

12-2010

## **Models for Interpreting Consumption and Identity: The Case of House X from Minoan Kommos**

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Models for Interpreting Consumption and Identity:  
The Case of House X from Minoan Kommos

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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Submitted to the LSU Honors College in partial fulfillment of  
the Upper Division Honors Program.

December, 2010

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Baton Rouge, Louisiana

The Minoan harbor town of Kommos in Crete (fig. 1) is an important site not only as a possible satellite of the nearby palace center at Phaistos (fig. 2), but also as an indicator of probable non-palatial life in Minoan Crete. The site is large and includes a civic center along with many well-preserved homes. The largest home (and one of the best preserved) is House X (fig. 3), which lies alongside a main thoroughfare just to one side of the civic center. This home can be used as a case study to understand the lives of those living there. Studies of consumption and trade in particular can shed light on the meanings of the material evidence. This paper seeks to show that there are indeed meanings encoded within the consumption that took place in House X and that these meanings can be identified by comparing patterns of distribution of different types of pottery and artifacts. First, I will introduce and examine various theories about consumption and trade, selecting approaches that appear valid for testing. I will then describe the site and House X, as well as the artifacts discovered, and I will compare the theoretical model to the home in an attempt to show that those living in House X consumed the things that they did at least in part because those commodities could send specific messages about their social status to others.

Social structures are particularly difficult to identify in Minoan Crete due to the lack of evidence we would normally use for gathering this information. Since there is no writing that can be deciphered from this period and little artistic or archaeological evidence that clearly makes reference to differing social status, we must rely on other sources. Therefore, this paper will take the form of an experiment, using only evidence from Kommos, in which I will attempt to demonstrate how a hierarchical social structure can be made visible by means of a theoretical analysis of the material record. To the

extent that it is successful, this paper can serve as the first stage of an inductive inquiry into ancient life.

### THEORETICAL APPROACHES

The use of a theoretical approach will be important for this paper because it can help provide a clear rationale for its claimed understanding of the material record from House X. By stating the objectives and motives clearly, the house and its contents can be interpreted within specific parameters that lead to conclusions about the meaning of the objects' existence and use. The focus of this paper will be on the consumption of goods at House X in Kommos, so the meaning of the term consumption should be clarified first. It can be viewed as the simple economic operation of purchasing or acquiring an object, the use of that object, its interpretation by the owner, or even the entire process that includes all of these components. Some writers seem to consider consumption as only the act of purchasing an object.<sup>1</sup> Others, however, have seen deeper meanings. Burns argues that consumption should be viewed as any use of a possession that is beyond simple commerce.<sup>2</sup> Dunn more generally states that consumption is “interdisciplinary [and] focused on culture.”<sup>3</sup> For this paper, a combination of these meanings will be considered, so that consumption can be viewed as not only driven by economic concerns, but also laden with cultural significance. Consumption, as a process, is thus complex, rather than simple. It is connected to concepts such as production, taste, desire, agency, and supply and demand. Each of these factors will also be taken into account and further discussed below.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Foxhall 1998, 295-297

<sup>2</sup> Burns 2010, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Dunn 2008, 2.

A full understanding of consumption must begin at the most fundamental levels of production, for the means of a good's production is deeply linked to its consumption. For this reason, a Marxist perspective can be quite useful, since this approach regards production as a key indicator of social issues and structures. Marxism began in archaeology as a materialist approach that emphasized the productive power of humans above all.<sup>4</sup> Marxists focused on a human-centered approach in which all cultural meanings had to be explained in social terms.<sup>5</sup> Here, goods are encoded with meanings derived from the fact that people produce goods in distinct ways that can be informative about their society.<sup>6</sup> Each production method is called a mode, and for each mode of production, different social distinctions exist (such as farmer, potter, metalsmith, etc.), causing people to relate to one another through the modes of production.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the people working to create an object are typically categorized as being in a different class from those buying it.<sup>8</sup> As Marxism has evolved within archaeological theory, greater emphasis has been placed on the importance of a society's ideological structure and how it can be seen in the material record. Attempts to view contradictions and inequalities within a society have also become a point of focus.<sup>9</sup> The concepts above show how inferences can be drawn from the very circumstances of an object's creation, even if on a basic level, about the society or societies in which it is found. For example, a large, well-decorated home with many fine objects inside can show that the people living there were in a different class from those who created the home and its contents, since they would

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson 1999, 92.

<sup>5</sup> Trigger 2006, 446.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson 1999, 93.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson 1999, 93; Trigger 2006, 332.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson 1999, 93.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson 1999, 95-96, Trigger 2006, 445.

have been distinguished by the modes of production. This can also provide information about social inequalities and perhaps the ideology of the people living in a community with such a home.

The concept of understanding objects in totality from their inception has also been explored by van der Leeuw, who has argued for a “dynamic” view of pottery in which people’s interactions with pottery are considered.<sup>10</sup> Here, we must look at the relationship between producer and consumer and the differences in their societies in order to understand the objects.<sup>11</sup> He also argues for a focus on the *chaîne opératoire*, which he defines as every step in an object’s production from the raw materials and tool(s) used, to the object’s use, and eventually its discard.<sup>12</sup> Every step in the life of an object and the process of its manufacture is considered in order to understand the significance of that object. According to van der Leeuw, the choices a potter makes about how to create a pot is based on preexisting ideas in his society’s culture about function, decoration, raw materials, technique, etc.<sup>13</sup> These theories, when considered in connection with the pottery of a specific dwelling, may help to shed light on the position of the people living there. The materials used for an object, its design, possible rarity, where it was created, and how long it was used are all factors that can be informative. By looking at the steps that would have been taken to create an object and the possible interactions that those creating the pottery may have had with those buying it, we may be able to see some indications of the society in which it was found.

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<sup>10</sup> van der Leeuw 1998, 117.

<sup>11</sup> van der Leeuw 1998, 118.

<sup>12</sup> van der Leeuw 1998, 123.

<sup>13</sup> van der Leeuw 1998, 123.

Specific steps in the consumption process should also be examined closely. The second of these steps (after production, above) would be shopping, or the process of acquiring items. Shopping is not always a simple act of consumerism. The process of shopping can convert an object that did not have personal meaning before into something the purchaser can identify with, changing its various preexisting meaning(s) and redefining the purchaser's relationship with it.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore converted from something simply "available" or "for sale" into a thing a person owns, which is therefore linked to them. The decision about what to buy is made by individuals who usually know at least some of their own intentions and motives, and because of this it can serve as a conscious or unconscious communicative act, demonstrating those intentions and motives.<sup>15</sup> The act of communicating through shopping is accomplished by display of symbols attached to consumption, such as the object's cost or purpose. The symbolic nature of consumption converts the intangible process of shopping and tangible material objects into parts of a personal identity.<sup>16</sup> For example, shopping at a high-end store, or buying "top of the line" brands are acts that, through their connection to elites, transmit symbols of status membership or aspirations to such status on the part of the buyer. Furthermore, there can be political implications to the conversion of an object from simply an available, purchasable product to one that has cultural value, depending on what information is communicated in its purchase.<sup>17</sup> For instance, shopping for objects associated with a particular role, like religious items, may be political since the consumer is making a statement about taking on that role and its status.

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<sup>14</sup> Cook, Yamin, McCarthy 1996, 54-55.

