Constructing a Region: the Contested Landscapes of Prepalatial Mesara

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Introduction

This paper, dealing with just one area of Crete during a single period, may at first sight seem out of place in a volume dedicated to the Emergence of Civilisation (Renfrew 1972), a work whose legacy should surely be its broad scope. However, one of the cornerstones of the Emergence is Renfrew’s fruitful comparison of the contrasting nature and pace of cultural change in north and south Greece, and within the latter, in regions such as Messenia, Crete and the Cyclades. In this respect, the ‘Emergence’ combines an emphasis on the recognition and interpretation of general trends in the archaeological record, and a focus on the region as a basic unit of analysis.

Indeed, the region has been considered the analytic unit par excellence in archaeological investigations, offering a great potential for the reconstruction of past societies (Cherry 1983; Kardulias 1994). However, current definitions of region very often rely on criteria which overlook the historical context within which regional pattern develops. In consequence, there is confusion concerning the ways in which local trajectories can be seen to bear upon wider scales of interaction. This inadequate integration is detrimental to the interpretative potential of regional approaches and downplays the importance of small-scale, local patterns. It is a main argument of this paper that the way regions are defined within archaeological studies has great repercussions for the understanding and explanation of social change, in that local cultural trajectories play an integral part in the creation and the maintenance of wider processes. Therefore, our interpretations would benefit from highlighting the dialectic relationship that exists between local and broader patterns.

In the context of the EBA Aegean, the Mesara in south-central Crete has been considered one of the most clearly defined regions that archaeological analysis has at its disposal by virtue of the restricted occurrence of characteristic types of archaeological artefacts (e.g., tholos tombs) within a distinct topography. Such
localized distribution has been interpreted as a sign of pronounced cultural homogeneity and also as a reflection of common social structures and processes (Branigan 1970; 1991; Manning 1994; Sbonias 1999a). This discussion will concentrate first on the criteria by which the Mesara has been defined as the 'ultimate' region, before proceeding to evaluate whether such a picture of homogeneity and regional integration during the prepalatial period is accurate. It is argued that the patterns and motives of regionalism were more diverse and dynamic than the seemingly uniform spread of archaeological artefacts in the landscape might suggest. By re-addressing the regional character of the Prepalatial Mesara, it will be demonstrated that region would be a more illuminating unit of analysis if defined in ways that allow us a successful integration of small and large scales. The careful consideration of short-term processes and the importance of historical context in defining and understanding regional pattern are instrumental to such an attempt.

Regional Analysis

Most commonly the criteria for defining analytic regions depend upon modern geographical divisions which have not always been pertinent to the range of historical periods that we study. Natural features may appear to demarcate space, but they do not have inherent delimiting properties. Boundaries and borders, even though making use of natural features, are explicitly culturally constructed (Donnan and Wilson 2001). Their function as delimiting devices can differ not only diachronically, from one historical period to another, but also synchronically, according to different circumstances. By selecting analytic regions merely on geographical grounds, we risk studying a specific natural topography as though it represents a distinct socio-political unit. Undoubtedly the physical landscape has an impact on the relations that people develop by allowing certain kinds of action and interaction and inhibiting others, but explicitly historical behaviour like regionalism cannot be dismissed as merely the product of geographical propinquity.

Within such rather uncritically accepted frameworks of analysis, the time- and place-specific historical conditions that affect the creation and expression of regionalism are underestimated. We are faced with timeless natural environments, the limits and capacities of which remain static while the human communities that inhabit them develop continuously varying cultures (Ingold 2000: 172–88). Through such approaches, change is rendered rather problematic. If human communities always encounter unchanged possibilities and limitations afforded by their local environments, how do we explain the very diverse forms that responses to these problems have taken through time?

