A SANCTUARY OF HERMES AND APHRODITE IN CRETE

In September 1972 a bulldozer opening up a minor road on the southern slopes of Mt. Dhikte above the village of Kato Syme, in the area of Vamos, uncovered remains of ancient walls, pottery and numerous objects, particularly of bronze. The immediate investigation of the find by the staff of the Heraklion Museum headed by the author was followed by systematic excavation (1972-74) under the auspices of the Greek Archaeological Society and the Greek Archaeological Service. The excavation, which is still in progress, has uncovered substantial parts of an extensive sanctuary, located at a height of 1200 m above sea level, on an inclining plateau backed by precipitous mountains covered with pine and oak trees. The site is known locally as Krya Vryse, the name given to a copious, cold spring which flows right by the excavated area.

The sanctuary had a long, continuous life from the latter part of the MM period through the 1st century A.D. Its development through this long time span cannot yet be completely documented. Each new season of exploration has made it increasingly evident that the sanctuary covered a far more extensive area than had initially been suspected, and that only a small part has been excavated. Even that has not yet been dug to bedrock.

Moreover, in addition to the problems inherent in excavating an area used over such a long time, where each period is represented by a shallow fill repeatedly disturbed by subsequent building and leveling activities, difficulties are compounded at the Syme sanctuary by other factors: the cultivation of the ground in modern times, the destruction caused by the bulldozer which dug down into deep levels and disturbed a large area, and the natural steepness of the plateau which facilitated the flow of rain and spring water through the sanctuary. The water not only washed down objects and deposited them in different contexts, but may also have caused changes in the configuration of the ground.

Because of all these factors, the stratigraphy of the site is extremely disturbed and difficult to disentangle and so far no complete sequence has been found. In fact, not all the periods within the long life of the sanctuary are represented in the architectural remains that have come to light so far. However, the pottery and other objects found fill in the gaps of the architectural evidence. In spite of the relatively restricted area investigated, the quantity and quality of these finds, as well as the impressive character of the architectural remains, testify to the importance of this new sanctuary throughout its long period of existence.

Entirely by accident the first season of exploration uncovered what must have been the center of the sanctuary in the early 1st millennium B.C. The bulldozer ploughing its way up the mountain brought to light and at the same time partially destroyed a structure which proved to be an altar. The altar was of a peculiar plan consisting of two parts. The eastern part was a solidly built rough rectangle (2.70 x 2.20 m.) with a rectangular depression (0.55 x 0.73 m.) sunk in the middle to a depth of 0.50 m., which must have been a boleos used for liquid sacrifices. The altar was approached from the east by a low step built of rough, undressed stones just like the altar itself.

The whole structure had been built in a deep, burnt layer which yielded mixed pottery ranging from the LM IIIB through the Late Geometric periods, at which time the altar must have been erected. The foot of a Minoan stone table was used as building material in the northern side of the structure. The altar was built against a strong wall (1.40 m. thick) of similar construction which extends beyond the southern limit of the rectangle. The exact date of this wall has not yet been determined. It is obviously earlier than the rectangular addition and must represent an earlier form of the altar, of a type known from Gortys (Rizzo & Scrinari, 1969, 90f. fig. 175). To the east and south of the altar extended a deep, burnt layer of a particularly greasy consistency resulting from the burning of countless animals, whose bones were found all over the area. Numerous objects, particularly of bronze, had been deposited in the pyre.

These votive offerings, just as the pottery in the burnt layer under the altar, must have been mixed together during the long period when this area was in use. In addition, the

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1. Kato Syme view of the site from the west.
2. Kato Syme: the excavated area from the north.
3. The altar from the northeast.

Credits: All photographs are by the author.
Subminoan plastic vase.
1
2
Protogeometric female figurine.
3
Early Geometric bronze female figurine.
4
Late Geometric bronze ithyphallic group.
5
Late Geometric clay female figurine.
6
Fragment of bronze tripod of Cyproite type showing griffins flanking Sacred Tree.
7
Late Dummec bronze container.