<sup>15</sup> Cook, Yamin, McCarthy 1996, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Cook, Yamin, McCarthy 1996, 53.

<sup>17</sup> Cook, Yamin, McCarthy 1996, 56.

Desire is another element of the consumption process that should be examined because it can clarify how the consumption of goods can be used to communicate. Foxhall argues that consumption of luxury goods does not begin with demand, or necessity, but rather with desire, or want. For her, it is important to consider that one cannot desire something one has never experienced, so the consumer has to have had contact with the object before they can consume it, either directly or indirectly by seeing it or being exposed to descriptions of it.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, desire is not always for things that are considered to be out of the ordinary, but is often for objects that are well-integrated into a society. The desire to consume objects can therefore be telling about a society since it can give some idea of the relationship between the self and consumption.<sup>19</sup> By desiring something, the consumer makes the consumption process more personal because fulfilling their desire becomes an external expression of their own internal thoughts about the object. Therefore, in looking at what specific people desired enough to consume, we may then be able to understand their conceptions about the objects they desired.

Through shopping acts, taste (or the consumer's preference for certain objects over others) can also be discerned, combining both the desire for an object and the frequency of its consumption. Taste is identifiable in the choices people make through consumption and the preferences that precipitate from those choices, giving agency to the act of consumption.<sup>20</sup> The meaning of an object is not inherent, but changes over time, is culturally and socially constructed, and differs from person to person. The consumer gives his or her own meaning to objects (see shopping, above) so the choices made about

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<sup>18</sup> Foxhall 1998, 297.

<sup>19</sup> Foxhall 1998, 298.

<sup>20</sup> Stahl 2001, 832-833.



which objects to consume (i.e. the consumer's "taste" for the objects) can demonstrate a pattern of meanings that are culturally specific.<sup>21</sup> For example, if evidence exists showing that a great deal of imported goods were consumed, then the consumers would have assigned their own meanings to these objects and in doing so demonstrated elements of their own culture. Therefore, in looking at the tastes of particular groups, not only are their choices visible, but the culture of their society is as well.

Combining these ideas about shopping, desire, and taste, it is possible to gather some understanding of how the meanings of consumption can be instantiated and communicated. Those who shopped for, desired, and expressed preference for the objects they consumed had motives behind these actions that can give clues about how they constructed their identity. By looking at the patterns of consumed objects it may therefore be possible to understand what sort of messages they were sending through these actions.

After the process of acquiring an object, the consumed object continues to develop new meanings within the societies that consumed it. Lifestyle and identity can be studied through consumption patterns, just as desire and taste can be. Dunn has defined lifestyle as "a pattern of individual or group behavior and activity that communicates taste preferences, customs, and habit through semiotic codes and sociocultural symbolism."<sup>22</sup> Goods associated with specific social groups or roles, such as tools, clothing, or professional equipment, shape one's lifestyle through the ways in which they are used, and lifestyle is demonstrated and/or altered through patterns of behavior and the use of objects.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the symbolic nature of material possessions helps shape identity, since the possessions with which one surrounds oneself affect how others see the

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<sup>21</sup> Stahl 2001, 829, 833.

<sup>22</sup> Dunn 2008, 128.

<sup>23</sup> Dunn 2008, 124, 128.

possessor and help to indicate one's identity, role within society, and membership or exclusion from group(s).<sup>24</sup> The consumed objects also may have helped the consumers to associate themselves with a certain group and also, if that group consisted of people who shared their identity, to show that association to people of possibly different statuses visiting the home. For example, if many objects related to a specific role are found together in a group, it may indicate that those objects had some specific cultural meaning that the consumers were attempting to use to associate themselves with a specific lifestyle or to demonstrate some aspect of their identity.

When considering the presence of imports it can be useful to use theory specifically related to their consumption. In contrast to other approaches already considered, Dietler has discussed the meaning of consumption from the perspective of historical anthropology, in which the social and cultural logic of the consumption process is examined for its consequences within societies.<sup>25</sup> For Dietler, it is important when attempting to understand the meanings behind consumption to look not only at what was accepted and consumed, but also to look at what was rejected and thus not consumed.<sup>26</sup> He focuses largely on the reinterpretation of foreign objects that happened in colonial societies, particularly in Iron Age France, and how imported objects are given specific meanings in the consuming society that are likely to be different from what was intended by those who created the object.<sup>27</sup> He points out that those consuming the object probably did not intend to emulate the object's makers, but instead wanted to enhance their own

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<sup>24</sup> Dunn 2008, 163, 173, 183.

<sup>25</sup> Dietler 1997, 483.

<sup>26</sup> Dietler 1997, 484.

<sup>27</sup> Dietler 1997, 486, 489.

status through selective adoption of foreign goods.<sup>28</sup> More recently, he has brought up the importance of recognizing agency with regard to the consumption of foreign goods. The choices made when consuming imports stem from preexisting social structures that constrain the range of meanings available for a consumed object to transmit.<sup>29</sup> Dietler also stresses the importance of not looking at all imported goods as prestige items simply because they were imported, but to examine carefully the context of their consumption and patterns of association to understand their true meaning.<sup>30</sup> A large number of imports found in a home, like House X, would have therefore probably not been used in the way that the foreign producers intended, but were instead used to enhance the status of the owners or to communicate something important about them to an audience. Therefore, the consumer chose to consume these imports because they were culturally predisposed to make that choice, but they did not adopt the object's originally intended function.

It is also worth considering in greater detail what sorts of meanings can be understood from the consumption of imported objects, since such a great number of them, as we shall see, have been found in House X. In contrast to theories explained above, for example, Burns has argued that the value of imported objects should be determined by their use instead of their production or other aspects of their history.<sup>31</sup> He focuses largely on how consumption of imported goods can be seen as a status-building mechanism. The connection between import consumption and status can be seen when the objects are viewed as an information system.<sup>32</sup> The imported objects become “pathways to power” by including meanings associated with far-away people and places,

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<sup>28</sup> Dietler 1997, 494.

<sup>29</sup> Dietler 2010, 55-57

<sup>30</sup> Dietler 1997, 489.

<sup>31</sup> Burns 2010, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Burns 2010, 29.

especially if an elite group there also used them (although even this is not necessary).<sup>33</sup>

The rare materials and styles of the objects make them seem exotic and they may then be used destabilize some other political power.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the conspicuous consumption of foreign goods may be associated with those attempting to build up their own status.<sup>35</sup>

Though Burns makes good points regarding the meaning of imports in connection with social status, his assertion that an object's use is more important than its production contradicts his statement that the materials and decoration can make the object exotic (since the materials and decoration are parts of the production process). It may be more useful to consider that the use of imported objects may be more important for this study than the use of non-imported goods, since the use the imports would give some information about the ways in which the owners adapted foreign objects for their own culturally-specific uses. His concepts regarding the ways imported objects could be related to building social status are of utmost importance, though, when considering the imports from House X. It may be possible to show that those living in House X were trying to use these objects not only to show some aspects of their identity, but also to help them to secure or enhance their social status and possibly local or even regional political power.

All of these theories, taken together, should allow for a well-defined interpretation of the consumption at House X. The broadest approaches, such as the Marxist approach and that of van der Leeuw's *chaîne opératoire*, allow for a more overarching interpretation in which the society as a whole is considered instead of just those living in House X. The theories regarding shopping, taste, and desire represent not only the

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<sup>33</sup> Burns 2010, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Burns 2010, 33.

