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The Central Court of the Palace of Petras

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Since the beginning of Minoan Archaeology, there has been a long discussion concerning the origin and the function(s) of the central court of the Minoan palaces, especially on how this particular architectural type served and reflected these two aspects.* All scholars agree that the central court is the most defining feature of a palace (Palyvou 2002, 167) and that it mirrored “a particular social order, and a symbolism carried by monumentality” (Driessen 2004, 75). Also, the central court is the *sine qua non* for the definition of a building as a palace, and it has been described as having functions “that were fundamental to Minoan society as a whole” (Davis 1987, 161).

A central court constitutes the focal point of the structural units arrayed along its four sides (Palyvou 2002, 167). The palace is designed from the central court outward. The court, as a sharply defined space,

contrasts with the irregular outer limits of the palace. Thus, the plan of a Minoan palace is that of an “exploded structure,” with the regular, straight lines turned inward to face the court and the outer limits reaching as far outward as the palace needed space. Beyond its role as an anchor to the various wings, the central court served as “the glue that gave . . . special meaning to the surrounding structures” (Palyvou 2002, 169).

*It is an honor to dedicate this paper to J. and M. Shaw. The selection of the subject is not without meaning, as they were the first scholars to see the central court at Petras fully excavated in 1993. I will always remember how moved J. Shaw was to walk on a “new central court” 20 years after the discovery of the court of Zakros. After their return to Kommos, he sent a note thanking me for the tour to “this complex little jewel,” as he labelled the Petras palace. I wish to thank Dr. M. Wedde for his *synergasia* in planning, executing, and studying the stratigraphical trenches and for much help with the present paper.

The Central Court at Petras

The central court of the palace of Petras was discovered in 1992 and excavated in 1993 (Fig. 6.1). In 1994 and 1995, a program of stratigraphical trenches was conducted in order to check the pre-Neopalatial history and the function of the area. The central building of palatial character at Petras had a long and probably uninterrupted architectural sequence starting from MM IIA when it was erected and lasting until its final destruction in LM IB. What MacGillivray pointed out for the Palace of Knossos is also valid for Petras: "The Palace at Knossos was one building with a very long history and therefore numerous occasions when repair and renovation programmes were effected as a necessary response to natural and violent human intervention" (1994, 45). The building was much more

important in the Protopalatial period than in the later phases. The central court, as the symbolic center of the building, followed the building's historical adventures and underwent structural modifications in order to adapt to changes, probably administrative in character. Driessen pointed out that the central courts of the palaces served "as a signpost for a particular social order, as a symbolism especially carried by monumentality" (2004, 75). At Petras, the later central court, despite its reduced dimensions, never ceased to emphatically display its monumental character. During the life of the palace, the central court was always significant and meaningful. As Preziosi has expressed it, "The formal elements of design are elements insofar as they are simultaneously significant and meaningful" (1983, 155). The



Figure 6.1. Petras palace. The central courts from the north. 1: Plaster floor of the MM IIA–LM IA central court. 2: Plaster floor of the LM IB central court. 3: Floor of the LM IB east stoa. 4: East wall of the MM IIA–LM IA central court. 5: East wall of the LM IB east stoa. 6: LM IIIA–IIIB house.

central court at Petras went through two very distinct and separate phases (Figs. 6.1–3). The MM IIA to LM IA court (Fig. 6.2) exhibits several of the characteristics of a standard Minoan central court as “the pivotal space” of the building (Driessen 2004, 75). After the LM IA destruction, the LM IB renovated structure reused the area occupied by the previous court to create a related architectural unit, one that divided the available surface into an open, narrow, sharply contained space and also a deep, parallel stoa that acted as the eastern facade of the palace (Figs. 6.1, 3). Both courts were oriented N–S with a deviation of 12 degrees to the west. The original MM IIA–LM IA surface measured 17.6 m from north to south and 7.6 m from east to west, with a ratio of 1:2.3. The measurements were taken across the center of the court because the plastered surface is slightly wider at the northern end. The later court is 14.6 x 5.1 m (ratio 1:2.9). The western edge of the older court is defined by a wall built with ashlar blocks on its southern end and at its northern end at the corner to the north facade of the palace. This wall is pierced by two openings, one leading to the long E–W corridor dividing the west wing in two, the other allowing access to an elongated rectangular room with ashlar door jambs and a flagstone floor (Pl. 6.1). This room was part of a series of spaces forming the southern edge of the extant building. It was in use until the final destruction of

