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Processional Behaviour in Neopalatial Crete (1700-1450BCE)
The Minoan palaces as theatres for social interaction

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Abstract

In sociology and anthropology there is a growing body of literature concerning boundaries, performance, and visibility. 'Looking' to the Minoan Palaces through these concepts makes it possible to move away from a formalized approach to the Minoan built-environment and create a more sensible approach in that it lets us focus on two crucial aspects, namely bodily movement in the form of processions and the visual experience of people. The function of images and built spaces was to create a meaningful environment that set the required structures for social interaction and communicated the ideologies underlying the reproduction of social reality and order. They strongly affected the lived-in world experiences and influenced every form of social interaction. This paper argues, based on a case study of Knossos, that the specific nature of the Palatial setting created a unique environment which was conductive to the production of asymmetric power relations and embodied normative notions of social power and authority. The use of the building in terms of regulating interaction and communication in the sense of crossing boundaries resulted in a conceptual understanding between 'us' and 'them'. The presented evidence pleads for the acceptance that architecture and iconography are expressive media, whereby the builders exploit the layers of facade, interior and structure, as a medium for expression. Relying on this, the task of the Minoan archaeologist is to reverse the construction process and to re-construct – on the basis of an integrative approach – the social concepts of reality from Minoan architectural and pictorial artifacts.

Introduction

It must have been said that in Minoan Archaeology the Minoan Palaces, especially for the 'well known' Neopalatial period (1700-1450BCE), were seen from the beginning as the major seats and physical embodiments of an overruling power.[1] Palatial and non-palatial architecture was studied as a formal construction, which was translated in a rigid classification of these forms into categories like the Minoan Palace, the Minoan Villa, and smaller houses.[2] Previous research looked at the archaeological data from a top down perspective: it defined a palatial style architecture and in the presence-absence of elements in the other buildings[3] it deduced a hierarchical society in which there were at least three large social layers. At the top there was a central authority, possibly a king, who organized all aspects of society at the intra-site and regional level.[4] In a recent volume, *The Monuments of Minos*, the functioning of the Palaces as elite residences has been questioned and scholars have tried to redefine them as court-centred public buildings, controlled by a higher elite who lived elsewhere but in the vicinity of the complex.[5] This article will argue that we have reached a dead end by looking at architecture in this formalized way, for it does not help us to understand more clearly how Minoan society worked. The major aim of this article is to explore how the settings of the Minoan Palaces worked as vehicles for claiming normative notions of authority and power, and how the performances conducted in and around these settings led to a transfer, negotiation, and acceptance of social norms and values in a society without true written resources at its disposal. In order to explore the role of the Minoan Palaces as

[2] McEnroe 1982: 3-19; Hägg 1997.
[3] Driessen 1989-1990: 3-23.
[4] Evans 1921.
[5] Driessen, Schoep, and Laffineur 2002.

a backdrop for large-scale ritual events, I outline an approach to studying Minoan architecture that builds on the concepts of performance, boundaries, and visibility. This integrative approach offers insight into the social dynamics of ancient societies by examining built space as the context of social interaction, and how architecture encodes and communicates meanings that can be perceived by social actors, influencing their actions and interactions.

The Concepts of Boundaries, Performance, and Visibility

A number of sociologists reflected on the role that space in general and buildings in particular play in shaping social interaction.[6] Lavin worked out the idea of behavioural regulators or boundaries in the built-environment and looked at architecture as an outcome of behavioural decisions prior to the actual constructional phase. These regulatory systems or boundaries act to control the amount and type of interaction that occurred between individuals, groups, and between people and architecture itself.[7]

In all societies proximity and distance play an important role in the intensiveness of interaction and communication between people. Especially for pre-historical societies one could argue that there is a strong relation between actual physical distance and social distance. In terms of crossing boundaries, we have to acknowledge that it is not only the physical distance that is essential, i.e. whether or not interaction can take place. It is also the difficulty in crossing the number of boundaries placed between them. For buildings the latter is an interesting observation. During the process of creating a building, its builders conceptually create boundaries before they are physically represented in the built-environment. The main assumption here is that the number of physical boundaries and the difficulty of crossing them resulted in an enforced feeling of distance between people. Boundaries are therefore constitutive elements for interaction between different people. Physical boundaries, as reflections of conceptual considerations made by humans, create a physical setting that allows control over the interaction and