<sup>35</sup> Burns 2010, 34.

progression seen in the consumption process, but also a shift in focus, specifically towards the inhabitants of House X who bought, used, and displayed them. Finally, the arguments of Dunn, Dietler, and Burns can demonstrate the specific ways in which those living in House X used the objects they owned, especially the imports, to formulate a specific identity for themselves within their society.

### CASE STUDY OF HOUSE X AT KOMMOS

The Minoan harbor town of Kommos (fig. 1) has been excavated extensively over the past 30 years by Joseph and Maria Shaw. The extensive finds there have included a series of very large civic buildings built one after the other and several houses on the hillsides north and south of the center. The town was probably established around 2000 BCE and was abandoned about eight hundred years later. After it was abandoned, a small Greek temple was built on the ruins and used for over a thousand years.<sup>36</sup>

Extensive settlement of the town began in the Middle Minoan period (MMIB – 2000-1700 BCE), when the many houses found on the hilltop and south hillside were built. An earthquake seems to have destroyed most of these houses. Instead of being remodeled, they were completely rebuilt.<sup>37</sup> The stratified pottery found in the houses and the civic center show the ceramic development at the site and help to provide relative dates.<sup>38</sup> The earliest of the monumental civic buildings, which took the form of a court surrounded by retaining walls, is dated to the Middle Minoan II period, just after the founding of the nearby palace complex at Phaistos. After the earthquake that destroyed the surrounding houses, the court was remodeled with a stoa along its north side.<sup>39</sup> This

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<sup>36</sup> Shaw 2006, 16-18.

<sup>37</sup> Shaw 2006, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Shaw 2006, 29.

<sup>39</sup> Shaw 2006, 30-33.

building is reportedly similar in size to the west court at Phaistos (approximately 30 meters on each side), making it unclear whether there was some sort of administrative palatial activity taking place here or whether the palatial style was recreated for commercial purposes.<sup>40</sup>

Of the homes at Kommos, House X (fig. 3) is the largest, measuring 260 square meters on its lower floor alone.<sup>41</sup> It is relatively freestanding, differentiating it from other homes that were situated much more closely together.<sup>42</sup> The house stood at a crossroads with its south side, which was alongside the east-west road, raised on a terrace.<sup>43</sup> It contains many special architectural features including a lightwell, a large stone threshold, and (uniquely at Kommos) representational frescoes.<sup>44</sup> The house was probably built during the Late Minoan IA (around 1500 BCE) period and was occupied continuously for about 200 years, with three phases of occupation visible in most spaces.<sup>45</sup>

House X contains some twelve or thirteen rooms on its lower level, not including ancillary spaces such as halls and staircases.<sup>46</sup> The rooms are described beginning at the entryway on the south side, and from there as if one walked through the house heading west, then north, then east. Particular attention will be paid to imports found in each room, and those for which no specific provenience was given will be discussed at the end of this section.

Room X9 was the main entryway into the house. It was the largest room and may or may not have had a roof covering it. Fragments of painted plaster have been found in

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<sup>40</sup> Shaw 2006, 35; Watrous, Hadzi-Vallianou, Blitzer 2004, 289.

<sup>41</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1990, 364.

<sup>42</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1990, 364.

<sup>43</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 2006, 19.

<sup>44</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1993, 131; Shaw 2009, 2.

<sup>45</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1993, 131.

<sup>46</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1993, 134.

the Late Minoan I stratigraphy here, indicating that it was probably one of the earliest rooms of the home.<sup>47</sup> Two Egyptian marl clay “pilgrim” flasks, probably for holding unguents or wine, were found here, along with Egyptian amphorae, and an oval-mouthed amphora with linear decorations from Gavdos in the Libyan Sea.<sup>48</sup>

Room X8 was a long rectangular room with slabs on its floor where a fire had been built in a simple hearth. It may have had a roof, but its walls were not sturdy enough to support a second story. The hearth, along with the presence of cooking ware, seems to indicate that this room was a space for food production.<sup>49</sup> Imported wares found in this room included an Egyptian carinated bowl and some Canaanite jars (fig. 4).<sup>50</sup> It also had painted plaster walls, under which were found what the excavators have called “doodles”, which they hypothesized were produced by an apprentice practicing here since the rudimentary drawings were painted over.<sup>51</sup> Room X14 is also important because fragments were found in it of a representational fresco depicting a colorful spiral frieze. Here also was found a shell necklace, which the excavators have been able to reconstruct (fig. 5).<sup>52</sup>

Room X7 is one of the most important spaces in the home due to the presence of a “house shrine” there (figs. 6, 7). Evidence for Minoan house shrines has been found at a number of sites, usually taking the form of a small chamber within the house, but the equipment used in them varies at each.<sup>53</sup> In the early twentieth century, Sir Arthur Evans emphasized house shrines as centers of worship, but evidence found later has indicated

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<sup>47</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1993, 139-140.

<sup>48</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 2006, 647-649, 672-674.

<sup>49</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1993, 140-142.

<sup>50</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 2006, 647-653.

<sup>51</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1993, 140-142.

<sup>52</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1993, 156-158.

<sup>53</sup> Cullen 2001, 437; Nilsson 1971, 77.

that in actuality, most Minoan worship probably took place in palatial or extra-urban nature shrines.<sup>54</sup> The space in X7 is rather small and squarish in shape. The earliest strata do not indicate much ritual use except for the presence of a closed-shape perforated vessel that may have been used as a sort of sprinkler, akin to a rhyton. In the last phase of the room's use, however, a small slab table was set up in the southwest corner of the room. On the table were two milk jugs, a conical cup containing a pebble and a few shells, and bivalve shells. To the side of the table were a brazier and an incense burner that had probably fallen from a wooden shelf or table. Pottery was found under the slab table in stacks, indicating that that they were probably *in situ*. One dish was full of ash, probably burnt incense or ritually burned offerings. There was also a small flat slab in front of the table on which the brazier probably sat. Next to the slab were found small beach pebbles and a triton shell. All told, this room produced five braziers, three incense burners, two kalathoi, two milk jugs, six conical cups, two bowls, and a badly fragmented Canaanite jar.<sup>55</sup>

Another special find from X7 was a steatite lentoid seal depicting a flying bird (fig. 8). It was found on the shrine and is thought to have perhaps been an offering. It was perforated and stranded, possibly to be worn as a bracelet. On the seal is depicted a bird whose tail is turning into something resembling the flounced skirt of female Minoan dress. This motif is similar to those often called monsters or demonic figures similar to those found in east Crete, at Zakros.<sup>56</sup> This transformation may also represent a Minoan

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<sup>54</sup> Marinatos 1993, 112. G. Gesell and M. Nilsson provide further information on Minoan house shrines, although most of the information provided in their writings is not relevant to this study.

<sup>55</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1993, 149-153.