Offerings characteristic of the Minoan period were clay and bronze animal figurines, fragments of wheel-made bull figurines and stone offering tables. To the Sub-minoan period belongs half of a double plastic vase in the shape of a male head, which should be assigned to the same stage of development as the janiform head from Piskokephalo in Oxford (Boardman, 1963, 105-106, no. 472, pl. 35). Many female figurines of the Protogeometric period were also found. To the Early Geometric belongs a bronze female figurine which incorporates Oriental and Minoan elements. An important find of the Late Geometric period is a group of two ithyphallic figures which can be associated typologically to a certain extent with some Iron Age groups from Asia Minor, and which is directly connected with similar ones of the 7th century from Sicily. A beardless female clay figurine belongs to the end of this period. Many fragments of a bronze tripod of Cyproite type, decorated with the repeated motif of two griffins flanking the Sacred Tree, were found scattered in the area. In spite of its connection with Cyproite tripods, certain differences suggest that it was a Crete work modelled on Cyproite prototypes. This is also indicated by many common elements and technical similarities existing between these fragments and those of another tripod of the Idanion Cave type. The latter was decorated with figures of horses, goats and a centaur and was undoubtedly made in a Cretan workshop.

The 7th century is represented by numerous examples of bronze figurines of excellent quality, images of gods or worshippers. To the Early Dummec period belongs the figurine of a man wearing a kilt and holding a four-stringed lyre, perhaps an early representation of Hermes, the inventor of the instrument. The Middle Dummec period is represented by an intact kouros, also wearing a kilt and bending his arms in a worshipping gesture. The torso of a male statuette of the same period is a work of superlative quality. The form of the head and the arrangement of the hair suggest the presence of Egyptian influences on the art of Crete in the 7th century. To the end of the Middle and to the Late Dummec periods belong respectively an archer and a small kouros, both superb products of a vigorous artistic tradition. They also prove that the well-known Berlin kapephoros (Ram Beurer) (Neugebauer, 1933, 61-62, no. 158, pl. 19) was created by the same workshop. The figure of a deity is impressive for its lively movement and the vivid expression of the face. The solid structure of the body and the sturdy form of the legs, which date it to the Late Dummec period, reveal a certain Corinthian influence on the art of Crete in the late 7th century.
Of paramount importance for the history of Cretan art and for the history of the sanctuary itself, is the long series of bronze cut-out plaques found in both this area and elsewhere in the sanctuary. The evidence suggests that they were separate offerings and not decorative attachments mounted on a larger object. Several of them represent male warshippers carrying an animal or part of it for sacrifice. Others may portray the god Hermes. Some represent male figures armed with bow and quiver, as that illustrated here. Iconographic elements common to this figure and the centaur mentioned above indicate the existence of a workshop which produced both figurines and plaques. This workshop is definitely distinct from that which produced the bronzes from Aphrodisias, a find of pieces of armor, which were divided among private collectors and the museums of Heraklion and Hamburg (Hoffmann, 1972, 1-14, pls. 1-13, 19-24, 27-38, 40). Up to now only five examples of these cut-out bronze plaques were known from 7th century Crete and they were all attributed to the Aphrodisias workshop (Hoffmann, 1972, 32-33). The recent find shows that this attribution is correct for only one plaque from Aphrodisias in the Heraklion Museum (Hoffmann, 1972, 36, fig. 6). The other four, in Oxford and Copenhagen and the Louvre, clearly belong in the Syme series (Hoffmann, 1972, pl. 40-49).

To the 7th century belong also a series of beautiful Dodecanese protomes and another of relief plaques, while many of the bronze cut-out plaques can be dated in the 6th century. The 5th century is represented by a bronze repoussé plaque showing Hermes, while from the upper levels destroyed by the bulldozer come the lower part of a clay statuette of Aphrodisias, another of Hermes, and a beautiful bronze figurine of the god wearing a short belted tunic, mantle, petasos and winged sandals, all works of the Late Hellenistic period. Numerous bronze and clay animal
figurines, miniature bronze votive shields, jewelry and other objects were also found.

The disturbance created by the bulldozer in this section of the excavation completely obliterated any traces of the layout of the sanctuary, which, however, became clear when the investigation progressed into the areas beyond its path. It then became apparent that the area to the east and south of the altar was laid out in terraces oriented southwest to northeast at an oblique line to the altar. These terraces were built of rough stone fill supported by retaining walls, which increased in height towards the south as the steepness of the plateau demanded. So far, three of these terraces have been uncovered (I-III on the plan). Their limits to the east and west have not yet been determined.

The destruction of retaining wall III near the southern limit of the excavation (particularly in trenches N, II, Σ, Τ) allowed the investigation to proceed in depth. It was then determined that the terrace fill and retaining walls, which south of the altar were covered by the burnt remains of sacrifices, had their foundations in another burnt layer resulting from sacrifices performed in an earlier period. This layer yielded pottery of the LM IIIIB-C period. It seems, then, that the terraced layout of the sanctuary must be contemporary with the earlier phase of the altar.

