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# BREAKING WITH TRADITION? THE ADOPTION OF THE WHEEL-THROWING TECHNIQUE AT PROTOPALATIAL PHAISTOS: COMBINING MACROSCOPIC ANALYSIS, EXPERIMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION\*

ILARIA CALOI

**Riassunto.** Negli ultimi anni sono stati condotti numerosi studi sulla tecnologia ceramica a Creta, grazie ai quali gli studiosi sono attualmente d'accordo nel datare l'introduzione del tornio da vasaio al M(edio) M(inoico) IB (circa 1900 a.C.), corrispondente all'emergere dei Primi Palazzi sull'isola. Gli studi più recenti sulle ceramiche del Medio Bronzo provenienti da siti della Creta settentrionale e orientale hanno rivelato che dall'introduzione del tornio nel MM IB, la tecnica conosciuta come *wheel-fashioning*, ossia una combinazione tra lavoro manuale e uso del tornio, fosse l'unica tecnica ceramica in uso a Creta fino al Tardo Bronzo. Al contrario, nella parte meridionale di Creta e in particolare nel sito palaziale di Festòs, recenti studi hanno dimostrato che la *wheel-fashioning technique* non era l'unica tecnica in uso perché, a partire dal MM IIA (circa 1800 a.C.), corrispondente al momento della monumentalizzazione del Palazzo, fu adottata per la prima volta la tecnica del *wheel-throwing*, la quale prevede l'uso esclusivo del tornio dall'inizio del processo di lavorazione del vaso. In questo articolo, per prima cosa presento brevemente le tecniche di lavorazione attestate a Festòs nelle prime fasi del periodo Protopalaziale (i.e. MM IB-MM IIA), e in seguito mi concentro sulle classi ceramiche festive del MM IIA che sembrano essere fabbricate con la *wheel-throwing technique*, confrontandole con quelle prodotte con la tecnica del *wheel-fashioning*. Più specificamente, per la classe delle *conical cups* (i.e. vasetti acromi senza anse), i più comuni vasi potori dell'Età del Bronzo attestati a Festòs sin dal III millennio a.C., si è proceduto al confronto fra esemplari del MM IIA e riproduzioni sperimentali eseguite da un vasaio professionista. Usando l'analisi macroscopica in combinazione con l'archeologia sperimentale e le necessarie informazioni contestuali, tenterò quindi di spiegare perché la tecnica del *wheel-throwing* è quasi esclusivamente attestata a Festòs e in siti che condividono la sua tradizione ceramica, come Kommòs e Haghia Triada. Poiché nel MM IIA il principale edificio palaziale di Festòs – l'Edificio Sud-occidentale – ha subito un'importante ristrutturazione/monumentalizzazione, la mia proposta è che nuovi gruppi siano arrivati a Festòs in questa fase, introducendo una nuova tecnica ceramica in grado di "rompere" la lunga tradizione ceramica del sito e dell'isola. Inoltre, si propone che le *conical cups* del MM IIA di Festòs venissero prodotte in grandi quantità e in forma standardizzata per essere utilizzate nel corso dei *feasts* organizzati in occasione della ristrutturazione dell'edificio principale del Palazzo e della monumentalizzazione dell'intero sito.