<sup>56</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1993, 149-153.



goddess making an epiphany in the form of a bird to her worshippers, since flying birds are often thought to represent a god about to, or having already made an epiphany.<sup>57</sup>

Room X4 presented several special finds as well. Remains of a plaster molding used for a low bench running around the room and covered in white plaster have been found.<sup>58</sup> A small painted pyxis was found here, perforated for suspension, and decorated with floral and scale motifs (figs. 9, 10). It was found intact on the floor next to the window where it probably hung. The shallow lid found nearby was used as a container for the beads that were found scattered about the floor.<sup>59</sup> Further items found in this space include a pithos, a cooking pot, a large jug, conical cups, and a strange four-handled jar.<sup>60</sup> Imported items included an especially rare Egyptian glass vessel with polychrome scalloped patterns (fig. 11), along with Canaanite jars and a part of a Cypriot set of a carinated cup and jug.<sup>61</sup>

Room X1 was likely used for storage and may have at one point been converted into a small kitchen. It is long and narrow and contained a hearth, two conical cups, a conical bowl, a teacup, a cooking pot, a Cypriot jug, loomweights, part of a stone lamp, and fishhooks. Fragments of a plaster fresco depicting white lilies on a yellow background were found here (fig. 12).<sup>62</sup> This space is thought to have been a closet for space X4 directly to its south, with the rooms connected by a large doorless entryway. The frescoes, then, were probably dumped in X1 during a remodeling of X4.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Shaw 1991, 4; Dickinson 1994, 279.

<sup>58</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1990, 351.

<sup>59</sup> Shaw 1991, 3.

<sup>60</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1993, 153-154.

<sup>61</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 2006, 647-658.

<sup>62</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1993, 154-156.

<sup>63</sup> Shaw 2009, 4.

Room X2 is a small square room that had three large pithoi embedded in its pebble floor. Here were found two steatite seals, one decorated with incised concentric circles surrounded by a dotted circle, and the other with abstract incised decoration on either side (figs. 13, 14). Further finds include an Egyptian amphora, a veined marble alabastron, loomweights, a miniature cup, a tripod pot, a brazier, and a clay figuring of a seated female figurine which may indicate some ritual activity took place here.<sup>64</sup> More fragments of frescoes were also found in this space. Here they depict floral motifs in blue and green on a red background. The plants overlap, creating a naturalistic representation.<sup>65</sup>

Though there is not much information about room X3, there is evidence for imports there. A matched pair of thin-walled, white painted, wheelmade Cypriot jugs or tankards was found in it, which the excavators found to be especially important because they compromise an identifiable set of pottery.<sup>66</sup>

Rooms X5 and X6 were both open rooms with many doorways and special architectural features. Room X5 had a lightwell in its southeast corner and evidence for burning on the floors has led to the assumption that it was a utilitarian space.<sup>67</sup> Here, the imported wares included Canaanite jars, a brown-burnished Syro-Palestinian piriform juglet, an almost complete Mycenaean angular alabastron and two Mycenaean ampharoid kraters.<sup>68</sup> Room X6 had a large slanted stone slab on the floor that led to the lightwell in X5, indicating activities using liquids may have happened here.<sup>69</sup> This may be considered

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<sup>64</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1993, 144-148; J. Shaw and M. Shaw 2006, 647-649.

<sup>65</sup> Shaw 2009, 9-11.

<sup>66</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 2006, 653-658.

<sup>67</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1993, 148-149.

<sup>68</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 2006, 649-653, 666-672.

<sup>69</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1993, 142-143.

an example of the “well-known Minoan interest in personal hygiene and hydraulic systems.”<sup>70</sup> Bones and shells were found here along with cups, a goblet, and a bowl, which may indicate that food preparation or dining were linked to the washing slab here.<sup>71</sup> Imported objects were also found in this room and include the rest of the set of a Cypriot set of a carinated cup and jug (the other fragments were found in room X4), a Mycenaean Vapheio cup (fig. 15), and a large Gavidot stirrup jar decorated with enormous cross-hatched loops.<sup>72</sup>

The final room of significance in House X is X10, which had few finds except for a small boukranion. This is an important find because it presents further evidence of the importance of religious practice in this home.<sup>73</sup>

In addition to the imports discussed above, another group of imports existed: those which the excavators gave no specific provenience within the home. They should be discussed because they make up such a large part of the material record from House X, most having been found in stratigraphy corresponding to the middle of the home’s occupation. Kommos, as a site, has the largest number of off-island imports of any site from Bronze Age Crete.<sup>74</sup> This includes the largest number of extra-Aegean pots and over 350 recognized and inventoried imports.<sup>75</sup> Many of these imports come from House X, making this a particularly important category of finds for this study. For example, the Egyptian finds from House X comprise one-sixth of the finds from Egypt for the whole site, which the excavators consider an astounding number for a single home.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Shaw 1991, 2.

<sup>71</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1993, 142-143.

<sup>72</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 2006, 653-658, 666-674.

<sup>73</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 1993, 137.

<sup>74</sup> Rutter 2004, 189.

<sup>75</sup> Rutter 2004, 189.

<sup>76</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 2006, 649.

These objects for which no provenience was given include some fragments of Cypriot white slip milk bowls, a Cypriot transport vessel, a total of twenty-two Western Anatolian jugs, one Western Anatolian basin, a white Cycladic jug, a painted medium-fine micaceous linear closed-body Aegean vessel, an unpainted Kytheran strap-handled micaceous cooking ware bowl, three Kytheran wares of uncertain shape, a Mycenaean goblet, and a Mycenaean bridge-spouted jug.<sup>77</sup>

Furthermore, there is a final group of imports for which no provenience was given comprised of fine wheelmade Gray Ware of a disputed origin. This includes one small askos and several fragments found throughout the home. These objects have been argued to be Italian, Anatolian, and Mycenaean, but none of these origins seem to be correct.<sup>78</sup> They seem to have been imitations of stone vases for which there was no great local demand.<sup>79</sup>

## ANALYSIS

With the house and its contents now described, it is possible to interpret them according to the models explained above. Firstly, it is important to demonstrate how social stratification at Kommos is visible through the consumption at House X, because the existence of a stratified society allows for the consumption in the house to be interpreted as an indicator of the inhabitants' expression of their particular place in society, as defined by their roles, resources, and constant consumption-based status competitions. The theories of Marx and van der Leeuw are especially useful in this case. The first hints of a social hierarchy are visible through the deployment of the Marxist perspective and its concept of modes of production. House X is extremely large, well

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<sup>77</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 2006, 653-672.

<sup>78</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 2006, 678-679.

<sup>79</sup> J. Shaw and M. Shaw 2006, 678-680.

decorated, and full of artifacts. These facts suggest a difference between the home's occupants and its builders. The inhabitants of this home apparently did not produce the home and its contents for themselves, since among the many objects recovered there is no evidence of industrial activity in the home. We must, then, infer that other members of the community produced finished goods for them. The example of the "doodles" from room X8 is telling: the excavators believe an apprentice from outside the home created them. Therefore, an understanding of the modes of production of the home and its contents allows the conclusion to be drawn that the people living in House X were of a high status, relative to others, since they were able to bring others in to do their work, even creating non-essential decoration for them, and to compensate them in some way.

Furthermore, the distinction in status between those who produced for House X and those who lived in it is reinforced by van der Leeuw's approach. It is impossible to know each step in the *chaîne opératoire* for the objects found here, but attempts at such an analysis can be informative. Any example of locally produced pottery from House X had at least two groups of people involved in its *chaîne opératoire*: the producers and the consumers.<sup>80</sup> The lack of overlap between the two groups therefore emphasizes their differing social status. While these conclusions are basic, they are necessary to create a groundwork for further interpretation of the consumption within the home and how the people of House X used consumption to communicate their membership in a higher class and their status roles.