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[6] Bourdieu 1973; Giddens 1984; Lefebvre 1991.
[7] Lavin 1981.

communication between the different users.[8]

There are two sociologists that are particular influential for the thoughts outlined above, and often cited in numerous studies by those who take an agent-centred approach to understanding the reciprocal relationships between architecture, people, and (social) structures.[9]

Giddens is distinguished from other sociologists of his time in that his theory of structuration starts from the assumption that humans are knowledgeable agents that act according to particular motivations and understand the conditions and consequences of their actions.[10] Therefore, this work fits perfectly in a paper that tries to bring past actors back to life. However, this is not the only element that is important. Another central theme in Giddens's work is that space is an integral part of social interaction. He talks about the locale, which is not to be seen as just the physical environment, but rather as the use or mobilization of the physical environment in a context of social interaction.[11] Architecture, therefore, plays a central role by delineating physical and social boundaries and serving as the context for the social actions and interactions between agents.

Georg Simmel, a sociologist who was of great influence for Giddens, speaks about the *'Zerlegbarkeit und Begrenzung des Raumes'*, the partionalism of space in individual pieces *'die als Einheiten gelten und […] von Grenzen gerahmt sind'*,[12] that are defined by boundaries.

For social groups or individuals, boundaries or *Grenze* have the same functions as the wooden frame of a painting. In their most basic way they isolate/protect from the outside, and work inclusively/collectively towards the inside. Borders/boundaries are, according to Simmel, artificial; they are the result of social action and interaction. To mark off the opposite is according to

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[8] For information about boundaries see Pellow 1996; Barth 1969; Wallman 1978: 200-217; Okely 1983.
[9] Gieryn 2002; Grahame 2000.
[10] Giddins 1984.
[11] Giddins 1984: 118.
[12] G. Simmel cited in Schroer 2006: 68.

Simmel a major social act.[13] It is very important to note that the boundary for Simmel does not have to be physical, but when it is, it reinforces the difference between the opposites.[14] Investing in material reflections that mark inequalities or difference through boundaries is in this way to be seen as the instalment of stability, social differences and a clear overview between the different tiers. Since boundaries are 'set' or 'created' by human actions they are, therefore, normative in character and constitute a normative foundation for the structuring of the living space.

Performance transfers social knowledge, and a sense of identity through repetitive behaviour.[15] These kinds of events are crucial for the constitution of every pre-modern society,[16] especially for Minoan society where the greater part of the population was in all probability illiterate. Nonverbal acts and *mise-en-scène* will therefore have played even more important roles in transferring ideologies, and they were of primary importance for the creation of a stable community. Performance in various cases can mean that both the actual performers and the audience have a physical setting in which to perform, which has been designed so that the intended objectives behind the performance can be reached and transferred to the audience observing it.[17] If we assume that the setting of the Minoan palace was a performative space, then it follows that the architecture is elaborated so that it meets the objectives of the performances that are conducted in and around these settings.

Performative theory becomes even more interesting when it is linked with the concept of visibility. For all cultures, the visible is important, and this is no less true for the Minoan culture. Visibility is strongly determined by the spatial context in which we find ourselves. Our field of vision is made by the things we see, its horizon formed by the boundaries of the physical environment that

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[13] G. Simmel cited in Schroer 2006: 69: 'Die Grenze ist nicht eine räumliche Tatsache mit soziologischen Wirkungen, sondern eine soziologische Tatsache, die sich räumlich formt.'
[14] G. Simmel cited in Schroer 2006: 69: 'Durch die Investierung in einer Linie im Raum gewinnt das Gegenseitigkeitsverhältnis nach seinen positieven und negatieven Seite eine Klarheit und Sicherheit.'
[15] Taylor 2002:149-169.
[16] Inomata and Coben 2006: 12.
[17] Alexander 2006: 29-91 (62).

surrounds us. Vision, visibility and their different gradations in a context of social interaction very often lead to asymmetrical relations between people. This makes vision and the amount of visibility important tools of power.[18] For the Minoan palaces, it seems that the planning behind them points precisely to the fact that asymmetries and distortions of visibility and vision are taken into account as important normative aspects by those constructing them. 'To be able to see' or 'to be witness' to what happens at particular places can be seen in specific architectural contexts as a privilege for a select number of people and makes them powerful tools in shaping asymmetric power relations. Today for example, areas sectioned for Very Important People are only accessible to a select number of people, and numerous elements like curtains, walls, elevated stairs etc. block the direct sight of others wishing to see.

