

THE RITUAL DESTRUCTION OF MINOAN ART? *

Paul Rehak

Loyola University of Chicago

Archaeologists thrive on destruction. We abhor cultures that pick up after themselves and carefully dispose of the evidence, though even today's garbage dumps are not immune from becoming excavation sites. And we need destructions, preferably undisturbed, to provide us with sealed contexts that show us a culture at a single moment in time, like a snapshot view. The archaeological technique itself is destruction: as we dig up the evidence we obliterate it in the process—hence the absolute need for careful excavation techniques, systematic recording, and publication. We become so accustomed to destruction in the archaeological record that we often forget to think of it as a deliberate, sometimes purposeful, process in many cultures, and we close our eyes to evidence that suggests it.

In this paper, I would like to look at a fairly restricted subject with wider implications: the destruction of carved stone objects during the neopalatial or new palace-period on Crete, roughly 1600 to 1450 BCE according to traditional chronology.¹ During this period, the Minoan civilization reached new artistic heights: the human figure first starts being represented in frescoes, relief frescoes and on stone relief vases and gold and silver plate; the production of hard stone seals and gold rings flourishes, and Cretan artists become adept at working with imported materials (like ivory) and in imported techniques (like faience manufacture).

This period comes to an abrupt end with widespread destructions across the island of Crete ca. 1450 BCE, perhaps at the hands of Mycenaean invaders as some have suggested, or perhaps as a result of internal revolts or inter-palace warfare.² Significantly, many of the crafts that had flourished before the destructions then come to an end in the Aegean world.

Stone carving, often on a miniature scale, is a leading art form of neopalatial Crete. During this period, stonecarvers were producing several types of container. Rhyta for holding liquids which could be poured in at the top and emptied out through a small hole in the bottom come in several shapes: conical, egg-shaped, ovoid. A number of these rhyta carry

scenes in relief like the well-known Boxer Vase (fig. 1) found at Ayia Triadha. There are also stone imitations of triton shells, stone rhyta in the shape of bulls' heads, and stone offering tables with Linear A inscriptions, all presumably produced by some of the same craftsmen. Most of the relief vessels were of black or green steatite or chlorite, and some of these pieces have traces of gilding or combine different materials for a polychrome effect, like the bull's head from the Little Palace at Knossos.

The stone rhyta with relief scenes have been the subject of two main studies: one by Peter Warren in his book on stone vases,³ and another by Bernd Kaiser, whose dissertation on Minoan relief work was published posthumously after his premature death in 1974.⁴ But there are important aspects of these vessels which have not been considered.

First, their distribution and findspots. Only five Minoan and four Mycenaean sites have produced stone vessels with relief scenes, in contrast to dozens of sites that have produced other types of plain stone vessel: Ayia Triadha, Knossos, Mallia, Palaikastro, Zakros on Crete, and Athens, Mycenae, Tiryns, and Epidauros on the mainland. Most sites are represented by only a single example, except Knossos, which has produced twice as many examples as all the other sites combined. This distribution would seem to support Warren's contention that all the stone relief rhyta are the products of a single workshop, located at Knossos.

Considering the relatively small corpus of examples, the range of context dates is surprising. Warren argued that all the stone vases with relief scenes were produced during the neopalatial period, in pottery terms between MM III and the end of LM I. While many examples were found in LM I B destruction deposits, not all were. A fragment from the Royal Road is datable to LM I A, showing that some relief vessels had been reduced to fragments while the new palace period was still in full swing. And two pieces were found in the Unexplored Mansion, and thus may have survived until LM II-III A.

Their findspots are also interesting. On Crete, many of the examples were found in unstratified

contexts, mostly outside the palaces. At Knossos, fragments have been recovered from the Royal Road, the Unexplored Mansion, the Gypsades Hill, and other locations outside the palace. None, however, has been found in the treasury of a Minoan palace where we would expect it, although these small rooms were often used to house ritual equipment, including plain stone vessels. The Sanctuary Rhyton from Zakros⁵ comes from the palace, but was found broken into four pieces, each located far from its companions in separate rooms. And none has been found deposited in a Minoan tomb. Instead, most fragments recovered through excavation can be characterized as stray finds, many of them only a couple of centimeters wide.