Geography, however, constitutes only one parameter in the definition of archaeological regions. The distribution of similar types of cultural material is to
some extent more important in underlining the validity of a distinct topographic area as a unit of archaeological analysis. The existence of material of broadly similar date in a clearly bounded environment is generally considered a sufficient indication of discrete social interactions within the demarcated area. This practice is particularly problematic in the case of material derived from surface surveys. Although the data used to assign sites to particular periods are crude and do not allow great chronological precision, sites plotted on a distribution map for a given period tend to be treated as if they were occupied contemporaneously. If it is not possible to determine whether such sites were inhabited simultaneously, however, then assuming that they were engaging in common processes of social interaction is an unjustified conclusion. Moreover, such distributions rely heavily on long temporal scales, whereas the patterns observed may be the result of an aggregate of short-term strategies (Foxhall 2000: 488). In this sense, the meaning of similar types of material spread over a bounded region may be dependent upon entirely different social practices.

In this sense, definitions of region with respect to territories or political centres that are better known for specific historical periods, the hypothetical Palatial territories being the most obvious example, may often be misleading. On the one hand, the location of ‘central places’ may change through time and, in consequence, the territories defined with respect to such ‘centres’ will alter. On the other hand, such shifts of power cannot be taken to represent simply the moving of territorial boundaries in a static region. More importantly, they reflect changes in the historical circumstances that impinge on political structure. If people’s perceptions of what constitutes the region change, then the conceptions and expressions of regionalism are also transformed. In consequence, the social practices that affect the extent and the intensity of regional patterns will be altered.

**Alternative Regions: Networks of Relevance**

If region is to be a valid analytic unit, its historical dimension must be restored. Regions are not bounded areas within which cultural pattern unfolds, but structures of belonging. Regions come about through the establishment of relations between people and places and the ways that such relations are expressed on the landscape. They are created and reproduced through people’s consistent engagement in specific social practices. They are not static geographies, but active networks of relevance in which some places are better connected than others. In this way dense and sparse areas can be recognized, not so much on the basis of absolute location, i.e. geographical proximity, as on the basis of relative location, i.e. how closely connected are particular places within a network of relevance. It is the nature and intensity of interactions between places (not their topographical position) that define the extent of a region and also distinguish between different regions.
Such networks of relevance emerge out of people’s engagement in common social practices and they change as people’s beliefs and validating systems are transformed. They represent shared opinions about the practices through which communal identity may be created, evoked, reproduced and remodelled. Different practices generate or convey different kinds of relevance, giving rise to different networks with diverse reach and potential. Thus different networks bring about different regions, within which the participating nodes are more relevant to each other than to positions outside the network (irrespective of their geographical position). Such regions depend entirely on the context according to which relevance is defined and, hence, different kinds of region become evident only with respect to specific practices. As places are physically connected through corporeal movement, so they are metaphorically connected by participation in a network of relevance, which makes their positions meaningful, allows them to interact. The density of the network creates the boundary beyond which the region ceases to be meaningful.

More importantly, networks of relevance underline the dialectic relationship between the local and the extra-local in two ways. On the one hand, the local cannot be meaningful unless there exists a network that defines and validates the characteristics of locality as a structure of belonging (Appadurai 1995; Lovell 1998). In other words, the practices that generate locality can be understood as such only when compared and contrasted to practices which are non-local. On the other hand, the network, as a wider value system bringing together people, places and events, does not become available unless people connect to it locally (Urry 2000), unless people reproduce in their daily routines the practices that make up the network. A region then is created when similar practices of belonging are taken up by a number of different communities, thus generating a wider network of relevance.

To study regions in this way, different defining questions need to be set. What kinds of networks of relevance pertain to a specific topography? What are the social practices that define what is relevant and what not? In what ways is relevance to a specific region materially expressed and performed?