The use of consumption by the inhabitants of House X for sending messages about their status becomes evident when we look to those theories that deal particularly

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<sup>80</sup> These groups are clearly distinguishable since the inhabitants did not take part in the creation of the objects and the producers did not use them once they were consumed.

with the process of consumption. This process, as described above, can be a very complex one, involving many different steps. First, the consumers made certain choices about what to consume. As Dietler points out, these choices and the consumers' intentions are formed out of a social predisposition to make them. Their choices also demonstrate their desire, as described by Foxhall, for the objects and that they had previously been exposed to fine things, such as high-quality imports and local wares. This may indicate that there was likely some sort of precedent at Kommos or in the region for consuming objects like the imports or religious objects from House X, such as an elite type of consumption, which those in House X were modeling themselves upon as participants or aspiring participants in that group. If this were the case, then their desire for and choices to consume these objects is indicative of a preexisting type of status competition at the site. This is demonstrated by the fact that there are other homes within the site where imported objects are found (though not as frequently as at House X). So, we can see that imports like those from House X were already a factor in the community at Kommos or the surrounding area and that the inhabitants of House X were choosing to consume these objects that were somehow related to examples they had already encountered through status competitions.

One aspect of their consumption was the act of shopping for these items, which, as already noted, endowed objects with new meanings through their connection to a new owner. These meanings were manifest in their symbolism to buyers and other observers. Here, those symbols would have been associated with the high quality and greater cost of the objects they were shopping for, such as the pyxis and the Egyptian glass vessel, both from room X4, whose symbols of elite status would have been based in the rarity of these

objects, their fine materials, and even the distance they would have travelled to get to Kommos. The fact that the inhabitants of House X had the resources to shop for such luxuries was linked to their position in a higher class and their elite status was transmitted and reinforced by the symbolic nature of the imported goods. By shopping for objects such as the Canaanite jar from the house shrine in X7 or the female figurine from room X2, they were also sending political messages about their status through import consumption and their religious role in the community through their consumption of religious items.

The taste for luxury objects, as defined by Stahl above, can therefore be seen as a manifestation of desire and of the shopping process, since it is constructed both by what the consumer wants to consume and what he or she does actually consume over time. Through taste the consumer's agency in the consumption process can truly be seen, demonstrating over time what the overall message they were trying to send was. The inhabitants of House X consumed many fine local wares and a very large number of imported goods (though, as Dietler points out, we should not blindly consider all imports to be luxury goods). That they consumed a larger number of religious and imported objects than any other objects over the 200 years they lived in the house, shows that they had a distinct preference, or taste, for these objects and wanted to send the messages discussed above to observers continuously.

The ways in which the inhabitants of House X showed their identity through consumption becomes even more apparent when we consider Dunn's model about lifestyle, identity, and consumption in combination with those theories regarding the process of consumption. Since lifestyle can be viewed by means of the consumption of

goods related to particular roles or groups, we can say that the people of House X had a lifestyle associated with elite status because they consumed fine objects that would have been linked to such a status. By selecting such objects they identified themselves with roles (such as religion), allowing the objects to become indicators of their lifestyle. So, not only were they sending messages about their status via the process of consumption, but they were also using these objects that they now possessed to demonstrate their identity as a member of a particular group, continuing to send similar messages as time went on.

The messages the inhabitants of House X were trying to send, beyond simply advertising their status, may have been meant to associate them with particular role(s) they played at Kommos. Though the fine goods and number of imports do send messages of their higher status, which were related to their modes of production and the *chaîne opératoire*, there were other messages being sent that can be understood by looking at the distribution of different types of artifacts from within the house. Thus, it may be, as previously mentioned, that the inhabitants were attempting to associate themselves with some religious role at the site by means of acquiring a great deal of religious paraphernalia. This would include nearly all the contents of room X7, including the shrine and the pottery associated with it, the female figurine from room X2, and the small boukranion from room X10. The inhabitants of House X had a desire for these objects and were performing according to a culturally specific model. Purchasing these objects would have sent messages to others that they were involved in religious activity. Then, by having them in their home, their lifestyle and identity would have been associated with religion as a part of their role in society.



The other major group of artifacts that may have been used to demonstrate their identity is comprised of imports. Because these objects were so plentiful in the house, they should be regarded as especially important for discerning the meaning of consumption there. Burns has argued that imports were consumed in order to build status and/or to attempt to build power by showing association with far-away people and places. Following on the analysis outlined above, it is possible to say that the inhabitants were consuming these objects not only to show that they were of a higher status but were also using them to build on that status (perhaps through feasting, see below) and link themselves with already powerful people. In shopping for these objects they sent political messages, connecting themselves with symbols of power and wealth. By owning them, they reinforced these concepts, integrating the idea of political power and high status into their lifestyle and identity.

When analyzing the imports, it becomes evident that there are certain types of goods that were consumed. The groups of imports that occur most frequently include many Egyptian flasks and amphorae, Canaanite jugs and jars, Cypriot drinking sets, Western Anatolian jugs, Aegean cooking wares, and Mycenaean drinking wares. As Dietler points out, it is important to consider what was actually consumed and what was rejected. Here we can see that the objects most consumed were those associated with eating and drinking. The lack of other types of imports is a sign that the owners of the house must have rejected other objects, which they for some reason did not consider worth consuming, demonstrating their taste for these types of items in particular. This may add another dimension to the concept that they were consuming imports to build their status and power, in which there is an aspect of these actions related to eating and

drinking. Perhaps the best way for the owners of the home to make these imported objects visible was to use them when others dined with them, making dining a venue for status competition as religion apparently was as well. If this sort of status competition was the case, they would have been demonstrating their identity as people who had the fortune to possess such things, as people who associated themselves with distant places, and as people who had the power to maintain some higher role in society at Kommos to their guests.

This hypothesis is reinforced by Dietler's concept of the diacritical feast in which feasting was used as a means to show social rank through consumption of special foods or goods.<sup>81</sup> These feasts defined elite status membership and put the act of social competition into a specific arena.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, if feasting was indeed the intended use of the imports, then the inhabitants of House X were using them to mark their inclusion within an exclusive elite group at Kommos and to compete with other members of that group for status. Perhaps through the use of imports for feasting they were even attempting to make themselves appear to be a part of a group of cosmopolitan, pan-Mediterranean elites, whether or not such links actually existed.

In the context of the diacritical fest, it should be noted that, at Kommos, House X seems to be an anomaly. As mentioned above, it is the largest house, with the only representational frescoes at the entire site and a large proportion of imported and religious goods. No other home at Kommos is comparable to House X in these respects. The only other home at the site with any other evidence for significant religious practice is the house on the hilltop called "The House of the Snake Tube", due to the presence of a

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<sup>81</sup> Dietler 2001, 85

<sup>82</sup> Dietler 2001, 86

religious vessel in the form of a snake tube found there. But no other definitive shrine has been found at Kommos from this period.<sup>83</sup> This fact sets House X even further apart from the other homes at Kommos and leads one to wonder with whom the inhabitants of House X were competing for status. Because this home was so overwhelmingly grand in comparison to the rest of the homes at Kommos, it does not make sense to consider the inhabitants of House X as only locally competing for status. Due to Kommos' proximity to the palace site of Phaistos and to Hagia Triada (fig. 2), it is entirely possible that the inhabitants of House X were not competing for status with the people of Kommos, but instead with elites from these neighboring towns. Through their consumption, those living in House X were indeed asserting and maintaining their status at Kommos, but it is likely that the ways in which they competed for greater status, such as dining, were reserved for other elites in the vicinity.