Visibility should therefore be looked on in my view 'as having the privilege to see what occurs on the other side of the fence' or not. This has two results in the environment of the Palaces; firstly, that clear physical boundaries between different groups of people are created, and secondly that the physical becomes symbolic in that the boundaries lead to an identification of the subjects' place in Minoan society.

Performances and visibility create a more sensible approach to the built environment in that they give us the possibility of focusing on two aspects crucial to studying Minoan palatial architecture, namely bodily movement in the form of processions and the visual experience of the people.

As a case study, I will discuss the Palace of Knossos beginning from the outside and working to the inside, a movement that has been proposed as the path taken by most of the visitors when these buildings were used for large public events. Since I cannot discuss every aspect of this Palace, I have decided to highlight only those elements that are in my opinion the most relevant: (1) The West Court with its raised walkways; (2) the Monumental Façade facing the rest of the town from the West; (3) the Central Court and

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[18] Thompson 2000; Simmel 1969; Thompson 2005: 31–51.

the elaboration of its surrounding inner facades.

West Court

A paved West Court forms the outer court and an integral part of the three biggest Minoan Palaces (Knossos, Phaistos, and Malia). In contrast with the Central Court this large open place was not defined by clear architectural boundaries, and has been identified as a large public place, 'the principal public plaza' for the entire Minoan community.[19] Although the West Court was accessible to everyone, one could argue that in the case of performative acts, a ritual, ceremony, or procession, circulation on these courts and their associated elements was far from open, because a normative code of behaviour was expected of the people when some kind of public event took place. In the West Court at Knossos (figure 1) there are some innovations that both guide and distinguish the actual people participating in the performance from the actual audience, and create clear architectural boundaries between both social spheres. First we have the raised walkways: each of them carefully constructed in white marble stone and with a width of between 1 and 1.4 m. These walkways created a triangle at the West Court and gave the impression that the west court was the central focal point for a circulation network that connected both the town and Palace with each other. Driessen has already argued that these ways could only be used for walking.[20] In the West Court they were not ordinary walkways but became an element of significance, and it seems that they served as procession ways regulating the movement of people both inside this court and from the west court towards the inner parts of the actual Palace. The elevated walkways distinguish between those that perform and those that observe. The largest processional way at Knossos, the Royal Road, runs directly towards a large elevated stairway or the so-called 'theatral area'[21] (figures 2, 3, 4) in the north of the West Court. It contains eighteen stairs, which ran in a west-eastern direction,

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[19] Palyvou 2004: 214-215.
[20] Driessen 2004: 79-80.
[21] Evans 1928: 578-587.

whose total height was 2.2 m.[22] The southern side also consisted of a flight of steps, although these were fewer in number (six). On the south side there was a square paved bastion built against it equipped with a platform. This paved platform could indeed be used to observe the performances in the actual theatre. We are able to observe that the theatrical area was arranged in such a way as to let people participate in the actual event on three levels. One could argue that the theatral area at Knossos created an architectural environment for social hierarchy, which had been translated into spatial order. If the paved bastion was indeed sectioned for the most prominent figures in Minoan society, then the two flights of steps could have functioned, as they stand, for the elite closest to the representatives of the community. On both sides of the raised walkway in the theatre a select number of people from the local community could take a place at ground level to observe the procession coming from the town and finishing in the theatre. In this way, the unique feature of the theatral area and its integration within the network of walkways gave the possibility to create a meaningful environment that codified existing boundaries between the different social tiers. However, the hierarchical positioning of people according to status could also function to (re-)shape and/or re-animate the socio-political fabric of the Neopalatial period during ceremonies ideological in nature. The theatral area and the positioning of the people within transferred a clear message of authority to the rest of the community that gathered in the West court. The theatrical area could function in two ways depending on the nature of the event, and was in this sense both generative of new patterns of social interaction and responsive to existing ones.