On the mainland, two non-joining fragments of the same conical relief vessel were deposited in the Mycenaean sanctuary below the later shrine of Apollo Maleatas at Epidauros,⁶ and another at Tiryns.⁷ One fragment in Athens survived in the Perserschutt, the mass of debris buried after the Persians sacked the Akropolis in 479/8 BCE.⁸ And a complete, but repaired, vase was found in chamber tomb 26 at Mycenae,⁹ but it is made in two halves of different materials and in different styles and obviously had one half made to supply a missing section.

Finally, this last points up the most perplexing aspect of all—their condition. Of more than thirty known examples, only one is actually in its original condition, fresh, as it were, from the workshop: a stone triton shell from Mallia with a scene of animal demons or *genii* standing on a platform. The globular octopus vase from Mycenae (mentioned above) has a lower half that is undoubtedly a repair. Two of the well-known vessels from Ayia Triadha are missing large sections: the Boxer Rhyton, mentioned above, and the Harvester Vase (fig. 3). A third, the Chieftain Cup (fig. 2), is missing part of its back, may be unfinished, and has been heavily restored in modern times. Even the Sanctuary Rhyton from the Zakros palace lacks significant pieces, though the excavator conscientiously looked for the missing portions.

If we compare the fragments with relief scenes to the dozens of complete stone vases from various sites, the results are staggering. Moreover, none of the relief vessels shows the signs of repair that are frequently found on other stone vases.¹⁰

Does the iconography of the scenes help us to an understanding of these fragmentary vessels? Relief vessels tend to show five types of activity or setting:

combat (including boxing as well as warfare), bull-leaping,¹¹ activities in peak sanctuaries or simply peak sanctuaries, marine life, and now with the discovery of the Mallia triton, *genii*. It is important to note that women are never shown on relief vessels, although they must have made offerings at peak sanctuaries, and this may suggest that men were the primary users of these stone relief vessels.

These stone relief vessels exhibit several interesting patterns, and if we turn to three other categories of stone vessels, the bulls' head rhyta, stone triton shells, and the libation tables with Linear A inscriptions, we will see many of the same patterns.

Most of the sites that have produced stone vases with relief scenes have also produced bulls' head rhyta: Knossos leads the way with eleven possible examples, followed by Mycenae with six, Zakros with three, and Palaikastro with one. Two fragments come from Pylos, a site that has not produced stone relief vases. The bulls' heads also come from a variety of dated contexts, most of them from outside palatial treasuries, and all of them are highly fragmentary. The frequently illustrated bull's head from the Little Palace was missing a third, and may have been placed deliberately within a deposit of wall-fill. (Another ear has resurfaced recently in the Stratigraphical Museum).¹² Another from the Zakros palace is also missing significant portions. And all the other examples are represented by small fragments. Parts of ears and muzzle fragments are typical. Out of twenty-three possible examples, not one single bull's head rhyton is actually intact.¹³ If we compile a composite drawing of the best preserved examples, we will see that the muzzle of the animal is always highly fragmentary, as if this area could have received a blow that smashed the head.

The stone triton shells found at a number of sites have only a slightly better survival rate. Even here, of the fourteen examples presently known,¹⁴ eleven were found reduced to fragments. Only the figured chlorite Mallia triton and two unfigured of alabaster from Knossos and Kalyvia are complete,¹⁵ and most of the others are represented only by tiny fragments. Once again, the four shells from Knossos represent a quarter of the finds, followed by Pyrgos and Palaikastro with two each, and eight sites each represented by one.

We can supplement the stone shells with imitations in faience: while two are half complete from Pyrgos and Kato Zakros, another is represented only by a few

fragments found in Shaft Grave III, apparently all that was ever actually deposited there.

The same patterns pertain to the inscribed libation tables that are common dedications in peak sanctuaries, unlike the relief vases and the bulls' head rhyta. Most of the inscribed—as opposed to the plain—offering tables are found in fragmentary condition, as a glance through the illustrations in various publications¹⁶ will show. These objects were presumably brought intact to peak sanctuaries. One stone relief vase fragment even shows men in a mountainous setting carrying ladles; one of these has survived intact carrying an inscription. But when found, all these inscribed objects have usually been broken, and often pieces are missing.¹⁷ This suggests that prior to their final deposition at peak sanctuaries, these objects were deliberately broken.