Finally, one artifact may be particularly worth noting; the Canaanite jar found as a part of the house shrine in room X7. The large number of religious artifacts found in the house has been discussed above as a potential indication of the owners' role in religious activity. That there was also an import found among the religious objects is especially important because of its association with status building and power seeking. It makes the hypothesis that the inhabitants of House X had some established role in religious activity at Kommos, and by means of consuming imported objects were attempting to build upon their preexisting status through status competitions within the region, or even more likely they were asserting greater religious power and/or perhaps attempting to become involved in the political sphere. It is impossible to say which of these they were trying to

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<sup>83</sup> Gesell 1985, 42.

do, but it is clear that they were associating themselves with religion and trying to build their already high status at the same time.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this study has been to use theoretical models about consumption and trade to demonstrate what those living in House X consumed and how it was used to send specific messages about themselves to others. By means of these theoretical approaches, which justify my conclusions, I have attempted to show that there was a stratified social system at Kommos in which those living in House X were at a higher level than others living at the site. Not only were they elites, but by the steps taken to consume the objects that they did reinforced by the size, decoration and elaboration of the house itself, they sent messages to others about their higher status and their roles in local and regional society. These roles may have been religious in nature, or may have been that of an elite attempting to gain power in the region, as demonstrated by their import consumption. The frequency and types of religious and imported objects found in the home leads to the conclusion that the inhabitants of House X were people with an already established social position as elites with a religious role who continued to promote themselves among neighboring elites, as seen in their import consumption, which to the observer would have associated them with distant peoples of power. Therefore, the consumption within the home was indeed meaningful, sending messages to the viewer about the consumer's place in their society and promoting them further, probably on a regional scale.

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## Figures

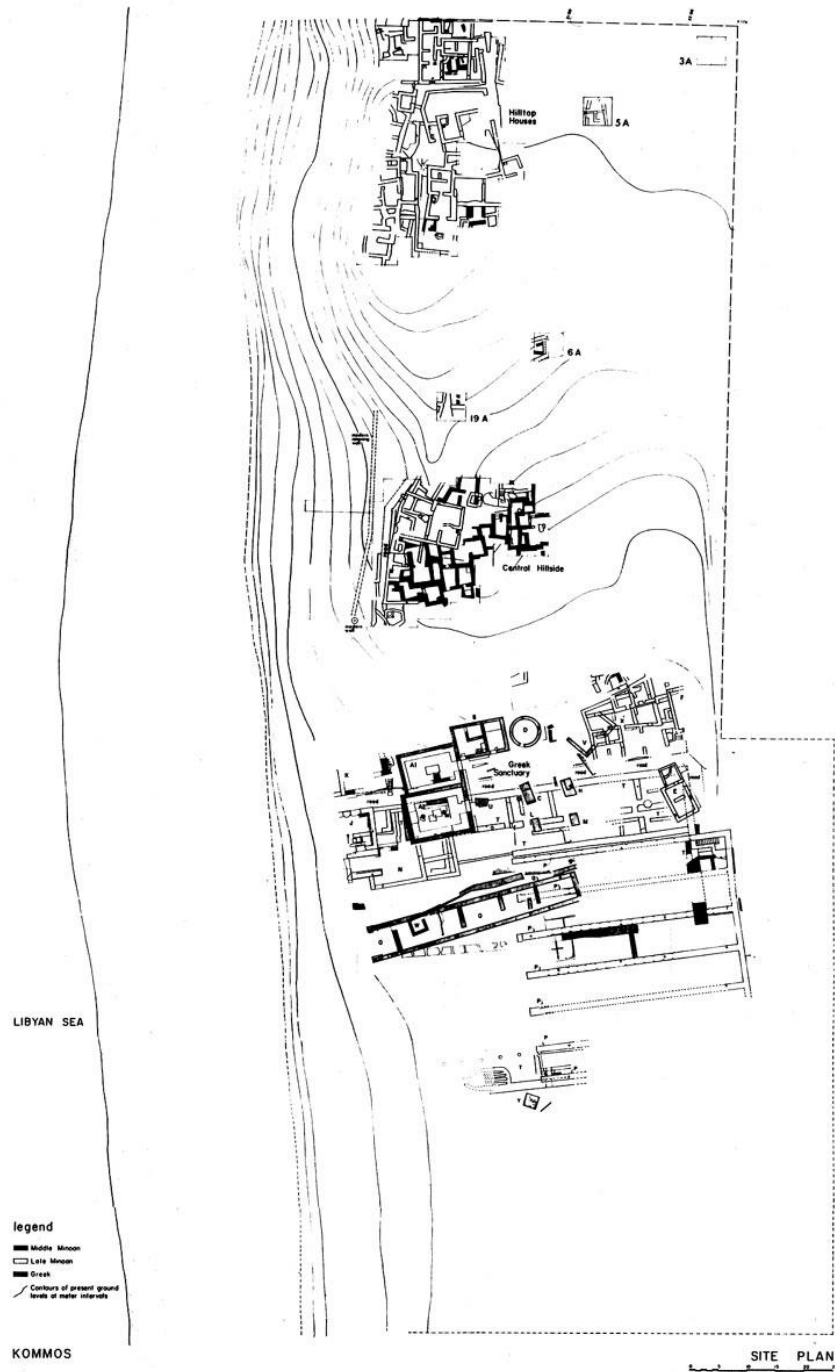


Figure 1: Site plan of Kommos (after Shaw)

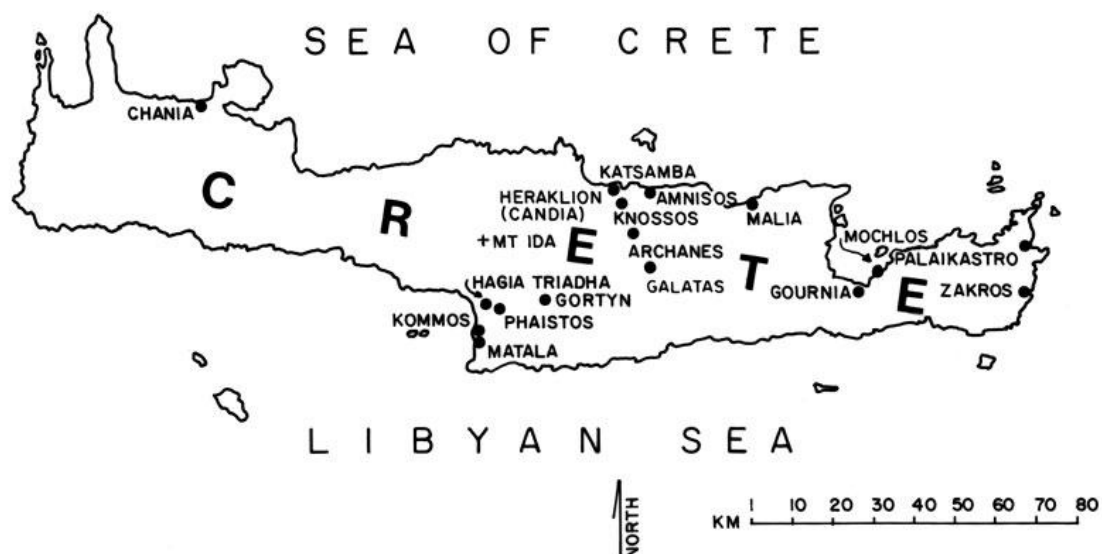


Figure 2: Map of Crete, showing the location of Kommos on the island and its proximity to Hagia Triada and Phaistos (after Shaw)