**Περίληψη.** Τα τελευταία χρόνια πραγματοποιήθηκαν πολυάριθμες μελέτες για την τεχνολογία της κεραμικής στην Κρήτη, χάρη στις οποίες οι ερευνητές συμφωνούν τώρα στη χρονολόγηση του κεραμικού τροχού στη Μέση Μινωική IB (1900 π.Χ. περίπου), που αντιστοιχεί στην ανέγερση των Πρώτων Ανακτόρων στο νησί. Οι πιο πρόσφατες μελέτες για την κεραμική της Μέσης Χαλκής που προέρχεται από χώρους της βόρειας και της ανατολικής Κρήτης αποκάλυψαν ότι η εισαγωγή του τροχού τη MM IB περίοδο, η τεχνική που είναι γνωστή ως *wheel-fashioning*, δηλαδή μια σύνθεση ανάμεσα σε χειρωνακτική εργασία και χρήση του τροχού, ήταν η μόνη κεραμική τεχνική σε χρήση στην Κρήτη μέχρι την Ύστερη Χαλκή. Αντίθετα, στο νότιο τμήμα της Κρήτης και ιδιαίτερα στο ανακτορικό χώρο της Φαιστού, πρόσφατες μελέτες απέδειξαν ότι η *wheel-fashioning technique* δεν ήταν η μοναδική σε χρήση γιατί, ξεκινώντας από τη MM IIA (1800 π.Χ. περίπου) που αντιστοιχεί στη στιγμή μνημειοποίησης του Ανακτόρου, υιοθετήθηκε για πρώτη φορά η τεχνική του *wheel-throwing*, η οποία κάνει αποκλειστικά χρήση του τροχού από την αρχή της διαδικασίας επεξεργασίας του αγγείου. Σε αυτό το άρθρο, θα παρουσιάσω αρχικά εν συντομία τις τεχνικές επεξεργασίας που πιστοποιούνται στη Φαιστό κατά τις πρώτες φάσεις της Πρωτοανακτορικής περιόδου (MM IB-MM IIA), και στη συνέχεια θα επικεντρωθώ στις MM IIA κατηγορίες της κεραμικής της Φαιστού, που φαίνεται να έχουν παραχθεί με τη χρήση της *wheel-throwing technique*, συγκρίνοντάς τις με εκείνες που έχουν παραχθεί με την τεχνική *wheel-fashioning*. Συγκεκριμένα, για την κατηγορία των *conical cups* (μικρά άχρωμα και άωτα αγγεία), το πιο σύννηθες κύπελλο πόσης της Εποχής του Χαλκού που πιστοποιείται στη Φαιστό ήδη από την 3<sup>η</sup> χιλιετία π.Χ., προχωρήσαμε στη σύγκριση ανάμεσα σε δείγματα της MM IIA και πειραματικές αναπαραγωγές ενός επαγγελματία αγγειοπλάστη. Χρησιμοποιώντας τη μακροσκοπική ανάλυση μαζί με την πειραματική αρχαιολογία και τις αναγκαίες πληροφορίες για τα συγκεκριμένα, θα προσπαθήσω λοιπόν να εξηγήσω γιατί η τεχνική *wheel-throwing* πιστοποιείται σχεδόν αποκλειστικά στη Φαιστό και σε χώρους που ακολουθούν την κεραμική παράδοσή της, όπως ο Κομμός και η Αγία Τριάδα. Δεδομένου ότι κατά τη MM IIA περίοδο το κύριο ανακτορικό κτήριο της Φαιστού – το Νοτιοδυτικό Κτήριο – υπέστη σημαντική ανακατασκευή/μνημειοποίηση, η πρότασή μου είναι ότι έφτασαν στη Φαιστό καινούριες ομάδες τότε, φέρνοντας μια νέα κεραμική τεχνική ικανή να «σπάσει» τη μακρόχρονη κεραμική παράδοση του συγκεκριμένου

\* The earliest version of this paper was first presented at the *Craft and People* Conference held at the British Museum, London in 2012, and was then enriched with new data coming from recent study on Protopalatial pottery from Phaistos and new experimental archaeology conducted in 2018 and 2019. I would like to thank Filippo Carinci for the great opportunity he gave me to study the Protopalatial

pottery from Phaistos. I am grateful to Simona Todaro for having discussed with me many aspects of this paper and to Sofia Antonello for helping me with pictures and figures. My paper has greatly improved because of the insightful comments of the two anonymous referees, whom I want to thank. A special thank to Don Evely for editing the paper.

χώρου και του νησιού. Προτείνεται, επίσης, η άποψη ότι τα *conical cups* της MM IIA της Φαιστού παράγονταν σε μεγάλες ποσότητες και σε τυποποιημένη μορφή για να χρησιμοποιηθούν ως αγγεία για τις μερίδες κατά τη διάρκεια των *work-feasts* που οργανώνονταν με την ευκαιρία της ανακατασκευής του κυρίου κτηρίου του Ανακτόρου και της μνημειοποίησης του χώρου στο σύνολό του.