the palace in LM IB and was found full of ashlar blocks fallen from the upper floor. The central room, probably a shrine equipped with a 4 m long plastered bench, was functional in the Protopalatial period but had been filled in after MM IIB. The “corner room” remained in use in Neopalatial times, with access probably assured from the west.

The east side of the court was formed by a parallel wall that is badly preserved today. It was probably a solid wall as there is no evidence for the existence of a stoa. A monumental staircase (4.1 m wide) at the northwest corner of the court was covered with plastered slabs (Figs. 6.4, 5). The rest of the width of the court to the northeast was occupied by a square room with an entrance to the west, presumably used to control access to the court (Fig. 6.2). The south side of the court was formed by the only partially-preserved wall discovered at that end of the building. The floor of the court was made of white plaster of very fine quality, 6–7 cm thick. There was also a double drainage system: water was led down from the roof (presumably) by a pipe into a junction. The junction has not been examined, but it is implied by the existence of the two arms of the drainage system. One arm heads north at the base of the west wall underneath the surface of the court to drain through a U-shaped stone spout at the monumental staircase (Figs. 6.2, 6; Pl. 6.2). The other arm runs eastward at an oblique angle as a slab-covered

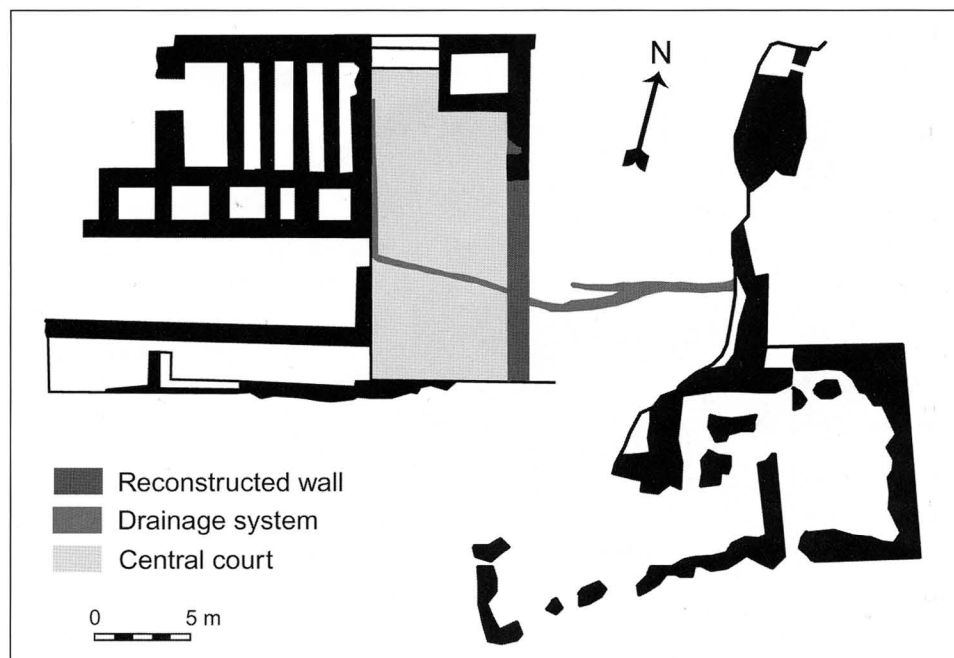


Figure 6.2. The MM IIA–LM IB central court in the Petras palace.