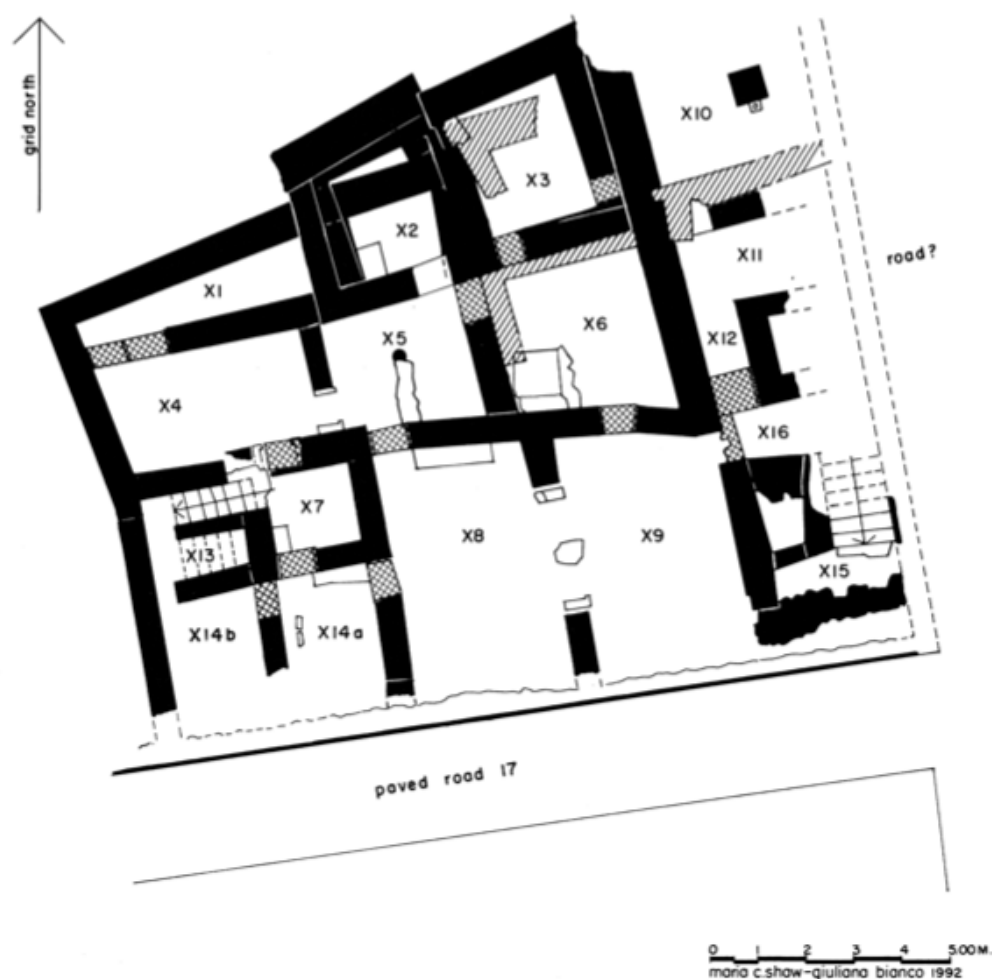


Figure 3: Plan of House X (after Shaw)





Figure 4: Canaanite Jars found in House X (after Shaw)

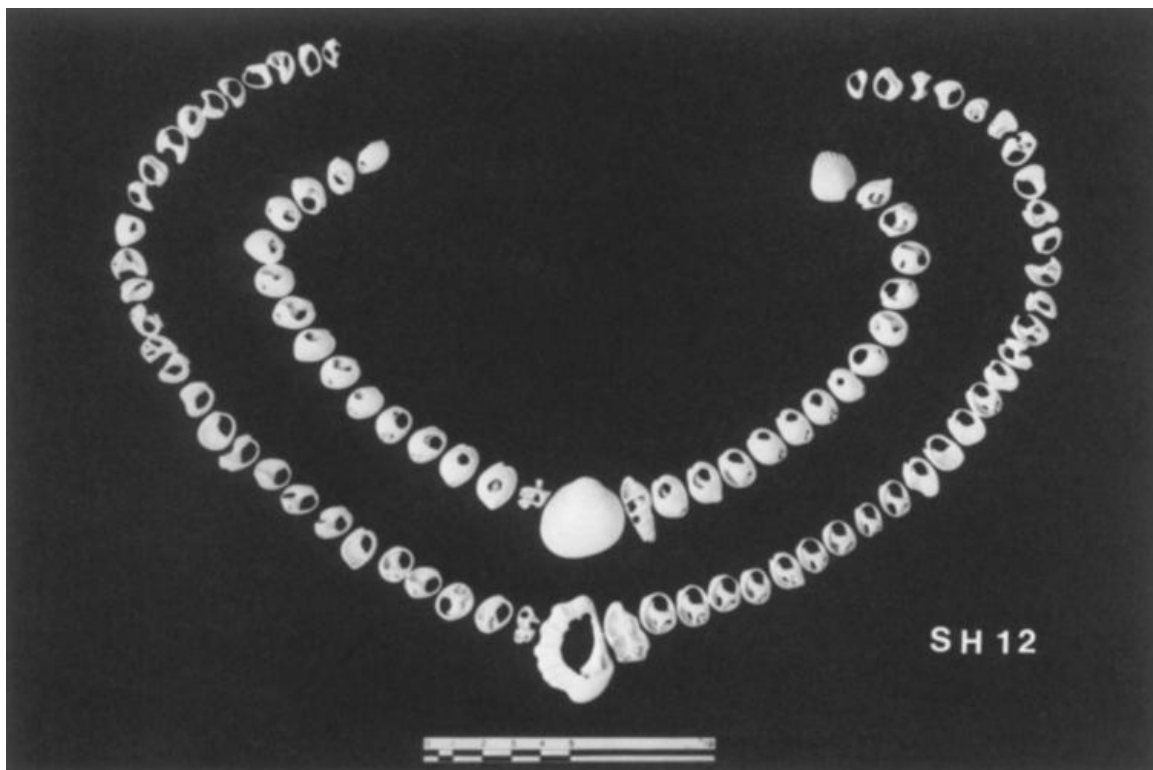


Figure 5: Shell necklace from room X14 (after Shaw)