The fragmentary condition of all these types of stone vessel has attracted little attention. Here, alas, I think that we archaeologists are part of the problem. We are so accustomed to fragmentary evidence that we tend to look for natural destructions (like fire and earthquake) or destruction by human beings as connected with warfare. Thus, we have neglected to ask ourselves an obvious question: What happened to all the missing pieces of the various neopalatial stone vessels? While I am willing to accept that even precious stone vessels occasionally got dropped or broken, it seems strange that for these four types of neopalatial vessels—stone relief rhyta, bulls' head rhyta, triton shells, and inscribed libation tables—virtually all examples are broken and most of their pieces are missing. But often we are unwilling to consider other explanations precisely because we recognize these as “art”: prestige objects that represent a considerable investment in time and resources to create.

I would like to suggest, however, that the two features I have just outlined for all these objects (broken condition and many missing pieces) can be explained in terms of ritual destruction, if some (or all) of these shapes were created to be deliberately broken after use. Here we should remember that we know little about how most of these vessels were used. The stone relief vessels, most of them rhyta, could have been used in pouring and drinking ceremonies. If used to hold and dispense wine, a conical rhyton could have held about thirty servings in the conical cups that have been found in the thousands, or fewer servings in the

large stone chalices that survive at a number of sites.

I would like to suggest as a working hypothesis that the specialized stone vessels we have surveyed (relief rhyta, tritons, bull's heads, and offering tables) represent a special kind of art, meant to be used once and then destroyed in a ceremony or ceremonies that probably had great social power. This kind of conspicuous consumption is seen in other societies as well. The small size of many of the surviving fragments, and the fact that they are not found in palace treasuries or tombs with other cult equipment, may mean that they were used in a different way. The scattered findspots of the stone vessels could even indicate that the broken pieces served as tokens, or *symbola*, for the participants in these ceremonies.

What I have just outlined here is a case for the deliberate destruction of art, a process which seems wasteful and—in some sense—morally objectionable to us. Remember the uproar recently when Ryoei Saito, a businessman in Japan with a vast collection of art, planned to have a pair of impressionist paintings by Renoir and Van Gogh in his collection burned at his funeral.¹⁸ And nearly 2000 years ago, when Petronius was forced to suicide by Nero, he used his farewell banquet as a setting for the deliberate destruction of a prized murrhine vessel in his collection, mainly to spite the emperor who had coveted it.¹⁹

In some cases, works that qualify as “art” are destroyed for practical purposes. The same Petronius smashed his signet ring to prevent its illicit use after his death.²⁰ And as soon as the pope dies, his ring is taken off and broken as well, for the same reason. On a larger scale, countless worthy buildings have been demolished in the name of progress to make way for more up-to-date structures.

Other examples could be added, but these few underline the fact that in many societies, possession of art and control over its destruction or preservation, equals power. Similarly, the time and expense invested in creating these objects, to say nothing of their precious materials, can be seen as an expression of status.²¹ What can make a more powerful effect than the deliberate destruction of such objects?

The case I have outlined here for the deliberate destruction of art in neopalatial Crete continues on into Mycenaean and Classical times, as we know from the many sanctuaries that have produced deliberately broken terracotta figurines²² and bronzes.²³ We should not be blind to such a powerful practice simply

because we, as students of the past, are so accustomed to looking at ancient art in fragments.

CATALOGUES

AM = Ashmolean Museum
 BM = British Museum
 HM = Heraklion Museum

KSM = Knossos Stratigraphical Museum
 NMA = National Arch. Museum, Athens

I. STONE BULLS HEAD RHYTA

Knossos

- | | | |
|------|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| (1) | 1. Little Palace head | HM 1368+1550 |
| (2) | 2. Unexplor. Mansion eye | HM |
| (3) | 3. Unexplor. Mansion throat | HM |
| (4) | 4. Tomb of the Double Axes inlays | AM 1938.603 |
| (5) | 5. Royal Road frags. | AM 1938.799 |
| (6) | 6. Unknown location head frags. | HM 259 |
| (7) | 7. Gypsades Hill frag. | HM 2104 |
| (8) | 8. Hogarth's Houses frag. | HM 2790 |
| (9) | 9. Royal Road frag. | KSM |
| (10) | 10. Gypsades Hill frag. | KSM |
| (11) | 11. Chance find backplate | HM 2554 |