**Abstract.** In recent years, several studies have been undertaken on ceramic technology and there is now a general agreement among scholar about the introduction of the potter's wheel in Minoan Crete in (M)iddle (M)inoan IB (1900 BC ca.), corresponding to the emergence of the First Palaces on the island. Most recent studies on ceramic technology of MM pottery from sites of northern and eastern Crete have revealed that since the introduction of the potter's wheel in MM IB, the wheel-fashioning technique (a combination of hand-building and wheel) was the only forming technique used in Crete until the Late Bronze Age. On the contrary, in southern Crete and especially at the palatial site of Phaistos, recent studies have shown that the wheel-fashioning technique was not the only technique in use because in MM IIA (18th cent. BC), at the time of monumentalisation of the palatial site, the wheel-throwing technique was first adopted. In this paper, first I briefly present the forming techniques attested at Phaistos in the first phases of the Protopalatial period, then, I focus on the MM IIA Phaistian classes of vases which appear to be manufactured through the wheel-throwing technique, comparing them with contemporary wheel-fashioned vases. More specifically, for the class of plain handleless cups, the most common drinking cup at Bronze Age Phaistos since Prepalatial times, I compare the MM IIA examples with experimental reproductions carried out by a professional potter. Finally, using macroscopic analysis in combination with experimental archaeology and requisite contextual information, I attempt to explain why the wheel-throwing technique is almost exclusively attested at Phaistos and in sites sharing its ceramic tradition, like Kommos and Ayia Triada. Since in the MM IIA phase the main palatial building of Phaistos (*i.e.* the South-western Building) went through an important renovation, I argue that new groups arrived at Phaistos in MM IIA, introducing a new forming technique that was able to break with the long-lasting ceramic tradition of the site – and of the island. Moreover, it will be argued that in MM IIA plain handleless cups were mass-produced on the potter's wheel in order to be used in the context of communal feasts during the renovation of the main palatial building and the monumentalization of the entire site.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the last twenty years, several studies have been undertaken on ceramic technology: there now is a general agreement among scholars on the introduction of the potter's wheel in Minoan Crete in Middle Minoan (MM) IB, *i.e.* around 1900 BC<sup>1</sup>. The MM IB phase corresponds to the beginning of the Protopalatial period (19th-18th cent. BC), when occurred the emergence of the First Palaces on the island. The Protopalatial period is usually subdivided into MM IB, MM IIA and MM IIB.

The introduction of the potter's wheel in Crete did not signal a break with the ceramic tradition of the previous Prepalatial period, as most pots went on being produced through the established combination of the hand-building and the wheel. Following V. Roux and M.-A. Courty, in this combination, which they defined as the wheel-fashioning technique<sup>2</sup>, the vase is wheel-made only in a second stage of the manufacturing process, when the roughout of the body has already been formed through hand-building, especially from coiling. This implies that rotative kinetic energy (RKE) is not used in the manufacturing process from the very start of each vessel.

Most recent studies on ceramic technology of Protopalatial pottery from sites of northern and eastern Crete (*i.e.* Knossos, Malia, Myrtos Pyrgos and Palaikastro) have argued that after the introduction of the potter's wheel in MM IB, the wheel-fashioning technique was the only forming technique employed on the island during the Protopalatial period and probably also later in the Neopalatial period<sup>3</sup>. A discordant voice is, however, represented by Ina Berg, whose recent work on Protopalatial pottery from Knossos has disclosed that there are some small vases dating from MM IB to MM IIB, which, on being examined by X-radiography, seem produced through the wheel-throwing technique<sup>4</sup>. This would mean that at Protopalatial Knossos both wheel-fashioned and wheel-thrown vases co-existed<sup>5</sup>.