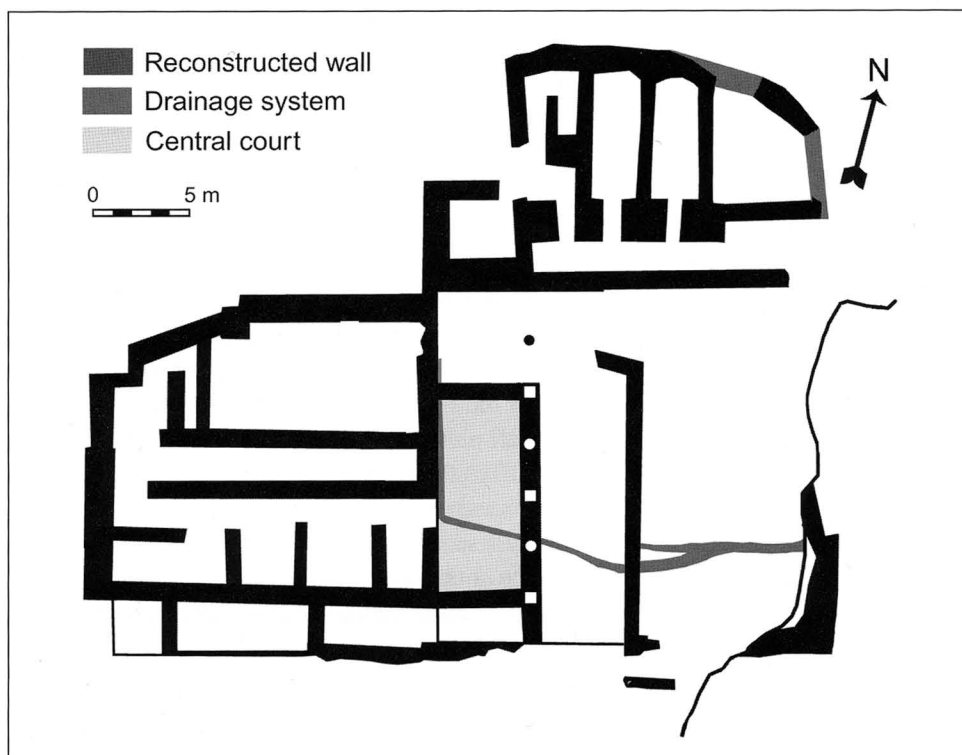


Figure 6.3. The LM IB central court in the Petras palace.



Figure 6.4. Petras palace. The monumental staircase from the northwest.



Figure 6.5. Petras palace. The monumental staircase from the west.

drain under the plaster of the court through the east wall and across the east plateau (here cut into the bedrock) and culminates at the edge of the plateau and the imposing Protopalatial retaining wall (Tsipopoulou 1999b, 183–184) into a large terracotta spout (Fig. 6.7).

Following the LM IA destruction, dated by a large deposit of vases (especially conical cups) that had fallen on the staircase from the upper floor (Rupp and Tsipopoulou 1999, 730), the palace in general and the central court in particular underwent significant alterations. The staircase went out of use, and the square room to the west of the entrance was covered over (Fig. 6.3). The width of the court was reduced by the construction of a stoa, which was approximately equal in depth (4.8 m) to the width of the new court along the eastern side (Fig. 6.8). This stoa, with a colonnade of alternating columns and pillars, ran the full length of the court. Shaw and Lowe (2002, 521) state that this was a common feature along the eastern side of the central court of Minoan palaces, including the one at Knossos.



Figure 6.6. Petras palace. The central court. The U-shaped stone drain spout from the northeast.

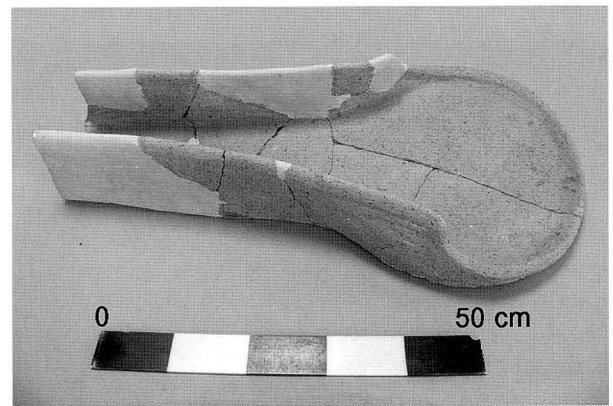


Figure 6.7. Petras palace. The terracotta spout.