Defining a Region: the Mesara in the Prepalatial Period

The Mesara is one of the most geographically distinct areas of Crete. The area of study usually comprises the western end of the largest plain in the island, the Asterousia range to the south and the slopes of mount Ida to the north (Figure 9.1). The picture of homogeneity of the Mesara is a product of both its geographical distinctiveness and its characteristic material culture. For the Prepalatial period, the unique mortuary practices set around the tholos tombs constitute the main differentiating element from the rest of the island. Thus a common extrapolation is that the natural topography of the Mesara has favoured
the development of rather isolated cultural practices exemplified primarily in the restricted distribution of the tholos tombs (Branigan 1970: 5–6; 1991: 190). Such a distribution has also been seen to reflect common social practices promoting a
picture of a largely integrated regional landscape. Ultimately these burial monuments have been approached as the most remarkable signs of a common regional identity during the Early Minoan period.

In light of the alternative perspective on region put forward in this paper, the following discussion aims to evaluate: first, whether the presence of the tholoi in the landscape is sufficient to mark the extent of the region as a practice of shared values; secondly, whether the widespread distribution of such monuments reflects the adoption of common social practices during the Prepalatial period; and finally, whether the tholoi can be seen as the conveyors of common identity at a regional scale throughout the period of their use.

Methodological restrictions

This analysis focuses on the tholos tombs, but their prominence in the Mesaran landscape may be as much a result of bias in recovery techniques, as of conscious strategies of investment in the preservation and visibility of these sites over time. The widespread looting of the tholoi has enhanced efforts to excavate as many as possible of these monuments, sometimes at the expense of other kinds of sites. On the other hand, there are clear archaeological indications that the ancient inhabitants of the Mesara deliberately enhanced the preservation and durability of these monuments by repeated use and repair.

Partly as a result of the above preoccupation with burial sites, EM settlements in the Mesara are not at present known in much detail. A great number of EM settlements has been identified by surface surveys which, while providing invaluable information on a regional scale, suffer from inherent methodological difficulties (Cherry 1983; Dewar and McBride 1992; Dunnell 1992). Neither the accurate size, nor the duration and internal organization of settlements thus recognized is known, while excavated settlements such as Trypiti and Ay. Triada are only published in preliminary form (Vasilakis 1988; 1995; Laviosa 1969–70; 1972–73; La Rosa and D’ Agata 1985; La Rosa 1992a). Moreover, extensive building activity in subsequent periods obscures the extent and nature of the EM occupation at Phaistos, Ay. Triada and Kommos.

In addition, the tholoi have poor stratigraphy due to the repeated burials that took place in them, while extensive looting has in many cases destroyed original contexts of deposition and blurred chronological horizons. As a result, their dating is largely based on typological classification of pottery and other material recovered from the burials, and more often than not is a matter of debate.¹ This situation is further aggravated by regional variations in pottery styles that make the establishment of chronological parallels between sites a very difficult task.²

Although previous approaches have taken note of these problems, they have largely underestimated the small-scale and short-term processes that might have contributed to the creation of regional pattern. Bearing in mind the stated
weaknesses of currently available evidence, we can make some provisional suggestions about the nature and intensity of regionalism in the EM Mesara.

Divergent Regional Trajectories

For the sake of the clarity of argument, this discussion will be structured chronologically, even though such conventional understanding of time may not be entirely representative of the pattern and pace of change. The proposed view of social change in Prepalatial Mesara envisages very gradual processes that must be understood in relation to what they drew upon. Therefore, to assess the degree of regional integration and the significance of burial monuments as symbols of regional identity during the Prepalatial period, we need first to explore the evidence of the Final Neolithic.

Final Neolithic

The Final Neolithic period in the Mesara is generally known from surveys (Blackman and Branigan 1975; 1977; Watrous et al. 1993; Hope Simpson et al. 1995). Besides Phaistos (Vagnetti 1972–73), there are only four other excavated sites: Gortyna-Acropolis (Levi 1959; Vagnetti 1973), Miamou (Taramelli 1897), Ay. Kyriaki (Blackman and Branigan 1982) and Kala Selia/Kaloi Limenes (Vasilakis 1987). The pattern of settlement appears homogenous for both the plain and the mountains, with sites of very small size being consistently located on low or higher hills. Most of these consist of only small scatters of material, while those excavated, as Kala Selia and Ay. Kyriaki, seem to represent single deposition phases. On the contrary, the stratigraphy at Phaistos presents a different picture: despite frequent interruptions in the occupation sequence, deposition resumed after each short abandonment and occupation always took place on the same parts of the hill.