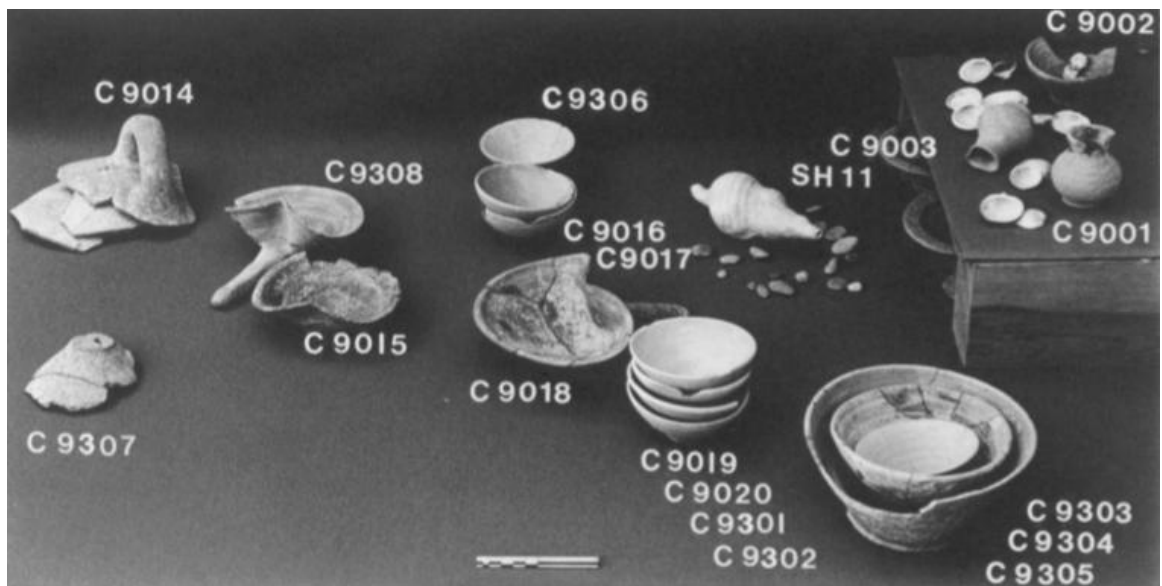


Figure 6: Objects found in connection with the house shrine from room X7 (after Shaw)



Figure 7: Reconstruction of the house shrine from room X7 (after Shaw)



Figure 8: Lentoid seal from room X7 (after Shaw)



Figure 9: Painted pyxis from room X4 (after Shaw)

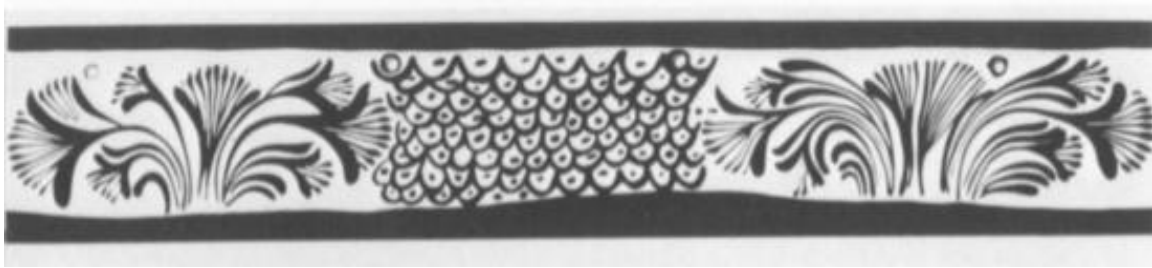


Figure 10: Reconstruction of the decoration of the pyxis from room X4 (after Shaw)



Figure 11: Fragments of the glass Egyptian vessel from room X4 (after Shaw)

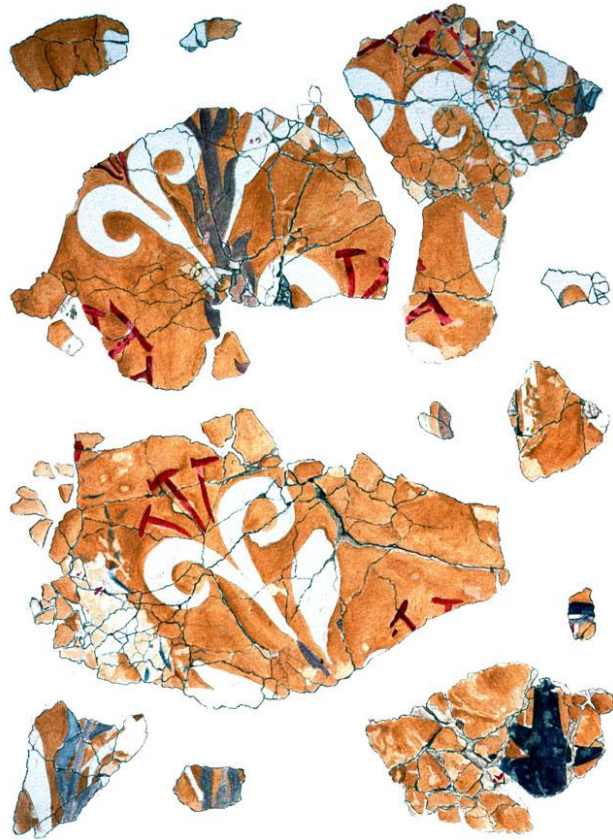


Figure 12: Fresco depicting lilies found in room X1, probably originally from room X4 (after Shaw)

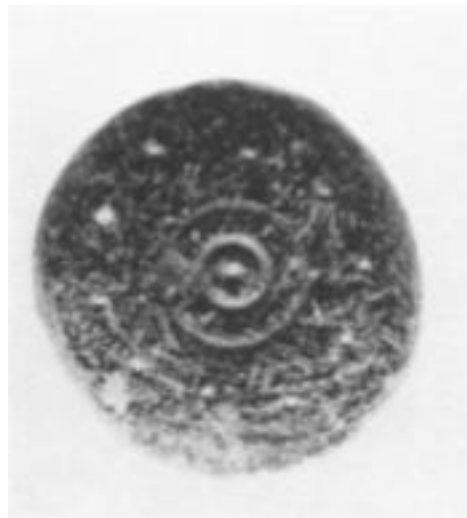


Figure 13: Steatite seal from room X2 incised with concentric circles (after Shaw)



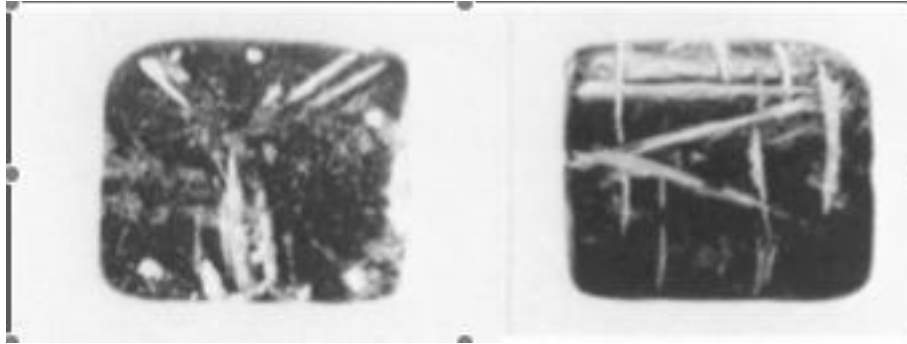


Figure 14: Steatite seal from room X2 incised with abstract decoration (after Shaw)



Figure 15: Drawing of the Mycenaean Vapheio Cup from room X6 (after Shaw)