Moving away from the theatrical area, the procession routes penetrate the Palace from the West Court at the north and western entrance; they continue to the Central Court along narrow corridors and they both stop abruptly in front of it. Based on evidence from other palaces like Malia and Phaistos one could argue that the penetration of the building by a raised walkway is rather the

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[22] Graham 1962: 180: 'The stairs are each not higher than 12cm'; Evans 1928: 581.

rule than the exception.[23] The creation of a path between the West and Central Court is to be seen as one of the most interesting achievements. No matter how often people might have gone back and forth between the West and Central Courts and connected them subjectively, it was only in visibly impressing the path on the surface of the earth that both these places were objectively connected. The will for connecting both places resulted in the shaping of things, a shaping that resulted in the raised walkways that freeze the movement between the West and Central Courts into a clearly prescribed route. Since the width is rather small, it is reasonable to argue that when people walked the raised walkways, they formed a line-up in front of the entrance, as they entered the Palace one by one, and created a form of procession from the outside to the inside.

Iconographical evidence and the layout of the western entrance at Knossos provide us with extra proof that this processional behaviour was indeed the case (figure 5). The east wall of the Propylon was decorated with a life-size fresco of a galloping bull. According to Hallager, this type of fresco was placed on prominent places to express power and authority, as it symbolically guarded the access towards the Palace.[24] It seems to have been carefully chosen to flank the entrance to the building, as if people had to overcome symbolically the strong and powerful bull.

Furthermore, the entrance was flanked by a guardroom that only enforced the difficulty of crossing the boundary from the outside to the inside. Once these boundaries were crossed visitors ended up in the Corridor of the Procession, that contained a life-size fresco depicting young men and women who were walking behind each other in an inwards direction (figure 6).[25]

A close look at the fresco shows that the central person (a woman) is approaching a group of four standing on a higher level than her. This kind of elevation is argued to be a symbolical marker or 'station', where people stand

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[23] Palyvou 2004: 214 argued that they penetrate the building 'in a symbolic manner, as if the town is invading the Palace'.
[24] Hallager 1995: 547-555.
[25] Evans 1921: 214–15; Evans 192: 660–685,758.

still and bring offerings before proceeding further in the procession that had most probably the Central Court as its final destination, as is shown by the procession of figures right of the group of four. The architectural elaboration of the west entrance speaks in favour of the behaviour shown in the procession fresco being the representation of a real life situation that occurred in Minoan times. The so-called guard room and room with the seat could serve as spaces where the group of four could stand or sit when observing the activities in the West Court. One could argue that at Knossos the iconographical repertoire is perfectly chosen to explain the function and the symbolic value of this entrance. The western entrance as a main public entrance worked to separate and to unify at the same time, as is also expressed by the iconography. The bull created a clear distinction, a stop. The procession fresco on the other hand initiated the continuum once access was gained to the corridor. Further on, the corridor turns sharply to the east and after some metres very sharply towards the north, in order to reach another corridor that gave direct access to the Central Court. In this corridor a large fresco of a young man was depicted, who is to be identified as a Priest-King.[26]

It seems that at this entrance people really had to line up in a procession to catch a glimpse of the splendour behind the fence of the Monumental western Façade (figure 6). In this way, it seems clear that access from the outside to the inside was tightly controlled, and when processions occurred at the Palaces the movement inwards appears to have been an act of social selection.

Central Court

Based on the study of circulation patterns one could argue that the strong similarities in layout between the different palaces create a common syntax of circulation and accessibility in these compounds.[27] When we look at the circulation pattern of the Palace of Knossos (figure 7) one could argue that the Central Court forms the most dominant and integrated space in the complex

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[26] Immerwahr 1990: 53; Hood 2005: 55.
[27] Palyvou 1987: 195-203; Preziosi 1983; Letesson 2005: 131-163.

because one had to pass the Central Court before gaining access to the deeper parts of the Palace.[28] Internally, there seems to be progressively restricted movement within the complex through a series of transition spaces, such as doorways and stairs, that form the link between the Central Court and the regions that lie deeper in the complex (figure 8). If we look at the Central Court as the stage in a theatre performance, we can in general argue that the spaces, which lie deeper in the map, away from the Central Court, represent everything that is backstage: a domain away from the eyes of the visitor. Whatever happened in these deeper parts was not directly seen by those who entered the Knossian palace through the west entrance.