Phaistos is also distinguished from the other FN sites of the area by its ceramic assemblage. Certain vessel types, particularly high-necked jars, bottles and miniature cups, seem to be restricted exclusively to Phaistos. In contrast, all other sites, although showing clear typological parallels with the pottery of Phaistos, produced only coarse wares (in contrast to the equal percentage of fine and coarse wares at Phaistos) and the standard bowl typologies typical of FN sites throughout Crete (Manteli 1993). The possibility of sample bias, given that Phaistos produced a much larger assemblage than the other sites, is countered by two factors: first, the vessel shapes associated with liquids occur in both coarse and fine wares within the Phaistos assemblage (Vagnetti 1972–73: 55–88; Manteli 1993, vol. I: 82–83, vol. II: 67–77). Therefore, the absence of fine wares in the other FN sites cannot explain the rarity of the particular vessel types. Secondly, the FN ceramic assemblage of Gortyna-Acropolis, although considerably smaller, showed
strong typological affinities to Phaistos with even distribution of fine and coarse wares (Vagnetti 1973: 7–9; Manteli 1993, vol. I: 110–12). Necked jars and bottles, however, were again strikingly lacking.

Phaistos thus seems to be differentiated from the rest of the FN sites in the Mesara by virtue of the longer duration of occupation on the site (itself the product of repeated depositions rather than an uninterrupted sequence) and by the nature of its ceramic assemblage, which shows a specialization in vessel types associated with liquids. Although these types are rare even within the Phaistos assemblage, their absence from all other sites in the Mesara, and also the exaggerated decoration that such shapes receive, very often combining a range of surface treatment techniques on the same vessel (Vagnetti 1972–73; Manteli 1993, vol. II: 67–77), underlines the importance of the activities of which they formed part. It seems possible that such activities involved the ceremonial consumption of drink, on regular or repeated occasions, at a scale encompassing the majority of the FN communities of the area.

It could be suggested thus that during the FN, Phaistos, by being the exclusive setting for ceremonial activity involving the consumption of drink, constituted a regional focus for the entire area, integrating the communities of the plain, the coast and the mountains. The recurrent nature of deposition at Phaistos, in contrast to the rather short-lived character of the other FN sites, may highlight the significance of the activities taking place there as integrative mechanisms in which all the Mesaran communities participated.

**Early Minoan I**

If the Mesara constituted a fully integrated regional environment already in the FN period, then how can the introduction of tholos burials in subsequent phases be interpreted? Let us first consider the evidence from the *plain*.

Although the evidence is fragmentary, it seems that EMI settlements continued the habitation patterns of the FN as indicated by the preliminary results of the Western Mesara Survey. EMI settlements continued to be placed in high locations, while their very small size has been linked with seasonal occupation (Watrous et al. 1993: 224). Similar types of sites have been recognized in the coastal area around Kommos, where EM habitation seems even sparser (Hope Simpson et al. 1995: 394–95). Although it is not possible at present to determine whether these sites were occupied on a seasonal basis, their possibly short-term character parallels the short duration of preceding FN sites in the area.

At Phaistos the nature of the EMI habitation is far from clear. Building remains of this phase are strikingly lacking, while EMI pottery has generally been recovered from deposits mixed with FN material (Warren and Hankey 1989: 13; Vagnetti 1972–73: 12, 16–17, 26, 27, 30, 33–34, 38–40; Karantzali 1996: 72–73), pointing perhaps to a continuation of the habitation patterns of the FN period. The rarity of architectural remains has often been attributed to the extensive
levelling that took place on the site in preparation for the building of the palace, but the later EMIIA remains in the same areas seem to have survived such disturbance. As regards the evidence for events involving the consumption of drink, fragments of EMI chalices and jugs have been found at the site, most significantly from a possibly open, paved area above the 'Neolithic hut' (Levi 1976: 414–16), indicating that drinking practices may have remained important in the life of the settlement. The range and scale of such activities have been obscured by later disturbance, but the rather sporadic presence of relevant material may imply that they did not retain the central character or large scale they exhibited in the previous period.