Mycenae

- | | | |
|------|------------------------|-----------------|
| (12) | 1. Acropolis frag. | NMA 2706 |
| (13) | 2. Palace closet frag. | NMA 6248 |
| (14) | 3. Rhyton Well frag. | NMA 6247 |
| (15) | 4. Rhyton Well frag. | NMA 6247 (2) |
| (16) | 5. Citadel House frag. | Nauplion 64.253 |
| (17) | 6. Citadel House frag. | Nauplion 64.128 |

Palaikastro

- | | | |
|------|--------|--------|
| (18) | 1. ear | HM 995 |
|------|--------|--------|

Pylos

- | | | |
|------|--------------------|--------------|
| (19) | 1. Belvedere frag. | Chora Museum |
| (20) | 2. Belvedere frag. | Chora Museum |

Zakros

- | | | |
|------|---------------------------------------|---------|
| (21) | 1. Palace head | HM 2713 |
| (22) | 2. frag. from northeast of the palace | HM 3323 |
| (23) | 3. frag. from northeast of the palace | unknown |

II. STONE RELIEF VESSELS

Athens

- | | | |
|-----|--------------------------|-----------|
| (1) | 1. bull-leaping fragment | NMA 10591 |
|-----|--------------------------|-----------|

Ayia Triadha

- | | | |
|-----|-------------------|----------------------|
| (2) | 1. Boxer Rhyton | HM 342, 498, and 676 |
| (3) | 2. Harvester Vase | HM 184 |
| (4) | 3. Chieftain Cup | HM 341 |

Epidauros

- | | | |
|-----|---|---------|
| (5) | 1. fragment w. warriors, seashore landing | Brauron |
| (6) | 2. fragment w. scale pattern, drowning man? | Brauron |

Knossos

- | | | |
|------|---|---------------|
| (7) | 1. masonry and hindquarters of animal? | HM 2358 |
| (8) | 2. frag. w. boxer to R | HM 255 |
| (9) | 3. frag. w. archer, scale pattern | HM 257 |
| (10) | 4. frag. w. men carrying ladles | HM 426 |
| (11) | 5. frag. from above Little Palace w. two boxers | HM 2329 |
| (12) | 6. frag. w. man depositing objects in <i>kanoun</i> at peak | HM 2397 |
| (13) | 7. frag. w. runner, shrine, and tree | AM AE 1247 |
| (14) | 8. frag. w. bull-leaping scene, part of man preserved | AM AE 1569 |
| (15) | 9. frag. w. marine style rockwork | HM unnumbered |
| (16) | 10. throne room frag. w. "ambushed octopus" | HM 254 |
| (17) | 11. frag. w. rockwork, and dolphin | AM 1938.605 |
| (18) | 12. frag. w. man dragging agrimi; helmet below | AM 1838.698 |
| (19) | 13. frag. w. man in relief from back, showing torsion to L. | HM 256 |

- (20) 14. frag. w. kneeling bull
above a fascia HM 258
- (21) 15. frag. from triton w.
octopus and rockwork HM
- (22) 16. frag. from triton shell w.
rockwork & dolphin HM
- (23) 17. frag. w. back of bull? HM
- (24) 18. frag. w. tail of dolphin
swimming to L. HM
- (25) 19. Unexplored Mansion
frags. w. netted bull HM
- (26) 20. Unexplored Mansion
rim frag. w. bull's horn?
& bull leaper? HM
- (27) 21. Unexplored Mansion
frag. w. bull's head
to R HM

Mallia

- (28) 1. triton shell w. *genii*
standing on platform Ag. Nikolaos
11 246

Mycenae

- (29) 1. octopus vase NMA 2490

Palaikastro

- (30) 1. frag. w. charging boar, originally
covered w. gold leaf. HM 993
- (31) 2. frag. w. dolphins
(unpublished) (excavated
1994)

Tiryns

- (32) 1. frag. w. architecture NMA 1605

Zakro

- (33) 1. Sanctuary rhyton. HM 2764
- (34) 2. fragment w. dolphins HM?