The court itself was further diminished by the addition of two short E–W column-supporting stone foundations of identical construction to the west side of the stoa (forming a Π -shaped foundation). The southern colonnade created a covered space leading to the SE room of the west wing. An exact reading of the northern part remains uncertain due to disturbances caused by a Byzantine ossuary dug into the central court in this area. A tentative reconstruction suggests a close similarity in depth between the N–S stoa and the space between the northern cross-wall and the northern edge of the landing of the staircase. The Petras LM IB stoa is, in fact, a deep L-shaped structure that borders the central court on the northern and eastern side and has a shallow southern extension forming the entrance into the room with the flagstone floor. This room is one of the best built spaces in the entire palace (Pl. 6.1). The flagstone floor is the

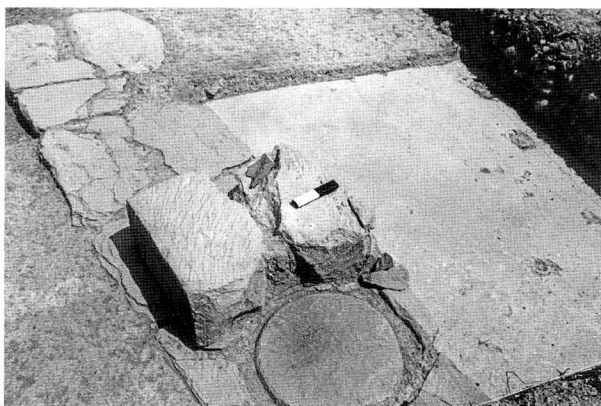


Figure 6.8. Excavation of the east side of the LM IB central court. To the left: LM IB plaster floor. To the right: MM IIA–LM IA plaster floor.

only one at Petras in the LM IB period. Given, in addition, the care of adding a small south stoa entrance, a special use for the room may be ventured. The main element of the stoa, the N–S part, differs from the standard Minoan palace stoa by its double depth. Since there is no evidence for an interior row of columns, an upper story can be excluded. Therefore, the usual upper story element, that is, the balcony for spectators of events in the central court, can find no place here. Nor is the Petras stoa part of a palace circulation system. The two stoas of the L-shaped construction are “sheltered extensions of the courtyard and not of an interior space” (Palyvou 2002, 172–173).

It would follow that the LM IB structures created a new form of central court: the western part open to the sky, the eastern roofed over, for a total surface slightly superior to that of the MM IIA–LM IA court. The sole comparison, albeit quite distant, would be Building T at Kommos, with its North and South Stoas and eastern complex of structures (Shaw and Lowe 2002, pl. 31a).

The wall along the western limit of the court (i.e., the east wall of the west wing complex) continued to be used. The later court also had a plaster floor, but it was much more worn than the floor of the first phase and probably also originally of inferior quality (Figs. 6.1, 9). A new, more primitive drainage system was constructed, employing the same concept as the previous one. Now, however, the water from the roof flowed in shallow channels in the plaster floor of the court, one heading north, the other retracing the course of the main MM IIA–LM IA,

E–W drain. Close to the staircase, the north drain descended below the surface of the court through a hole marked by a slab where the water then employed the pre-existing U-shaped stone drain. The reuse of the old drainage system at this point explains why the square room added to the north magazines in the LM IB period was built some 0.5 m north of the staircase landing (with its destroyed steps) and not abutted against the wall supporting the landing; the water from the central court had to be evacuated off to the side.

Despite the destruction and abandonment of the palace in LM IB, the area of the central court never ceased to be used as an open flat space. The area of the plateau east of the stoa’s back wall shows no signs of major construction. The only pieces of evidence for construction in this area are the pits cut into the bedrock dating to the EM period and graves from the 12th century A.D. This long and intense occupation makes the reading of the stratigraphic palimpsest of Petras extremely difficult. Thus, in LM IIIA, just to the east of the latest court, a small house was built, which remained in use until LM IIIB (Tsipopoulou 1997; Figs. 6.1, 10). The court, especially in its eastern part, was partially cleaned of the thick destruction deposit that had fallen from the upper floor in order to serve the limited needs of the new inhabitants (Figs. 6.11–13). Much later, in the 12th century A.D., when a cemetery was established on the plateau among the ruins of the palace, the area suffered even more. Four cist tombs were built within the central court by using either the stumps of the palace walls or stones taken from them.