This suggestion is corroborated by the evidence from neighbouring Ay. Triada, where a single, extensive EMI deposit has been discovered south of the Piazzale dei Sacelli (La Rosa 1988: 329–30; 1992a: 70; Catling 1988: 66), and consisting mainly of organic remains and a range of fine tableware. It was dated to a phase earlier than the first use of Tholos A (La Rosa 1988: 330) and has been considered an extensive rubbish dump, but may prove to be the result of a particular deposition event rather than of long-term habitation. Wilson and Day (2000: 60) have suggested that this deposit might have been the result of communal, ceremonial consumption of food and drink. If their suggestion proves right, then this deposit would constitute the only example of such activities outside Phaistos and not related to a funerary context. Moreover, its large scale, contrasting with the more fragmented nature of the Phaistos material, may also indicate that such ceremonial activities gradually lost their exclusive association with Phaistos noted in the FN period.

Turning to the mortuary evidence, supposedly the main domain of innovation and integration during the EM period, the picture from the plain is rather controversial. Despite the debate concerning the date of some of the tholos tombs on the plain (see note 1), it seems that tholos burials do not become common in this area until the beginning of the EMII period (Branigan 1993: 15; Branigan forthcoming). On the other hand, the Ay. Onoufrios burial assemblage, discovered in the vicinity of Phaistos (Evans 1895: 105–36; Watrous et al. 1993: 224, note 64), indicates that mortuary behaviour was a concern among the communities of the plain. Although this assemblage was the first to be discovered in south-central Crete and, in a way, defined the 'typical tholos assemblage', it seems unlikely that it was deposited in a tholos. As yet, no such monument has been located in the area and, although complete destruction by looters is a possibility, the recent discovery by the Western Mesara Survey of a 'flat' (non-tholos) cemetery on the Ieroditis ridge to the north of Phaistos (Vallianou and Watrous 1991: 121; Watrous et al. 1993: 224) may imply that different mortuary traditions were followed in this part of the plain.

The picture is very different in the mountainous area of the Asterousia. Acknowledging the problems in dating the tombs, it may still be suggested that the earliest tholoi were established in this area, with concentrations in the Ayiofarango/Moni Odigitria area and the coastal area between Kaloi Limenes.
and Lebena (Figure 9.1). For some of these monuments (Megaloi Skinoi C, Ay. Kyriaki A, Lebena Yerokambos II, Kaloi Limenes II, Trypiti), a FN foundation
date has been suggested (Vasilakis 1989–90: 23, 33, 38–39, 70–71; Vagnetti and
FN material from most of these sites comes from surface and not excavated
contexts, however, it may be more plausible to suggest that tholoi were built
during the EMI period at or near all the pre-existing FN sites in this area. This
preference seems to represent a conscious choice to emphasize the location of FN
sites, as even the cave at Miamou received burials of EM date (Taramelli 1897:
294; Manteli 1993: Appendix IX).

In contrast, EMI settlements are striking by their low visibility. Such sites,
identified in the form of very thin scatters in which EMI material generally
constituted only a small percentage, appeared clearly clustered in the areas
around the tholos tombs, and, in the Ayiofarango where such observation was
possible, evenly distributed between the different tholoi. Although these sites
may represent contemporaneous settlements using the same tholos tomb, their
small size and their clustering at very short-distances from each other may favour
their interpretation as short-lived installations succeeding each other in the same
area, demarcated by the presence of the tholoi. In both cases, there seems to be no
pronounced association of particular settlements with specific tombs. The
suggestion by Blackman and Branigan (1977: 70), that certain settlements without
tombs would have shared the burial grounds of neighbouring sites, would
strengthen such an interpretation. It seems then that in the Asterousia, during
EMI, the burial grounds constituted the focal points in the landscape, whereas
settlements were established with respect to a discrete area delimited by tombs,
but in no particular association with any of them.