Furthermore, the investigation of this area of the sanctuary proved that this terraced layout existed already in the prehistoric period, although, at that time, it followed a different orientation. In trench Σ part of a retaining wall (III on the plan) was discovered built inside the LM III burnt layer in a roughly north-south direction. Therefore, the continuity in the use of the sanctuary exists not only in the cult practices employed, but also in its architectural plan.
So far, the main cult center of the LM III period has not been located. Pottery of MM IIIB and LM IA date has been found in deep levels of a partially investigated room west of the altar which may date to the LM IIIC period. A small bronze votive axe and a rectangular stepped stone table were the only objects of religious character found in this area. Since the excavation of the room has not yet been completed, it is impossible to say whether it was the center of the sanctuary in the LM IIIC period. Sherds of earlier phases of the Late Minoan period, LM IA and LM IIIB, have been found in the prehistoric burnt layer south of the altar along with numerous fragments of large wheel-made bull figurines similar to the LM IIIB-C examples from Agia Triada. One was almost a meter long and about half a meter high, to judge by the proportions of its fragments. Numerous bronze animal figurines were also found.

It is certain that the site was already an important religious center in the MM IIIB period. Under the LM IIIA period layer, a wall was discovered. Parts of two rooms have been investigated. The walls survive to a height of 0.30 m. A door, blocked at some later time, connected the two rooms. Stone tables were found on a low bench which ran along the three excavated sides of the large west room. In the northeast corner of the second room was found a wall on which was a scar (0.60 × 0.70 m); height, 0.24 m covered and paved with schist slabs. Both rooms had plaster floors. Many stone tables, two with Linear A inscriptions, and stone vessels were found in the shrines. Most of the pottery belonged to cult vases which the sanctuary was discovered. The shrine was not in a LM IIIB period.

The extent of the Minoan sanctuary is made obvious by other, isolated finds, such as two bronze figurines of idols found near the northern limits of the excavation in a much later context, doubtless washed down from the area to the north. The unexpected find of three splendid Minoan swords right on the edge of the excavated area in the east, only 0.40 m below the present surface, may also indicate that the limits of the prehistoric sanctuary in this direction have not yet been reached. Two of the swords are over a meter long and can be dated to the LM IIB phase. The third, decorated with incised designs along the blade and with a handle of ivory, may be slightly later in date. The swords were found carefully laid down with their handles towards the south, but it is not entirely certain that they were in situ.

In any case, there is no doubt that the Minoan sanctuary extended to the north of the altar. In the relatively small area dug here, which is supported by a retaining wall of the 5th century, cluster buildings representing most of the periods of the use of the sanctuary. The distinction of the two burnt layers of prehistoric and historic times, which extend northwards beyond the excavated area, is clear.

Under the prehistoric burnt layer was a wall belonging to a structure built of huge stones which seems to continue to the west and north. The fill covering this wall face produced pottery of the MM IIIB and LM IA periods, whereas the burnt layer contained, along with great quantities of animal bones, pottery of the LM IIIA phase, wheel-made bull figurines and stone tables.

On top of the eastern end of the Minoan wall lies the wall of a Late Geometric or 7th century building, which must be associated at least chronologically if not also structurally, with a 'hearth' found in this area. This hearth, formed of two rows of parallel stones and with a floor of pebbles, was found to be clear ash that extended over a large area around it. A pair of goat's horns were found near it.

Parts of two walls of another building dating to the first half of the 6th century have also been cleared. This building had a roof of tiles laid on a layer of lepido (a special type of waterproof bluish-black schist clay still used in roofing houses in Crete) supported by wooden beams. Sometime after it went out of use the foundations of the wall of another building were laid inside it.

The eastern limits of the two earlier structures were destroyed by a small double temple of the oikos type. Its western hall, measuring 2.65 × 2.85 m, is relatively well preserved, standing to a height of 2 m at the northwest corner. The entrance was on the south side. Along its northern wall ran a bench. The strong foundations of a later building lie on top of the south wall of this part of the temple and also on its western half, which has not yet been dug.