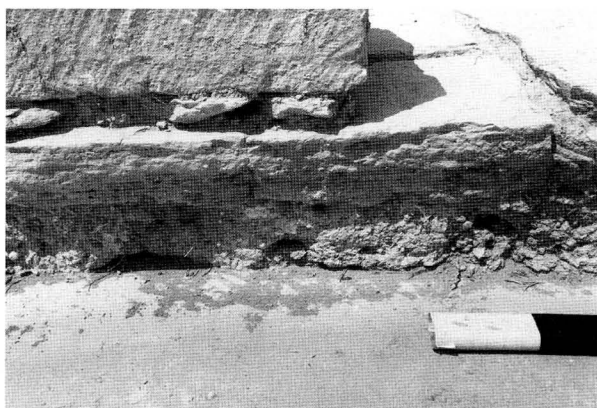


Figure 6.9. Petras palace. Excavation of the central court. Foundation of the east side.

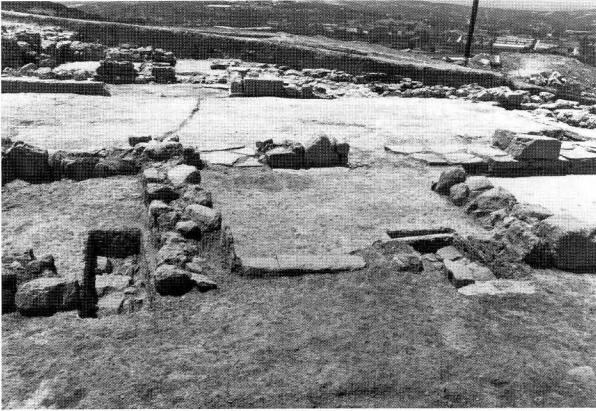


Figure 6.10. Petras palace. The LM IB central court and the LM III house from the east.



Figure 6.11. Excavation of the central court. The LM IB destruction deposit at the west part of the court, view from the east.

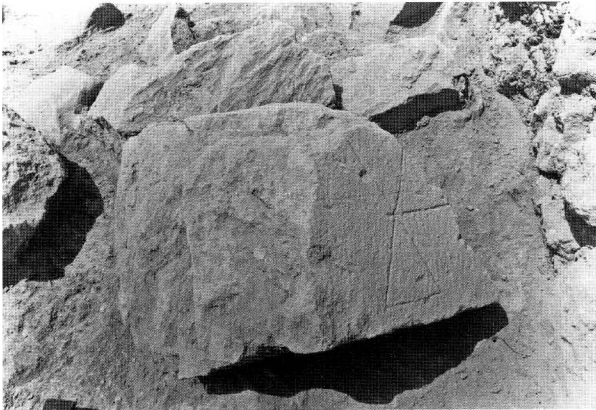


Figure 6.12. Excavation of the central court. The LM IB destruction deposit at the west part of the court. Ashlar block with mason's mark, a double axe.

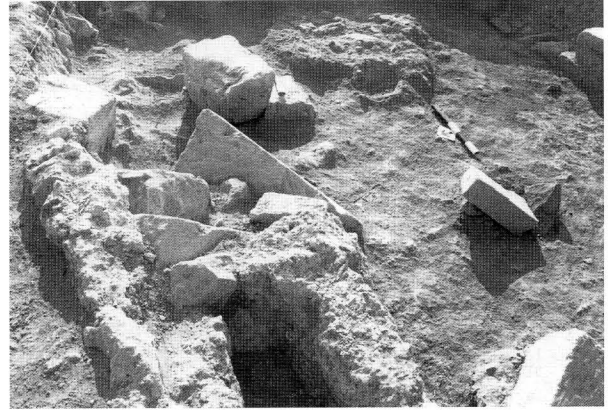


Figure 6.13. Excavation of the central court. The LM IB destruction deposit at the west part of the court, view from the northeast.