III. STONE SHELLS**Ayia Triadha**

- (1) 1. obsidian dolion HM 360

Kalyvia

- (2) 1. alabaster triton HM 177

Knossos

- (3) 1. serpentine frag. AM 1924-41
- (4) 2. serpentine frag. BM 1907 1-19
217
- (5) 3. serpentine frag. KSM
- (6) 4. alabaster triton HM 45

Rhodes

- (7) 1. marble triton lost

Mallia

- (8) 1. chlorite triton w. *genii* Ag. Nik. 11246

Palaikastro

- (9) 1. serpentine frags. HM 505
- (10) 2. obsidian frags. HM 1008

Pyrgos

- (11) 1. serpentine frags. KSM MP 71/3
- (12) 2. serpentine frags. KSM MP 71/30

Slavokambos

- (13) 1. serpentine frags. HM

Zakro

- (14) 1. chlorite triton frags. HM 3083

IV. FAIENCE SHELLS**Mycenae**

- (1) 1. faience triton frags. NMA 166

Pyrgos

- (2) 1. faience triton frags. HM

Zakros

- (3) 1. broken nautilus HM 311

NOTES

*This paper is printed essentially as presented at CAMWS-SS, on Oct. 22, 1994, with minimal references. Some of the material here on bulls' head rhyta was presented in preliminary form at the conference: *Politeia. Society and State in the Bronze Age Aegean*, Heidelberg, Germany, April 1994; proceedings forthcoming in *Aegaeum* 12. A schematic catalogue of objects is included at the end. I thank J.G. Younger for reading and commenting on earlier drafts.

¹For a suggested revision of chronology, see P. P. Betancourt, "Dating the Aegean Bronze Age with Radiocarbon," *Archaeometry* 29.1 (1987) 45-9; but cf. P. Warren, "Absolute Dating of the Aegean Late Bronze Age," *Archaeometry* 29.2 (1987) 205-11; P.P. Betancourt and H. N. Michael, "Dating the Aegean Late Bronze Age with Radiocarbon: Addendum," *Archaeometry* 29.2 (1987) 212-3; M.J. Aitken *et al.*, "The Thera Eruption: continuing discussion of the dating," *Archaeometry* 30.1 (1988) 165-82; J. Muhly, "Egypt, the Aegean, and Late Bronze Age Chronology in the Eastern Mediterranean: A Review Article," *JournMedArch* 4 (1991) 235-47; response by S. Manning, *op. cit.*, 248-62; P. Warren and V. Hankey, *Aegean Bronze Age Chronology* (Bristol 1989); P. Betancourt, "High Chronology or Low Chronology: The Archaeological Evidence," in D.A. Hardy and A.C. Renfrew, eds., *Thera and the Aegean World* III.1 (London 1990) 19-23.

²S. Hood, "Warlike Destruction in Crete c. 1450 B.C.," *Πεπραγμένα του Έθνεθνούς Κρητολογικου Συνεδριου* ("Αγιος Νικολάος, 25 Σεπτ. - 10 Οκτ. 1981) (Heraklion 1985) 170-8. But cf. W.-D. Niemeier, "The Character of the

Knossian Palace Society in the Second Half of the 15th c. B.C.," in O. Krzyszkowska and L. Nixon, eds., *Minoan Society. Proceedings of the Cambridge Colloquium 1981* (Bristol 1983) 217-36.

³P. Warren, *Minoan Stone Vases* (Cambridge 1969).

⁴B. Kaiser, *Untersuchungen zum minoischen Relief* (Bonn 1976).

⁵J. Shaw, "Evidence for the Minoan Tripartite Shrine," *AJA* 82 (1978) 429-48.

⁶For illustrations, see L. Morgan, *The Miniature Wall-Paintings of Thera* (Cambridge 1988) 151-2, pls. 193-4.

⁷J. Sakellarakis, "Fragment of a Stone Vase from Tiryns," *AAA* 6 (1973) 174-8.

⁸Kaiser (supra n. 4) 30 Athen 1.

⁹Kaiser (supra n. 4) 28-9 Mykene 1; idem, "Zur Datierung von Kammergrab 26 im Mykene," in *Die kretisch-mykenische Glyptik und ihre gegenwärtigen Probleme* (1974) 38-41.

¹⁰E.g., a spouted two-handled bowl from a LM I house at Knossos: H.W. Catling *et al.*, "Knossos 1975: Middle Minoan III and Late Minoan I Houses by the Acropolis," *BSA* 74 (1979) 57-9 no. S2; 58 fig. 41.

¹¹See recent papers on this subject by J.G. Younger and B. and E. Hallager, forthcoming in *Aegaeum* 12.