In southern Crete, recent studies have also shown that the wheel-fashioning technique was not the only technique in use in the Protopalatial period. More specifically, at Phaistos, closed ceramic deposits dating to MM IIA have provided vases that are manufactured by different forming techniques: most of them are made in a combination of hand-building and the wheel, some classes of vases are produced through the wheel-throwing technique, and a few cups, especially in crude ware, are still entirely handmade<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> EVELY 2000; KNAPPETT 1999; 2004; SPEZIALE 1999; CALOI 2011.

<sup>2</sup> ROUX-COURTY 1998, 748. On the different methods of adopting the wheel-fashioning technique, see *ibid.*; KNAPPETT 2004, 257-265; CHOLEVA 2012, 364-366; JEFFRA 2013.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*; KNAPPETT 2016.

<sup>4</sup> BERG 2009; 2011a.

<sup>5</sup> *Ead.* 2011b; see also *Ead.* 2015.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the handleless conical cups found in the MM IIA closed deposit from the filled-in platform of Room IL in the South-western Building of Phaistos in CALOI 2016a, 23-24, fig. 2a (hand-made), fig. 2b-e (finished on the wheel), fig. 3a-d (wheel-fashioned), fig. 4a-d (wheel-thrown). See also *Ead.* 2012, 48, 51, fig. 9.



This means that different forming techniques co-existed at Phaistos at least in the MM IIA phase. A similar pattern can be observed also at Kommos, where deposits dating to MM II present some vases that are wheel-thrown and other wheel-fashioned<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, Aleydis Van de Moortel has argued from macroscopic observations that wheel-throwing was introduced at Kommos in the MM IB phase and became more widespread in the MM IIA and MM IIB phases<sup>8</sup>.

In the next pages, first I briefly present the forming techniques attested at Phaistos in the first phases of the Protopalatial period. Then, I focus on the MM IIA Phaistian classes of vases which appear to be manufactured through the wheel-throwing technique, comparing them with contemporary wheel-fashioned vases. More specifically, for the class of plain handleless cups, the most common drinking cup at Bronze Age Phaistos since Prepalatial times, I compare the MM IIA examples with experimental reproductions. In so doing, I used a combined approach which integrates the macroscopic examination of locally-made plain handleless cups with a detailed study of the traces identified on these vessels and the testing of their technological properties by experimental reproductions carried out by a professional potter, Vassilis Politakis<sup>9</sup>. The choice of reproducing plain handleless conical cups is motivated by the fact that at MM IIA Phaistos these cups are standardised and manufactured in a fast and quick way without being finished and/or smoothed. Despite the difficulties inherent in identifying surface features corresponding to a specific primary forming technique, the absence of any final treatment to smooth the surfaces of these plain handleless conical cups helps somewhat in identifying the primary manufacturing technique used to produce them. Finally, I attempt to explain why the wheel-throwing technique is almost exclusively attested at Phaistos and in sites sharing its ceramic tradition, like Kommos and Ayia Triada. Since in the MM IIA phase the main palatial building of Phaistos (*i.e.* the South-western Building) went through an important renovation<sup>10</sup>, I hold that new groups arrived at Phaistos in MM IIA, introducing a new forming technique that was able to break with the long-lasting ceramic tradition of the site – and of the island. The new approach was in competition with those established by local potters: new wares emerged that contrasted with the well-known Kamares Ware. Moreover, it will be argued that in MM IIA plain handleless cups were produced *en masse* on the potter's wheel, to be used in the context of communal feasts during the renovation of the main palatial building and the monumentalization of the entire site<sup>11</sup>.