At the north part of the court, just to the south of the monumental staircase, an ossuary was built to serve the cemetery. This structure, 2.3 m deep, destroyed all earlier levels down to the EM II period, which constituted the earliest organized occupation at Petras.

The thick LM IB destruction layer contained plaster, burned wood, and many architectural fragments fallen from the upper floor (Figs. 6.11–13). These included door jambs, some of them double, suggesting the presence of pier-and-door partition(s) on the upper floor to the west of the court.

Some ashlar blocks had incised mason's marks. The palace at Petras has produced 29 ashlar blocks with mason's marks, four of which are still in situ (Fig. 6.12). The most common marks are double axes, stars, branches, parallel lines, and double triangles. The majority of these blocks are no longer in the Siteia Museum storeroom where they were placed after the excavation.

Intense burning was also observed along the stoa colonnade (where the deposits were undisturbed by the Byzantine graves) in a context also containing much plaster, probably from the wooden columns.

Stratigraphical Trenches in the Central Court

For a better understanding of the stratigraphical sequence in the central court, three stratigraphical trenches were excavated $\Sigma 1$, $\Sigma 6$, and $\Sigma 19$ —each measuring 0.5×1 m and running N–S. In $\Sigma 1$, after the removal of the two plaster floors and 12 cm of earth between them, an EM II level was reached, in which a wall made of small stones founded directly on the bedrock was found at a diagonal angle to the trench.

Trench $\Sigma 6$ was situated along the east side of the later court, just to the south of a column base (Figs. 6.14, 15). The sherds on the surface, especially conical cups and a few pithoid jars, were LM I. The soil between the two successive floors measured 8–16 cm in thickness. The floor of the first central court was made of plaster with many tiny pebbles and sand inclusions. Its surface was very hard, made up of a surface layer of white plaster ca. 5 mm thick, a 2–2.5 cm thick layer of coarse plaster with pebbles, and a third coarser layer that contained mudbrick fragments and small coarse sherds. The soil underneath the earlier floor was loose and had a few very small stones. The few sherds in this layer were nondescript and dated to early MM. Underneath this soil were large stones, especially at the south part of the trench, that were used to level the area. Among these stones were a few very small sherds (mostly MM I), some small fragments of burned mudbricks, and a small fragment of red plaster, identical to those

found in EM III levels. The removal of the first large stones revealed more stones showing that this fill was substantial. The few sherds in the fill were, again, early MM. The excavation did not continue any deeper as it was too difficult to remove the whole tumble of large stones without destroying more of the plaster floor of the earlier court. It is probable, but it cannot be proven with any certainty, that a large part of the area of the central court was an open space in the Early Minoan period. In other, larger palaces of Crete where there is complete and secure stratigraphical evidence, such as at Malia and Phaistos, and probably also at Knossos, it seems that the area of the central court was an open space from EM II onward (Driessen 2004, 77). This open space would not even have been level, as hinted at Petras by two facts: the substantial fill that was placed below the surface of the court and the uneven distances from the surface to the bedrock revealed in the stratigraphical trenches. The drop in the bedrock runs diagonally across the site, from SE to NW, with a substantial increase in the NW part of the central court (Tsipopoulou 1999a).

Trench $\Sigma 19$ (Fig. 6.16), opened in order to define the stratigraphy of the west part of the court, showed that the drain was an integral part of the first court and that it was in continuous use until the final Neopalatial destruction of the palace.