The tholoi thus represented a focus of ceremonial activity for the communities
of the Asterousia during the EMI period, in sharp contrast with the communities
of the plain, where mortuary behaviour did not constitute a primary interest. It
has been suggested that the tholoi in the Ayiofarango may have been used as
territorial markers associated with arable land, a scarce resource in this area
(Bintliff 1977a; 1977b). The consistent location of tholoi at or near FN sites (often
coinciding with such patches of arable land) may also signify a conscious attempt
to lay claim to specific resources, natural and symbolic, thus making the tholos
tombs the primary means of social negotiation. Moreover, the burial assemblages
of the tholoi, consisting almost entirely of serving/pouring vessels, suggest that
drinking ceremonies might have been part of the funerary rites (Branigan 1970;
1993). During EMI in the Asterousia, therefore, it seems that the tholos tombs
emerged as the new focal points for community integration, relying on different
social strategies, but appropriating at the same time practices of social integration
that previously characterized the entire Mesara.

This change in the setting of ceremonial activity, from the exclusivity of FN
Phaistos to the context of the tholos tombs, transformed the mechanisms and the
scale of regional integration. Moreover, in the plain, the consumption of drink may still have been the primary means of social negotiation, even with the eclipse of Phaistos and the emergence of new ‘centres’ (e.g. Ay. Triada). In the Asterousia, by contrast, the inclusion of such ceremonies in the funerary ritual was only of peripheral importance, while the funeral itself became the defining element of integrative processes.

The EMI Mesara thus appears to have been characterized by two distinct networks of relevance that were both gradually breaking away from the FN pattern of regional integration. In the Asterousia, community/relevance was expressed by burial in tholos tombs. Drinking ceremonies were probably embedded in these new practices to legitimize their status and enhance their effectiveness as integrative devices, but their role remained peripheral in a context where burial was the primary focus. By contrast, in the plain, tholos burials did not represent a relevant medium of negotiation, because pre-existing practices involving the ceremonial consumption of drink prevailed, even if the pre-eminence of Phaistos as the exclusive setting for ceremonial behaviour was now challenged. In the EMI period, therefore, regional integration was achieved rather at the level of two discrete ‘sub-regions’, the mountains and the plain.

Early Minoan II and Late Prepalatial

In EMII, the expansion of tholoi to all parts of the Mesara has been interpreted as an even stronger sign of regional homogeneity than in previous periods, but how accurate is such a picture?

From EMIIA onwards the proliferation of tholos tombs across the Mesara (Figure 9.1) was also accompanied by greater longevity of settlements. In both the Asterousia and the plain, a larger number of EMII sites has been identified, while the only excavated settlements, Trypiti and Ay. Triada, belong to this period (Vasilakis 1988; 1995; Laviosa 1969–70; 1972–73; La Rosa and D’Agata 1985). For Phaistos in particular, an increase in population has been proposed, on the basis of the better preservation and greater frequency of architectural remains on the hill and it has been suggested that this site may have exceeded the threshold of ‘egalitarian’ organization in EMIIA (Branigan 1988: 42; 1993: 114–15; 1995: 35; Whitelaw 1983: 339; Watrous et al. 1993). It cannot be ascertained whether these very fragmented and scattered remains were in simultaneous use, however, and so any estimates of the population they sheltered must be accepted with caution. Although some allowances must be made for disturbance by later building activity, Levi’s (1960) description of EM Phaistos as ‘only a transitional stage between the Neolithic and the Palatial’, albeit exaggerated and countered by other studies (Zois 1965; Andreou 1978; La Rosa 1992b), hints at a picture of the site far removed from its grandiose status in later periods. The building of the Palace on the Phaistos hill has greatly biased our perceptions of its political position with respect to other Mesaran communities in preceding periods.
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of ceramic imports from the Mesara to Knossos during EMII (Wilson and Day 1994), which perhaps reflects social strategies increasingly reliant on the enhancement of status by ‘external’ contacts.