¹²My thanks to Colin MacDonald and E. Hatzaki for allowing me to examine and mention this piece.

¹³A complete bull's head rhyton on the art market "from Egypt" is probably a fake: C. Seltman, "A Minoan Bull's Head," in G. Mylonas, ed., *Studies Presented to D. M. Robinson, I* (1951) 6-14.

¹⁴C. Baurain and P. Darcque, "Un triton en pierre à Mallia," *BCH* 103 (1983) 3-73, with catalogues.

¹⁵The Knossos example has holes drilled along its lip,

perhaps for a metal attachment: A. Evans, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos II.1* (London 1928) 823 fig. 539 A.

¹⁶L. Godart and J.-P. Olivier, *Recueil des inscriptions en Linéaire A, 4. Autres Documents*, École Française d'Athènes XXI, 4 (Paris 1982). Cf. C. Davaras, "Three New Linear A Libation Vessel Fragments from Petsofas," *Kadmos* 20.1 (1981) 1-6; P. Metaxa-Muhly, "Linear A Inscriptions from the Sanctuary of Hermes and Aphrodite at Kato Syme," *Kadmos* 23.2 (1984) 124-35; A. Karetsou *et al.*, "Inscriptions en linéaire A du sanctuaire de sommet minoen du Mont Iouktas," *Kadmos* 24.2 (1985) 89-147.

¹⁷Davaras (supra n. 16) 3: "I reached the conclusion that we can no longer doubt that...these libation tables...were intentionally broken for ritual reasons during their deposition at the sanctuary." There are some exceptions to this general rule, like the intact Archanes inscribed ladle.

¹⁸In *London Daily Telegraph* (13 May 1991). The paintings were bought at Christies and Sothebys in a May, 1990 auction. The Van Gogh is a version of a portrait of Dr. Gachet. The Saito collection was valued at 160.6 million dollars. I thank L. Sorensen of the Lilly Art Library, Duke University, for this reference.

¹⁹Pliny, *HN* 37.7.20.

²⁰Tacitus, *Ann.* 16.19.

²¹G. Clarke, *Symbols of Excellence. Precious Materials as Expressions of Status* (Cambridge 1986).

²²In the Mycenaean shrine at Phylakopi, the animal figurines seem to have been deliberately scattered after being broken: C. Renfrew, *The Archaeology of Cult. The Shrine at Phylakopi* (BSA Suppl. 18: 1985) *passim*.

²³E. Gebhardt has informed me that many of the bronzes from Isthmia and Olympia appear to have been deliberately broken.

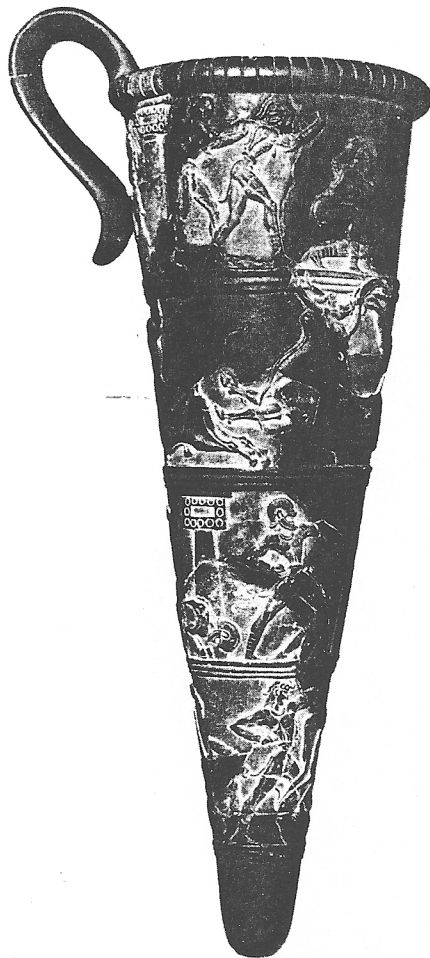


Fig. 1. Boxer Rhyton. From S. Marinatos and M. Hirmer, *Crete and Mycenae* (New York 1960).



Fig. 2. Chieftain Cup. From S. Marinatos and M. Hirmer, *Crete and Mycenae* (New York 1960).



Fig. 3. Harvester Vase. From S. Marinatos and M. Hirmer, *Crete and Mycenae* (New York 1960).