The Finds

The movable finds in the central court of the Petras palace were not significant in quantity, nor in quality, as was expected from a primarily open space that had suffered from continuous use throughout many centuries. The large majority of the whole vases, or those with a complete profile, were conical cups. A large deposit of LM IA handleless, unpainted conical or semi-globular cups fallen from the upper floor was excavated in the area of the landing of the monumental staircase and the square room at the NE corner of the court. This deposit proves the existence of a single, upper-floor room equal to the surface of the

landing and the square room. There were 691 such cups with a complete or with full profile and 8,531 more sherds from similar cups. This impressive number probably suggests that a room on the upper floor situated on top of the staircase, or very close to it, was used for ritualized reception ceremonies with token hospitality (Rupp and Tsipopoulou 1999). The total number of cups is similar to a number on Linear A tablet HT31 from Hagia Triada thought to total conical cups (Godart and Olivier 1976, 58–59). This deposit also included a small number of other types of vases, namely 12 one-handled globular cups with painted decoration,

Figure 6.14. North section of stratigraphical Trench $\Sigma 6$ in the central court of the Petras palace.

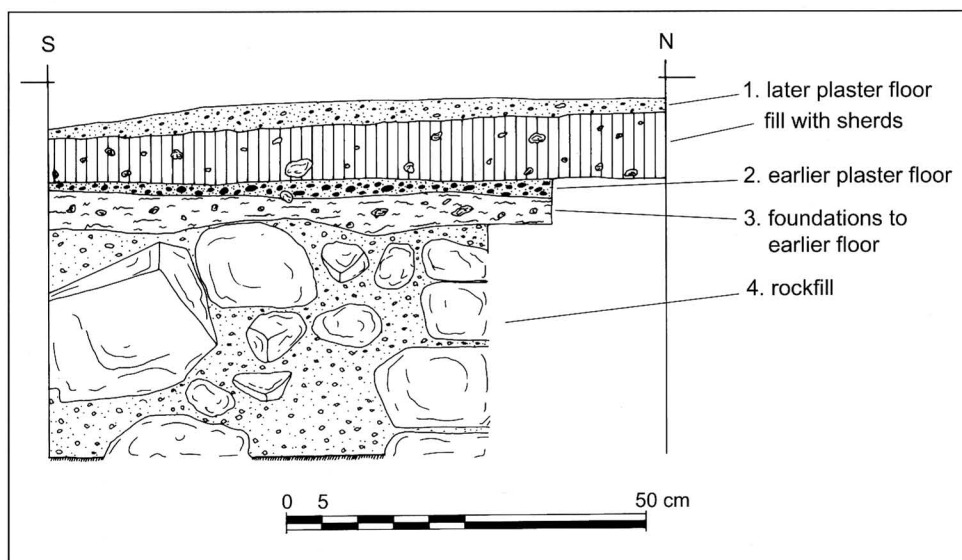
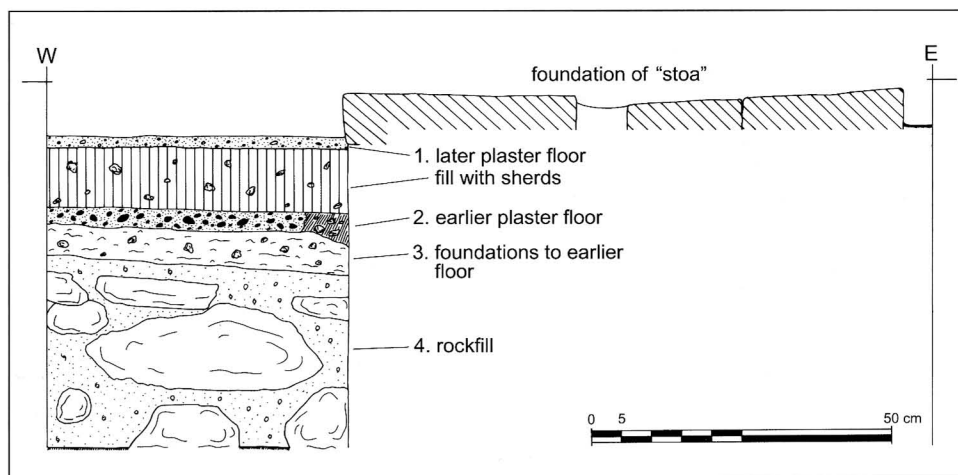
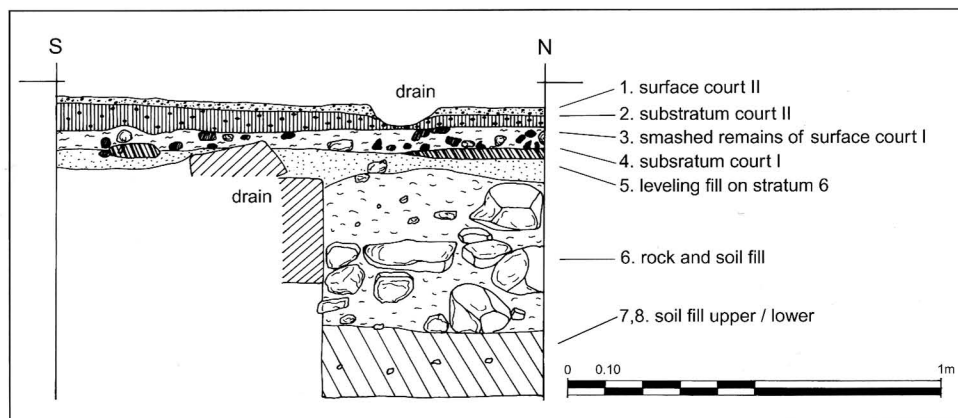


