The Final Neolithic-Early Bronze Age transition
in Phaistos, Crete:
an investigation of continuity and change
in ceramic manufacture

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ABSTRACT

The Final Neolithic and Early Bronze Age periods in Crete are considered as times of transformation in settlement pattern, of the emergence of complex architecture and related innovative material culture, which presage the social changes of later phases. The change in ceramic repertoire has been used to argue for a technological and cultural ‘revolution’ at the beginning of the Bronze Age, perhaps even of the influx of new population. The site of Phaistos in Southern Crete offers great potential for examining the Final Neolithic-Early Bronze Age transition in Crete and to investigate the degree of continuity and change, on account of the completeness of its stratigraphy, as well as the abundance of the ceramic material.

This study critically examines the production technology of ceramics during the Final Neolithic and Early Minoan I at Phaistos, addressing issues of technological change in this period of transition and discussing how the reconstruction of ceramic manufacture can be related to the changes occurring over time at the site. The investigation of technological variation within the ceramic assemblages is performed by integrating macroscopic observation and an integrated analytical programme involving thin section petrography, scanning electron microscopy, Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy and X-ray diffractometry, in order to reconstruct technological choices on raw material choice and manipulation, surface treatment and firing practice. This is combined with the information available on forming techniques and shape. The chaîne opératoire interpretative framework is adopted as a means to reconstruct the operational sequence of pottery manufacture, and to embed such an understanding within the social context of the communities of the Mesara Plain.

By examining the significance of technological choices in pottery making within the context of Phaistos, the study demonstrates a complex picture of continuity and change over the period of study, which belies recent conjecture of a single-phase transformation at the beginning of the Early Bronze Age. Furthermore, it suggests that in some of the phases considered changes in the organisation and practice of pottery production can be related to changes in consumption at this special site, which saw an array of activities before construction of the later court-centred building.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................ I  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .......................................................................................................... III  
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ..................................................................................................... IX  
LIST OF FIGURES ................................................................................................................ XI  
LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................................. XX  

CHAPTER 1  INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................................... 1  

CHAPTER 2  THE FINAL NEOLITHIC – EARLY BRONZE AGE TRANSITION IN CRETE ................................................................................................................................. 7  
2.2. INTERPRETATION OF THE FN-EM TRANSITION OVER TIME .............................................. 15  
2.2.1 Population dynamics, migration and social change at the beginning of the Bronze Age in Crete: recent discoveries and interpretations ................................................................. 17  
2.2.2 A revolution in ceramic technology? ................................................................................ 27  
2.3. THE NEOLITHIC–EARLY BRONZE AGE TRANSITION IN THE AEGEAN ................................. 31  
2.4. THE FN-EM I TRANSITION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PHAISTOS: FINAL REMARKS ... 41  

CHAPTER 3  POTTERY TECHNOLOGY OF BRONZE AGE CRETE .............................................. 45  
3.1. A PLACE FOR MINOAN POTTERY IN THE ‘HISTORY OF CERAMIC TECHNOLOGY’. .... 45  
3.2. LOOKING BEYOND THE PALACE: UNEARTHING PREPALATIAL POTTERY TECHNOLOGY ............................................................................................................................ 49  
3.3. POTTERY TECHNOLOGY AS A MEANS OF INVESTIGATING POLITICO-ECONOMIC SYSTEMS ....................................................................................................................... 51  
3.4. BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN SOCIETY AND CERAMICS: THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGICAL STUDIES IN UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL PROCESSES ........................................... 59  
3.5. CRETE AND BEYOND: A GLANCE TO RECENT TECHNOLOGICAL STUDIES ON CERAMICS IN THE AEGEAN AREA ...................................................................................... 61  

CHAPTER 4  RECONSTRUCTING AND UNDERSTANDING MATERIAL CULTURE CHANGES: METHODS OF INVESTIGATION ................................................................. 67  
4.1. OBJECT, TECHNOLOGY AND PEOPLE: DIVERGENT PATHS IN INTERPRETING MATERIAL CULTURE VARIABILITY OVER TIME ............................................................. 67
6.3. PRE-FIRING SURFACE TREATMENTS ................................................................. 165
  6.3.1 Techniques involving the use of tools only: scraping, scoring, wiping, smoothing,
burnishing, incising, impressing. ............................................................................. 166
  6.3.2 Tools and raw materials: granulation, slipping, painting, washing. .......... 167
6.4. FIRING PROCEDURES ..................................................................................... 169
  6.4.1 Firing temperatures and gradients. ............................................................... 171
  6.4.2 Firing structure .......................................................................................... 173
6.5. POST-FIRING SURFACE TREATMENTS ......................................................... 180
  6.5.1 Surface treatments of FN III-EM IB ceramics at Phaistos: concluding remarks.
..................................................................................................................................... 180
6.6. FN-EM I POTTERY MANUFACTURE AT PHAISTOS: A TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION?
..................................................................................................................................... 184

CHAPTER 7 RECONSTRUCTING THE CHAÎNE OPÉRATOIRE: FROM
TECHNOLOGICAL CHOICES TO OBJECTS, TO PEOPLE ................................... 187
  7.1. RECONSTRUCTING CHAÎNES OPÉRATOIRES OVER TIME ....................... 188
   7.1.1 PHASE I ....................................................................................................... 189
   7.1.2 PHASE II ..................................................................................................... 193
   7.1.3 PHASE III ................................................................................................... 201
   7.1.4 PHASE IV ................................................................................................... 209
  7.2. CERAMIC PRODUCTION IN THE CONTEXT OF PHAISTOS IN THE FN-EM I PHASES ... 219
   7.2.1 PHASE I ....................................................................................................... 221
   7.2.2 PHASE II ..................................................................................................... 222
   7.2.3 PHASE III ................................................................................................... 223
   7.2.4 PHASE IV ................................................................................................... 225
  7.3. CERAMIC TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE AND CONTINUITIES IN TIMES OF TRANSITION:
       THE FN-EM I FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF PHAISTOS................................. 231

CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION ..................................................................................... 237
  8.1. TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE IN CERAMIC MANUFACTURE IN THE FINAL NEOLITHIC-
        EARLY BRONZE AGE TRANSITION .................................................................. 237
  8.2. CERAMIC PRODUCTION IN CONTEXT: PHAISTOS AND CRETE IN THE FN-EM I
        TRANSITION ....................................................................................................... 239
  8.3. RECONSTRUCTING TECHNOLOGY, RECONSTRUCTING SOCIETIES: RECONSIDERING
        THE METHODS OF ANALYSIS ......................................................................... 243
  8.4. ACHIEVEMENTS AND FUTURE RESEARCH PROSPECTS ......................... 245

BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................................................................ 249
Appendix I Ware classification, list of samples and sample pictures ......................... 269
Appendix II Macroscopic Observations ........................................................................ 389
  a. Surface treatment ..................................................................................................... 389
  b. Colour change in section as an indicator of firing procedures ................................. 398
  c. Fashioning technique .............................................................................................. 410
Appendix III Petrographic examination ....................................................................... 415
Appendix IV SEM examination of the ceramics ............................................................ 465
  a. Technical details ...................................................................................................... 465
  b. Firing strategies and body raw material choices ..................................................... 465
  c. Surface treatment ................................................................................................... 486
Appendix V FTIR analysis of the ceramics ..................................................................... 501
  a. Technical details ...................................................................................................... 501
  b. Results .................................................................................................................... 501
  c. Firing procedure estimations. .................................................................................. 507
Appendix VI XRD analysis of the ceramics ................................................................. 515
  a. Technical details ...................................................................................................... 515
  b. Results .................................................................................................................... 515