When we look at the immediate surroundings of the Central Court at Knossos, it has to be noted that the court is surrounded on all sides by Monumental Façades, which create a closed off world of luxury with strong colour schemes, the use of marbles, pillars, and lots of innovations such as balconies with wooden balustrades, and the Tripartite Shrine at the western inner façade. Since no other buildings in Minoan times can be compared with such splendour, one can argue that the Central Court of the Palace was intentionally invested with symbolism, creating a meaningful space for those who could observe its splendour.[29]

But what are the indications that the Central Court was really so important after all? It is interesting to note that soundings underneath the Central Court of Knossos proved occupation going back to the Neolithic.[30] The Central Court was at that time already an open place, but not so clearly marked by architectural boundaries. This favours the view that access to this place was controlled and institutionalized during the Palatial periods so that it played an important role in producing and reproducing normative notions of power and authority. Preziosi worked out the hypothesis of a possible east-west orientation and stated that the core of the Minoan Palaces was the square

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[28] The words syntax and integration are derived from the work of Hillier and Hanson 1984 on 'space syntax theory'. More information about the possibilities of this method and its applications can be found on www.spacesyntax.org
[29] Further information about the Palace's form and function see Hiesel and Matthäus 2001; Matthäus 2001: 57-73.
[30] Evans 1994: 1-20.

formed by the Central Court and the west wing where the religious structures were situated (figure 9). For the Palace of Knossos the exact centre of this square is the middle of the Tripartite Shrine; it is to be seen as the major ritual area around the Central Court. This could prove that religious considerations formed the core for the further layout of the Palace.[31] If the Tripartite Shrine[32] indeed formed the major point of access for the procession, then this is an extra reason for enclosing the Central Court from the outside.

Furthermore, the Central Court of Knossos and its construction with a line of sight to the Peak Sanctuary of Juktas should be mentioned (figures 10, 11). At the north entrance, a processional road enters the Palace and ends immediately in the Central Court at its north end. It is interesting to observe that the Juktas sanctuary is almost directly situated on the elongated axis of this processional walkway. This could be proof that in the Palace's layout, one of the ruling principles was that the orientation of this northern passageway had to be in line with the actual sanctuary on the Juktas hill. The geographical positions and the intervisibility between Juktas and other sanctuary sites in the environment, with the Ida and Kamares caves on the one hand and the Psychro cave on the other, create an interesting pattern (figure 12).[33] This geometrical pattern suggests a triangular relationship between all three sanctuaries, with Knossos acting as the final point in the configuration, and Juktas as the religious mediator. Since these sanctuaries pre-date the Knossian Palace, these observations give the impression that the builders of the Palace were aware of this configuration and constructed the building in such a way that the 'node' of Knossos integrates perfectly with the triangle formed by Juktas, the Idaean (Kamares on the other side of the mountain) and the Psychro Cave, which proves again that religious and ideological considerations played an essential role in the placement, orientation, and construction of the Palace of Knossos.

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[31] Preziosi 1983: 419.
[32] Shaw 1978: 429-448.
[33] A brief description and further bibliography for the different caves and peak sanctuaries highlighted in this article see Watrous 1996; Doxtater 2009 studied the geographical relationships between the Palaces, Caves, and Peak Sanctuaries in detail.

Conclusions

To summarize, the evidence presented by the Palace of Knossos gives the impression that the spatial arrangement and layout of the setting created a suitable environment that forces the visitor to pass from the outside to the inside in the form of a procession. According to Richard Schechner, processions are a kind of 'natural theatre':[34] an event passes along a prescribed path, in this case the raised walkways, spectators gather along the route, and the procession stops at appointed places where performances take place. In a specific context like Knossos, these processions could have had ceremonial and symbolic importance, characteristics that distinguish these kinds of actions from daily ones. It seems that at Knossos these processions were exclusive, which means that only a minority of the community was able to take part in these processions; this is clearly indicated in the architecture of the procession ways, which are elevated above ground level to create a clear boundary between those that perform and can enter the Palace and those that observe and only can guess at the splendour behind the Monumental Façade. This creates a physical and symbolic fence between those standing in the West Court and the Central Court.