Figure 6.15. West section of stratigraphical Trench $\Sigma 6$ in the central court of the Petras palace.

Figure 6.16. West section of stratigraphical Trench $\Sigma 19$ in the central court of the Petras palace.



three straight-sided cups, one footed cup, four kalathoi, one small lamp, and four bowls. There were also fragments from two amphorae, a “souvlaki-stand,” two small pithoid jars, three tripod cooking pots, one jug, and one funnel. This shows that these presumed ceremonies involved consumption of food and drink by a large number of people (who probably came occasionally to the palace for various transactions) and a few officials who used the larger decorated cups.

Concluding Remarks

The above analysis suggests, once again, that the palace of Petras, although a genuine Minoan palace and a structure fully integrated into the Minoan architectural and cultural vernacular, remains atypical, when not—occasionally—idiosyncratic (Cunningham 2001, 72–74). This has its roots in two phenomena. The first is that the form taken by the palace of Petras through time was dictated by the constructions that were raised on the site after the post-MM IB total destruction and/or by the razing of all the structures on the plateau. Although the exact sequence is uncertain, the palatial building that sealed the hieroglyphic archive in the MM IIB destruction was almost equal in extent, as far as the west wing is concerned, as that of the later period. The sole significant difference between the earlier and later palace is the form of the NW corner of the building (Tsipopoulou and Hallager forthcoming). The subsequent rebuilding reemployed the system of E–W axial walls, thus creating similar spaces. The destruction in LM IA does not appear to have been particularly violent over the entire site, but it did cause extensive damage to certain areas, such as

Another interesting find from the central court is a pithos inscribed on the rim with a Linear A inscription that was found in the east part of the court near the SE corner (Tsipopoulou and Hallager 1996, 31, 34–36), suggesting that, in the last phase of the building, the storage needs were increased, unless this pithos was used to gather water from the roof.

From the west-southwest area of the latest central court came a few more vases (mostly undecorated amphorae) fallen from the upper floor.

the rooms south of the corridor and the monumental staircase, which went out of use. The LM IB phase was short.

The second phenomenon is related to the size of Petras’ site catchment: the palatial building did not grow organically outward from the central court to the four cardinal points, because the economy did not warrant a complete set of four wings—something for which there would have been sufficient space. The west wing, the structure that may have existed south of the west wing, the north magazines, and whatever use was made of the Protopalatial building(s) at the SE corner of the site were sufficient to cover the needs of the administration.

This observation raises the question: why was Petras a palace in the Neopalatial period? Would not a “villa” that was subordinate to some other palatial center have sufficed? The answer must be sought in the importance of Petras in the late Prepalatial and the Protopalatial periods. The Neopalatial economic system of Crete adopted building blocks dating to earlier times; one such block was the Siteia Bay area and its central administrative building, the palace of Petras.

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