Thus it appears that the widespread presence of tholos cemeteries in all parts of the Mesara from EMII onwards may have reflected a marked increase in competition rather than an unprecedented period of regional congruity. In EMII the spread of tholoi in the plain and their proliferation in the Asterousia did not represent the adoption of the same social practices at a larger scale, but rather the appropriation of a pre-existing medium in order to serve different social strategies. As the period unfolded, the increase of tholoi in all areas, the architectural formalization and standardization of cemeteries, as well as the enhanced visibility of settlements and their more explicit association with specific cemeteries, suggest that integration now happened at the level of the individual cemetery/community. Similarly, the drinking ceremonies that had constituted the core of communal practices at a regional level during the FN, were assimilated by different contexts of interaction, the significance of which was transformed in EMII. From EMII onwards, the regular association of the consumption of drink with burials and also the increased scale of such practices and their partial dissociation from strictly funerary rites (Branigan 1993), allowed such strategies to emerge again as the primary ceremonial form, but within much more localized contexts.

Thus the picture emerging for EMII Mesara is far removed from the prevailing image of strong cultural and political homogeneity. The spread of the tholos tombs, far from expressing social and political congruity, seems to be embedded in a web of fierce competition (Sbonias 1999b). In the previous period, each of the two ‘sub-regions’, the western part of the plain and the Asterousia, was characterized by internal unity and, although different from each other, still shared a common framework of reference, drawing upon the common patterns of the past. By contrast, the emphasis on the particular locations of the tholos cemeteries in EMII suggests a gradual deterioration of wider communal ties, and their replacement by the expression of collective identity at the level of the individual cemetery.

Conclusion

It seems that the Mesara almost never constituted a homogenous cultural environment, but was rather characterized by many diverse and contested social landscapes. Geographical proximity does not suffice to illuminate the social dynamics of regional development in the Prepalatial Mesara. The significance of the region as a symbol of identity was not self-evident in geography, but rather became visible to members and non-members through specific social practices that defined what was relevant, local and familiar.

Therefore the shared presence of tholos tombs in a bounded area proves
neither sufficient to elucidate the patterns of social interaction that defined the Mesara as a region nor indicative of the motives or the scales of such practices. Far from advancing a picture of the Mesara as a largely unified social environment, the divergent patterns of use of the tholos tombs imply that, during the Prepalatial period, different networks of relevance were active, which made use of the same medium for different purposes and with respect to different local conditions. If integration at the scale of the ‘sub-region’ constituted the EMI network of relevance, in EMII the association with individual cemeteries and single communities emerged as the new currency of negotiation. The extent of the region changed and, by implication, the ways in which the region was made visible were transformed. New means of expression brought about new ‘centres’ new focal points for the performance of identity.

In this framework, the supremacy of FN Phaistos as a unifying symbol for the area came under dispute during EMI. Its rather subdued nature throughout the Prepalatial strongly contrasts with the more thriving status of Ay. Triada. The lack of clear EMIII deposits and the rarity of MMIA material at Phaistos (La Rosa 1992b: 232), at the time when some of the richest burials continued to take place in the tholoi of the plain, again make a powerful statement. That the hill of Phaistos still constituted a powerful point of reference, however, is suggested by the rich MMIA assemblage of drinking vessels at nearby Paterikies (Bonacasa 1967–68). The building of the Palace in MMIB, coinciding with the foundation of the tholos at Kamilari (the only tholos cemetery to receive burials till MMIII), would have made this point even more explicit.

It is apparent then that the distribution of funerary monuments is not a sufficient criterion by which to infer homogeneity for the Mesara or distinguish it from other areas of Crete and the Aegean. How different were the practices of the Prepalatial Mesara, where social negotiation was carried out through funerary behaviour, from the rest of Crete and the Southern Aegean, where mortuary practices also constituted the primary arena of social competition? Does the use of different types of tombs suffice to determine differences in regional pattern? On the contrary, as was demonstrated in the case of the Mesara, it is the contexts in which these features acquired meaning that generated and reproduced such differentiation. Such contexts appear to be equally dependent upon general trends and local scales of interaction.