The act of 'closing off' the Central Court and the further layout of the Palace could indeed be taken as coming from religious motives; an indication that its builders tried to control access to this space, as is proved by the presence of guardrooms facing the major entrances.

When people visited and interacted with the Central Court, this communication and identification process resulted in a conceptual understanding of those who were in, and those who were out. It also led to an understanding of the privilege they had to have access to the place were the Tripartite Shrine was situated, something that made it a very exclusive matter to make offerings in front of this shrine in the central court. 'To be able to see' both the Tripartite shrine and the splendid view to Juktas from the central

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[34] Schechner 1988: 159-60.

court was reserved to a select number of people, creating a collective identity for those who had access to it. Although we cannot identify the different social tiers, it seems unreasonable to suppose that the building of an architectural mega structure like the Minoan palace could be achieved without the authority of a higher elite that collected and managed all necessary resources for the building project.

In accepting this, the evidence presented makes it plausible that the Palatial settings were arranged and elaborated logically in the particular manner that suited the users' economic, political and social needs and that people aimed at creating the most suitable environment to enhance and legitimize their status, influence and power.[35] This favours the idea that architecture is meaningful on itself, something that sounds very simple, but is at the same time very difficult to accept in archaeological research. Architectural settings are human made creations and are therefore cultural artefacts: they are meaningful for those who interact with them. The builders exploit the different layers of facade, interior and exterior as a medium for expression.[36] Therefore, these spaces are made meaningful and constitute a symbolic language, a visual language that speaks for itself.

In this way, the spatial configuration of the Knossian Palace and the iconography in these spaces constitute a specific narrative for the building, whereby bodily movement in the form of a procession should be seen as the action, which takes the person moving to the Central Court that forms the end zone. One could argue that the movement from the main public entrance to the Central Court was a controlled narrative, wherein people were literally 'guided' to read space in a specific order. The processions that occurred at the Minoan Palaces did not just describe or imitate the order of the lived-in world of the Minoans; instead, the ritual performance is the poesis of order and this order exists only because it is performed.

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[35] This assumption is generally supported by studies of the Roman house. See Anderson 2004: 144-156 (esp. 146); Wallace-Hadrill 1994; Grahame 2000; Laurence 1994.
[36] Brant 1994.

To come to the metaphor of language,[37] this should be understood as promoting the view that architecture tells us something about society and is not simply a container. The production of the built space (writing) by its builders is the result of their reflections about 'why' these complexes should be built in those particular ways. The movement of people in this setting can be seen as an act of reading; to be seen as a person who experiences the different deeper meanings inside the different layers in order to identify himself within this context. Speaking refers to the people inside and outside the building, for all are affected by the large amount of visual information. Speaking can therefore be seen as two-fold: on one side there is the interaction between people and the responsive environment, on the other there is the interaction between the people themselves.

The integrative approach above has shown that it is plausible to see the setting of the Minoan Palace as a medium for the expression of asymmetric power relations in Minoan society.

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[37] This approach is based on the writings of Moore 1986.