## 2. THE FORMING TECHNIQUES ATTESTED AT PHAISTOS IN THE FIRST PHASES OF THE PROTOPALATIAL PERIOD (MM IB-MM IIA)

The Minoan site of Phaistos, first excavated in 1900 by Luigi Pernier, who brought to light the Second Palace of Phaistos<sup>12</sup>, was later excavated from 1950 to 1966 by Doro Levi. The latter excavated the First Palace (Protopalatial) and the contemporary quarters of the town (Fig. 1)<sup>13</sup>. Recent studies have demonstrated that Phaistos is not only a consumption center, but also a producing one: it is the only palatial site on Crete of this date that has provided a potters' quarter (known as Artisans' Quarter) including a kiln and a dump area, the *Strada Nord*, located to the W of the Middle West Court (*Piazzale I*) of the Palace and continuously in use from the Prepalatial through the Protopalatial period<sup>14</sup>. Together with this potters' quarter, the Italian-Greek survey has also revealed the possible existence of a production area at only 800 m to the W of the Palace<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> VAN DE MOORTELT 2006, 266-269.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 328. She states that few local vases, especially conical bowls, dating to MM IB could have been wheel-thrown.

<sup>9</sup> Within a new, major programme started in 2018 with Simona Todaro on technological study of Minoan pottery of Phaistos in a long-term perspective, from the Neolithic to the end of the Middle Bronze Age, I started a new project which combines macroscopic analysis of Phaistian Protopalatial pottery and experimental reproduction of Protopalatial ceramic material. This two-year project is entitled *La tecnologia ceramica a Festòs (Creta) nel Medio Minoico IIA (1800-1750 a.c.): l'introduzione della wheel-throwing technique e le sue implicazioni socio-politiche* and is financed by the Ca' Foscari University of Venice (*Fondi Primo Inseidamento* 2018). On the

experimental work by V. Politakis in his laboratory, see <http://www.spiritofgreece.gr/>.

<sup>10</sup> CARINCI 2011; CALOI 2012.

<sup>11</sup> On the mass production of handleless conical cups at Phaistos, see TODARO-CALOI forthcoming. The paper entitled «Time for plain speaking: thinking through plain handleless cups in Minoan Crete» was presented at the 2019 AIA Meeting held in San Diego (California) in January 2019. On communal feasts at Protopalatial Phaistos, see also: CALOI 2012, 2017 and 2019.

<sup>12</sup> PERNIER 1935; PERNIER-BANTI 1951.

<sup>13</sup> LEVI 1976; see also LEVI-CARINCI 1988.

<sup>14</sup> TODARO 2009.

<sup>15</sup> *Ead.* 2015.