The region thus represented a topography of communication in which places were connected by participating in common networks of relevance. Moreover, social change is better understood along these lines. When new principles of what was relevant to regional identity were introduced in the Mesara during the Prepalatial period, new places became part of the region and others abandoned. New resources became available or desirable, new conditions for economic and symbolic interaction arose within which communities engaged in different social practices. New arenas emerged that used different currencies for social negotiation. Through this process, the physical configuration of the regions of the
Mesara – their extent and their boundaries – was also transformed. Such transformation was not so much represented by the differential distribution of sites across the same landscape, but by the emergence of new, contested landscapes. The standardization and formalization of mortuary behaviour did not so much reflect an integrated social landscape, as perhaps promote fragmentation by making strong claims to particular locations which became regions of their own.

The patterns of regionalism in the Prepalatial Mesara were not uniform in their development, but rather exemplified several setbacks, breaks with previous traditions and the ‘re-inventing’ of pre-existing communal practices. Such regionalism did not always have the same focus, but rather the emergence of different focal points for ceremonial activity through time created different understandings and practices of regional identity. By implication, the scales at which integration was effected differed, not only from one period to the other, but also with respect to different social strategies.

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Endnotes

1 Note for example the difference of opinion concerning the date of the foundation and first use of Tholos A at Ag. Triada: Branigan (1993) and Karantzali (1996) date it to EMI, Banti (1930–31) to EMII, Zois (1998) to EMIIA; Wilson and Day (1994: 13 and n.41) note that ‘the first use of tholos A (the large tholos) at Ag. Triada need not be earlier than EMIIA’; and La Rosa (2001: 222), in a reconsideration of the stratigraphy of Tholos A, also states that the earliest deposition dates to the end of EMI and to EMIIA. Similar contrasting remarks concern the dates of other Mesara tholoi. In the present study the arguments and observations of all the specialists have been taken into account and, where possible, any information on stratigraphy and excavation context was integrated. Thus the dates for the tholoi followed here are generally based on the agreement of the majority of researchers.

2 For the Mesara in particular, the EMIIIB and EMIII periods are a matter of controversy. EMIIIB can only be identified by rare imports from other areas (e.g. Vasiliki Ware), whereas
apart from one of the levels of the Lebena Yerokambos II Tholos, there seem to be no other stratified contexts of this period in the area (Alexiou 1961–62: 227). Moreover, Watrous et al. (1993: 224 and n. 65; also Warren and Hankey 1989: 20) note that no deposit of EMIII has been identified in the Mesara, even though Branigan (1970; Blackman and Branigan 1977: 68) sees no significant break in the occupation of the area during EMIII/MMIA. However, such ‘gaps’ could equally be the products of our inability to determine the nature of EMIIIB and EMIII pottery in the area, and not so much the result of cultural disruption. As most of the material comes from tombs, this may reflect a change in deposition practices rather than abandonment of sites and the beginnings of nucleation (as has been suggested in many cases, Manning 1994; Branigan 1995; Watrous et al. 1993; Watrous 2001).

3 As part of my Ph.D. thesis (Relaki 2003), a detailed study of the stratigraphy and structural remains at FN Phaistos indicates that occupation on the hill was not continuous, but rather punctuated by frequent intervals of settlement, abandonment and re-occupation.

4 Miamou is a possible exception, as the deposit shows perhaps repeated deposition sequences. In addition, Manteli (1993: Appendix IX) has identified typological traits in the pottery that could link it to the Late Neolithic tradition as this has been defined at Knossos. However, the characteristic high-necked jars and bottles of the Phaistos typology are again lacking from this assemblage.

5 The settlement at Megaloí Skinói was the only one to give a greater amount of EMI material (Blackman and Branigan 1977: 41).

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