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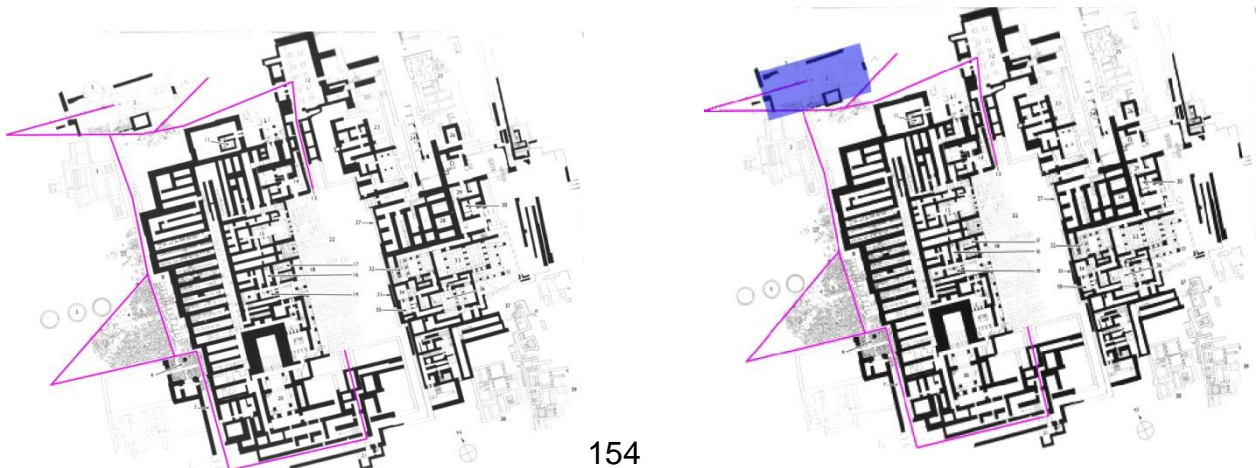Figure 12: Triangular relationship between these sanctuaries (own picture)
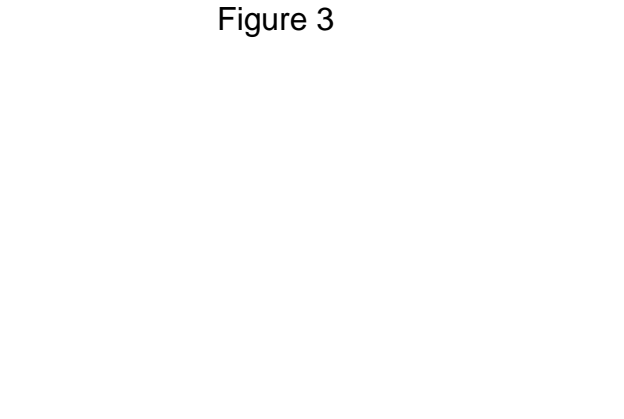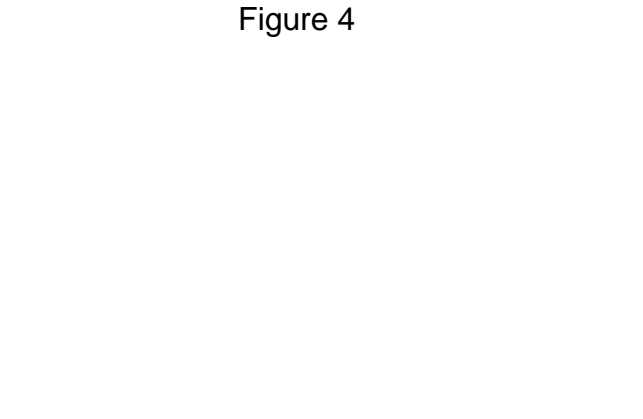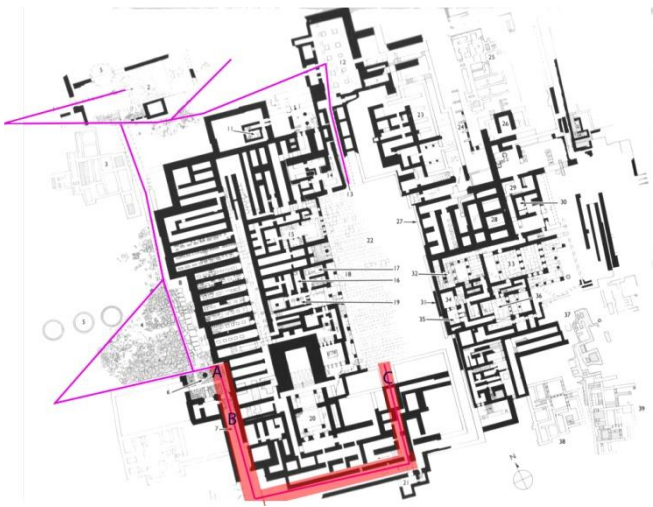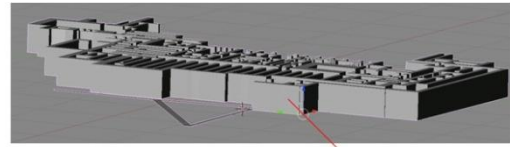
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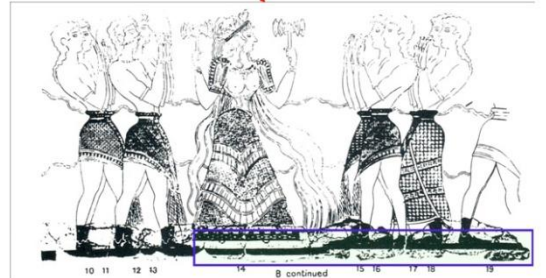Figure 6