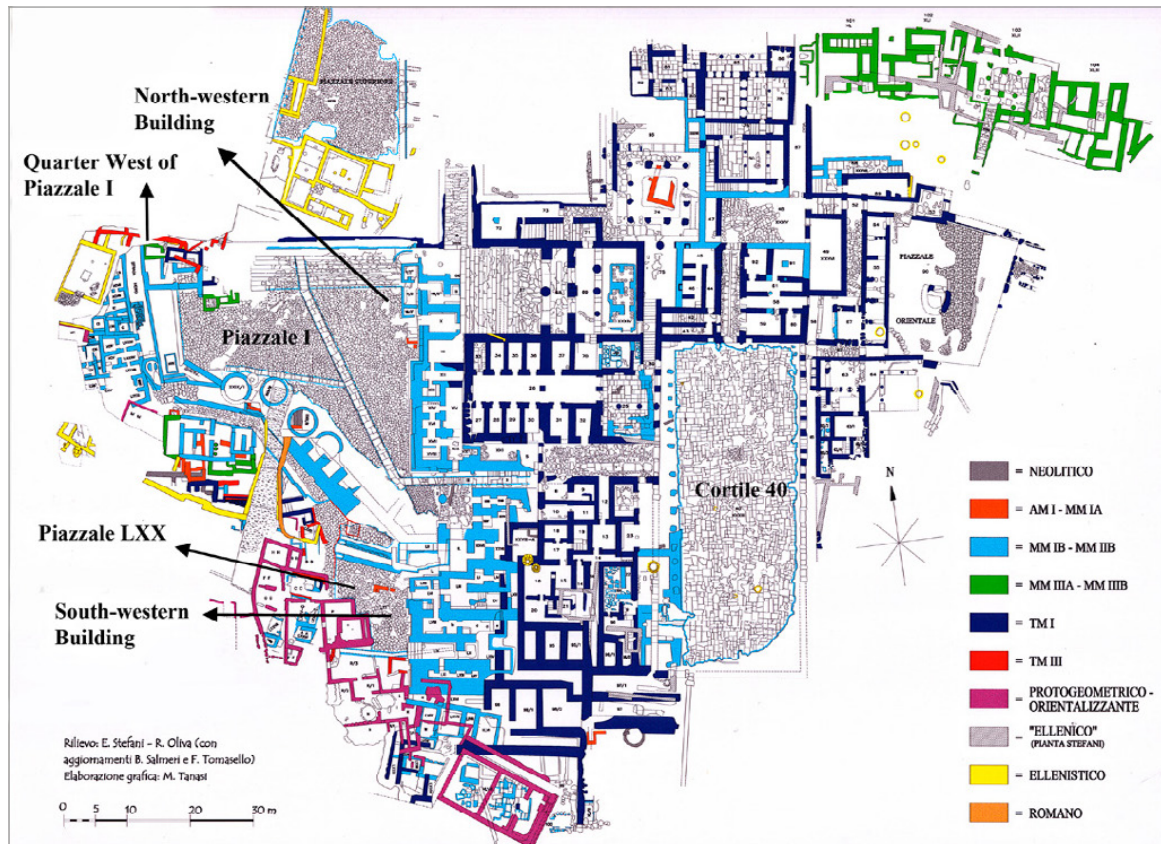


Fig. 1. Phaistos. The plan of the Palace with indications of its main courts (*piazzali*) and of its main Protopalatial buildings and quarters (revision by A., © Archivio disegni SAIA; NIG 7779.).

My recent study of the stratigraphical/contextual data and MM IB-MM II ceramics retrieved from two houses situated in the Quarter W of the Middle West Court (*Piazzale I*) of the Palace (Figs. 1-2) has been my starting point for a new definition of the ceramic sequence of Protopalatial Phaistos. This work has allowed me to identify a good sequence of three successive depositional events with homogeneous ceramic deposits, which have been dated respectively to MM IB (with an Early MM IB sub-phase), MM IIA and MM IIB<sup>16</sup>. The visual inspection of the finished products retrieved from each of these deposits enabled me to recognize strong changes in manufacturing techniques at Phaistos especially from MM IB to MM IIA<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, in the last years I have also focused on pottery from two MM IIA homogeneous deposits retrieved from the South-western Building of the Phaistos Palace (Figs. 1-2), *i.e.* the filled-in platform deposit of Room IL and the dump of the *Bastione II* wall, which marks the northern limit of the Lower West Court (*Piazzale LXX*)<sup>18</sup>. This study helped me in identifying specific classes of pottery which appear to be produced through the wheel-throwing technique (see *infra*, 3).

At the beginning of the Protopalatial period, in MM IB, the potter's wheel was introduced to Phaistos, as well as in the rest of the island. The traces left from these earliest wheels on the MM IB vases from Phaistos consist of irregular rillings and undulations, which are likely due to the adoption of that form that could be termed the so-called primitive wheel (*i.e.* pivoted turntable)<sup>19</sup>.

The hallmark of the Protopalatial period is the Kamares Ware: it is decorated in polychrome on a black-slipped surface, and well represented by different kinds of drinking pots (carinated, cylindrical and straight-sided cups) and pouring vessels (mostly spouted jars and jugs). At MM IB Phaistos, most Kamares vases were produced through the use of the potter's wheel, which was however utilized in two different ways. It was used to finish handmade products, especially small vases, like drinking pots and small pouring

<sup>16</sup> For the first definition of a MM IB-MM IIA sequence at Phaistos, see CALOI 2009; see also *Ead.* 2013, 25-49.

<sup>17</sup> See *Ead.* 2011.

<sup>18</sup> The publication of these two deposits is in preparation: «Reno-

vating the First Palace of Phaistos during the Middle Minoan IIA phase (18<sup>th</sup> cent. BC). Combining architectural and ceramic phases». Their preliminary presentation is in CALOI 2012 and 2016a-b.

<sup>19</sup> *Ead.* 2011, 90.