An inscription of the 2nd century B.C. used as building material in the eastern wall of the temple and a 20th-century coin of Lyttos found under floor level, give a terminus post quem for the dating of this structure. The latest finds in this area, mainly lamps, belong to the 3rd century A.D. Inside the temple were found a large number of clay figurines of Hermes, clay votive herms, figurines of Eras and Psyche, many clay female figurines wearing chiton and mantle, and part of a stone statue of Aphrodite. Among these objects, most of which were found together in front of the bench, a stone offering table was also included, while two broken oinochoai had been used as building stones in the walls of the temple.

The most important find in the area of the temple, found near the surface, was an inscription of the 3rd century A.D. with a dedication to Hermes Dendritis (i.e. Hermes of the Trees).

EMPA ΔΕΛΣΙΤΑ (σι) ΝΙΚΑΝΩΡ
ΘΕΟΜΑΝΤΟΤ ΤΟΝ ΝΑΟΝ
The cult of Hermes in Classical and later

**Suggested Reading**

times at the Kata Syme sanctuary is proven beyond doubt by the evidence of an inscribed shard and the bronze plaque and figurines mentioned above (see pages 7, 11), whereas the parallel cult of Aphrodite is attested by a graffito on a Late Hellenistic hydria which reads: ΑΠοροχώρα, perhaps ΑΠοροχώρα, and many representations of the goddess ranging from Dedalic examples to others of later periods.

However, the inscription which mentions specifically the worship of Hermes Dendrites is important evidence for the identification of a much earlier representation of the god which would otherwise be problematic. It occurs on a rectangular plaque which dates to the 7th century and was found near the 'hearth' in the northern area of the excavation. It represents a combination of repoussé and incised techniques a beardless man, dressed in a short belted tunic, sitting on the branch of a tree. His left arm is wrapped around the trunk and his right hand grasps one of the branches. The close and dynamic interconnection of man and tree and the stance of the figure staring full-face at the spectator suggest to themselves the representation of a demonic being, but the epigraphical evidence for the worship of Hermes in his character as Nature God confirms this identification. Further support can be found in a 6th century bronze plaque found near the 'hearth', where the god is represented bearded and wearing his characteristic winged sandals, but also crowned with small branches that seem to spring out of his hair.

The iconographical elements connected with the representation of Hermes, which became standard in the 6th century, had not yet been canonized in the 7th, but the combination of epigraphical and archaeological evidence indicates that the worship of the god was established at the Syme sanctuary in this period and probably even earlier, as suggested by the find of a bronze herald's staff of unique type found in levels of the later Geometric and early Orientalizing period. At the same time, the joint worship of Hermes and Aphrodite, deities whose basic character is closely connected with nature and fertility, suggests that their succession of the Minoan Goddess and her consort did not modify in any significant way the essential elements of the cult at Syme.

The importance of this religious center throughout Crete is attested by graffiti on tiles and shrubs, mainly of the Hellenistic period, which mention the names of pious citizens from various towns, such as Lyttos, Kooassos, Tylos, Hierapetra [modern Hierapetra] and Arkades (modern Apharesi), who visited and worshipped at the site. There is good reason, then, to connect the sanctuary with the Hieron Oros [Sacred Mountain] mentioned by Polygennet (Geography, III 17, 3) who locates it between Knossos [modern Knossos] and Hierapetra on the southern shore of the island.

It is not possible to determine whether the sanctuary belonged to any of the known cities in the area, such as Vamos. Surface sherd of Minoan and later periods indicate the existence of a settlement on a hill situated 6 km south of the sanctuary, near the village of Kata Syme, in a ravine which begins just east of the excavation and runs all the way to the sea.

In spite of the limited extent of the investigation, it is clear that the Kata Syme sanctuary is so far unique not only in Crete, but throughout Greece as well. As a whole it does not conform to any of the known Greek religious centers. At present the uninterrupted continuity of worship at the site from the MM III B period through the 3rd century A.D. is certain. Hermes and Aphrodite in their character as nature and fertility deities were worshipped from very early historic times through the Roman period. These same basic qualities can be recognized in the goddess and her consort worshipped in the Minoan period. The cult practices employed, i.e. the burning of sacrificial animals and depositing of votive offerings in the pyre and the similarity of certain types of offerings, such as the bronze and clay animal figurines, are attested from the LM III B period through the 6th century B.C., while the use of intact stone tables as ritual objects and broken ones as building material continued into a very late period. The site continuity exists in the architectural layout of the sanctuary. It is hoped that further excavations at this important site will supply the stratigraphical continuity which is lacking so far.