Figure 9

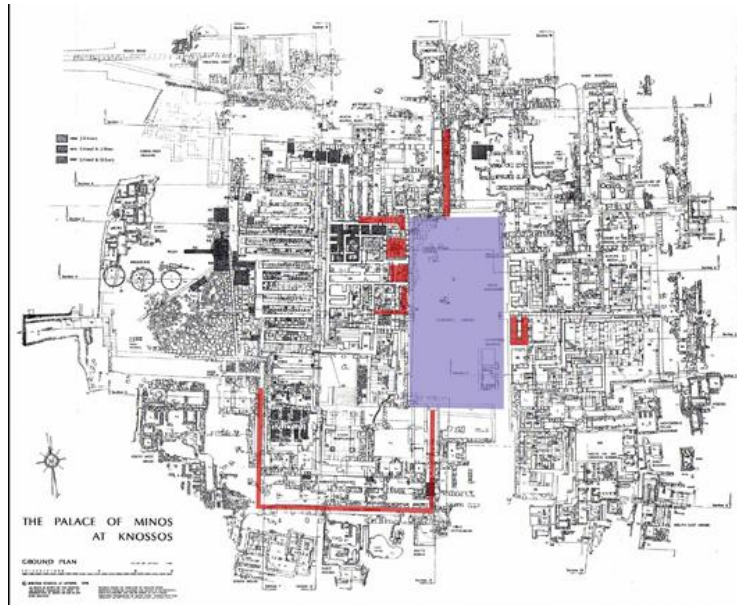Figure 7
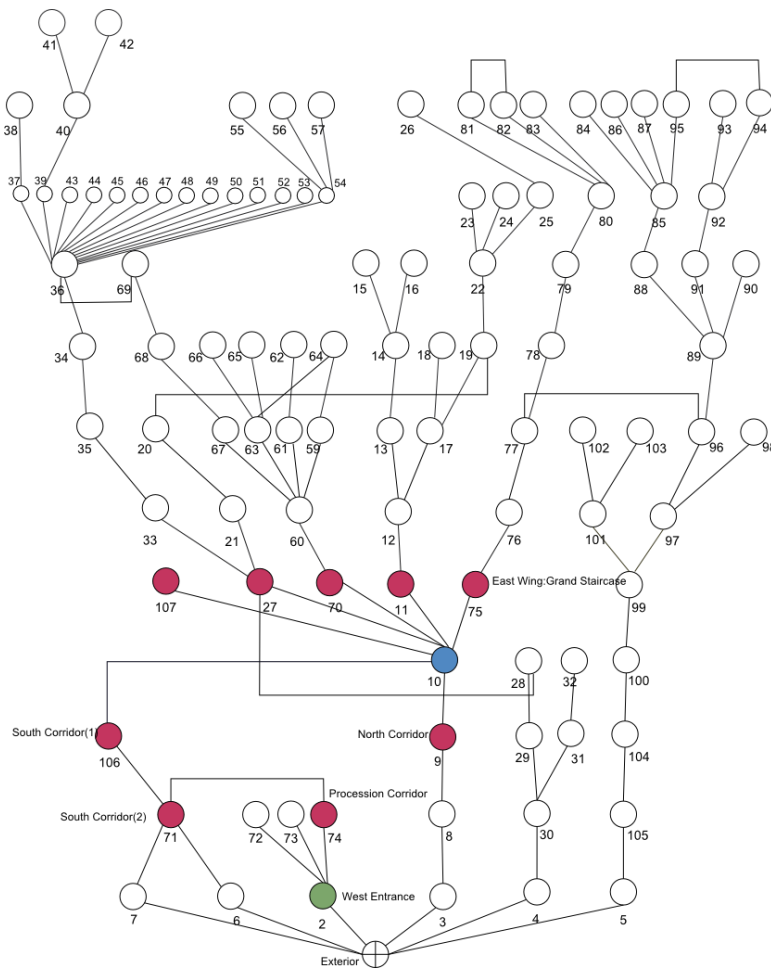

Figure 8

Figure 10   Figure 11

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