containers for some specific product, and they may also have been valued for their own appearance.

A significant number of Kamares vases and fragments have been found outside Crete, in Egypt and the Levant as well as in mainland Greece. This pattern is reminiscent of the distribution pattern of Corinthian pottery and suggests an early well-established export traffic to areas outside Crete. Much of the Kamares Ware from outside Crete has been found in tombs and settlements and not in palaces which would have been expected if we were to use a model of a wider range of gift exchange and diplomatic foreign relations to explain the distribution pattern. It is true that a Kamares cup has turned up in the courtyard of the palace at Tell el Dab'a (Avaris) in the Nile Delta (Walberg 1991, 117), but other find-contexts of Kamares Ware in Egypt and the Levant are not suggestive of high social rank or wealth. At Harageh, El Lisht, and Kahun, Kamares Ware was found in rather uncertain contexts which do not allow us to connect it with specific buildings, tombs and other features and to draw conclusions about its role (Kemp and Merrillees 1980; Walberg 1983, 141–143). The Kamares fragments from El Lisht come from a fill on the west side of the northern of the two pyramids. A case has been made for an association between them and the workers who constructed the pyramids (Kemp and Merrillees 1980, 4). However, the Kamares vases could also have belonged to temple personnel and specialist craftsmen involved with the royal tombs. The fill cannot be linked securely with either of the pyramids. At Harageh, some Kamares sherds were found with a block bearing the praenomen of Sesostriis II, but the context does not provide an association between the sherds and that king or with any personnel or workmen at the site (Engelbach 1923, 11). The find-contexts at Kahun are also uncertain, and the sherds cannot be safely connected with any specific area

of the settlement (Kemp and Merrillees 1980, 87). Kahun contained not only small, simple houses for workmen but also larger, more elegant houses presumably intended for priests and lay personnel (Kemp 1991, 149–160). Contexts such as Tomb 416 at Abydos (Evans 1921–1935, p. 268; Kemp and Merrillees 1980, 112, 174; Walberg 1976, 125) and Tomb 88 at Qubbet el Hawa (Edel in Kemp and Merrillees 1980, 176–177) are definitely more suggestive of middle-class rank and some wealth than of laborers or slaves. On the other hand, they are definitely non-royal and do not suggest gift exchange between Minoan palaces and Egyptian kings. The find-contexts of Kamares Ware in Egypt would be more consistent with trade, possibly organized by the Minoan palaces and carried out by merchants at Cretan harbor sites and foreign centers. Perhaps the vases ended up in tombs which appear to belong to middle class owners because the owners were merchants who imported certain products. That Kamares Ware was valued for its own sake is indicated by the fact that it is one of the few wares from the Greek area which was not only exported but also imitated abroad in other parts of the Mediterranean (Walberg 1988, 634–639).

I would like to suggest that the two palaces of Knossos and Phaistos may have monopolized the production of Kamares Ware to be used for themselves and for the export trade that it created. This would explain why so little Kamares Ware has been found in Crete outside the two palaces and their satellites. Kamares Ware thus seems to have played an important role in Minoan society and economy, but not primarily as a power tool for the elite within Crete.

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