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The stuff of the gods

The material aspects of religion
in ancient Greece

Edited by Matthew Haysom,
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ABSTRACT

The “material turn” in the humanities and social sciences has brought about an expanded understanding of the material dimension of all cultural and social phenomena. In the Classics it has resulted in the breaking down of boundaries within the discipline and a growing interest in materiality within literature. In the study of religion cross-culturally new perspectives are emphasising religion as a material phenomenon and belief as a practice founded in the material world. This volume brings together experts in all aspects of Greek religion to consider its material dimensions. Chapters cover both themes traditionally approached by archaeologists, such as dedications and sacred space, and themes traditionally approached by philologists, such as the role of objects in divine power. They include a wide variety of themes ranging from the imminent material experience of religion for ancient Greek worshippers to the role of material culture in change and continuity over the long term.

Keywords: Greek religion, Etruscan religion, Mycenaean religion, materiality, religious change, *temenos*, temples, offerings, cult statues, terracottas, *omphalos*, cauldrons, sacred laws, visuality, purity, pollution, gods’ identities, divine power, inscribed dedications

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I0. Investigating the instability of religious material culture in Greek prehistory

The case of “bench shrines”

Abstract

The radical shift in the conceptual status of objects that has been brought about by the “material turn” in the humanities opens the door for a recasting of old questions. Archaeology now plays host to a wide variety of interrelated theoretical perspectives, from phenomenology to actor-network theory, that emphasise the degree to which objects can form people so that objects and people are co-constituted and interdependent. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the study of religion where the subject matter has naturally led scholars to give priority to beliefs and interactions between people. In this paper I will focus on one prominent episode of religious materiality in Greek prehistory: that of the so-called “bench shrine”. My aim is twofold. First, to clarify the history of this type of space, which has sometimes been considered the archetypal built religious space of Greek prehistory, but which has a complex historiography. Second, and concurrently, to think about how approaches aligned with “materiality” can help us understand this history.

Keywords: Minoan, Mycenaean, materiality, religion, Crete, Aegean, continuity, Bronze Age, cult, sacred space

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Materiality and the prehistory of Greek religion

The radical shift in the conceptual status of objects that has been brought about by the “material turn” in the humanities opens the door for a recasting of old questions. Archaeology now plays host to a wide variety of interrelated theoretical perspectives, from phenomenology to actor-network theory, that emphasise the degree to which objects can form people so that objects and people are co-constituted and interdependent. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the study of religion where the subject matter has naturally led scholars to give priority to beliefs and interactions between people.

One of the defining features of the Greek archaeological sequence over the long term is the instability of religious material culture. This is most obvious through comparison to some neighbouring parts of the eastern Mediterranean. In ancient Egypt there are “ideal types” of religious materiality, for example in temple architecture, that last millennia.¹ Over a wide arc stretching from the Levant to the Persian gulf the cult statue, walled off in a temple of eye-catching form but restricted access, was a similar material constant over the ages.² Near Eastern myth reverberates with the presence of these long-lasting forms of religious materiality: the cosmic act of creation in the building of a temple-city or the death of a god in the dismantling of a cult statue.³ Attractive analyses have emphasised the important roles of these forms of religious materiality in constituting and maintaining the wider societies of which they were a part.⁴ Northern Europe too has some forms of religious materiality that are far more long-lasting than anything attested in Greece. The phenomenon of precious objects deposited in watery locations, for example, has a good claim to the label “religious” and in parts of Northern Europe is attested in every phase of the sequence from the Mesolithic to the early centuries AD.⁵

Once upon a time, the long-term instability of Greek religious material culture was easily accounted for. Those who imagined radical breaks in the wider Greek sequence, episodes of precipitous depopulation, waves of external invaders, or the wholesale shift from settled to mobile and pastoral lifestyles, could easily incorporate the disappearance of religious material culture into these narratives. Over the years, however, such

¹ Kemp 2006, 142–150.

² For a recent review of the phenomenon see Hundley 2013.

³ “The founding of Eridu” (Lambert 2013, 366–375) and “the descent of Inanna” (Kramer 1951, 3, lines 44–46) respectively.

⁴ E.g. Wengrow 2010.

⁵ Bradley 1998.

narratives have become less straightforward. Every supposed break in the prehistoric sequence has witnessed re-evaluations that complicate the idea of complete disjunctions and emphasise continuity. It is clear that there are settlement sites in the Aegean with long-running histories of continuous occupation that span ages of supposed dislocation.⁶ We can now confidently identify a few cult sites that remained constantly in use over the very long term, but even in these rare cases there tend to be radical changes in the materiality of religion across the phases of their use.⁷

A common critique of earlier generations of scholars is that religion has been too often seen as “a state of mind rather than a constituting activity in the world” and, while this can be an unfair characterisation,⁸ it does apply to those approaches to the prehistory of Greek religion that focus on “continuity”. The notion that the Classical divine identities of Artemis or Hera are a useful lens through which to view Bronze Age imagery; or the belief that the Hellenistic cult of Zeus Kretagenes can help us interpret a chryselephantine statue from the 15th century BC, carry with them an intrinsic model of religion.⁹ Scholars who suggest ideas like this, in the light of the massive material changes over the periods concerned, must have a sense of religion as a tough sinewy core of beliefs with material culture as only a superficial coating, so that the latter can be radically changed while the coherence of the former is maintained. Accepting this conception gives any explanation of the radical discontinuities in material culture only a minor place in the writing of the history of religion in Greece over the long term. Illustration of the sinews of continuity at the core is much more important than consideration of the pattern of cracks and lacunae on the coating.¹⁰

As discussed in the introduction to this volume, partially in response to the wider scholarship on materiality, experts in a wide range of different religions have demonstrated the problems with this kind of model of religion. Belief is not independent of the experience of the material world. Religions are in a constant state of becoming: shaped by every individual in response to the assemblage of things and people that they experience in their lives. This understanding of religion and religious change means that material culture is not a superficial surface that can be picked up and discarded over time but it is the fabric of religion itself. By this conception a discussion

of the changing materiality of religion in Greece is not an addendum to the history of Greek religion but it is the very work of writing the history of religion in Greece over the long term. For the rest of this paper I will focus on one prominent episode of religious materiality in Greek prehistory: that of the so-called “bench shrine”. My aim is twofold. First, to clarify the history of this type of space, which has sometimes been considered the archetypal built religious space of Greek prehistory, but which has a complex historiography. Second, and concurrently, to think about how approaches aligned with “materiality” can help us understand this history.

A brief historiography of “bench shrines”

As alluded to above, an important element of the materiality of religion around the eastern Mediterranean in the Bronze and Iron Ages were temples housing cult statues. These commonly restricted access to the cult statue’s small inner chamber through one or more walled-off courtyards and anterooms. Precise forms varied: in Egypt and Hatti the courtyards could be the largest and most impressive elements of the complexes and the facades could be elaborately decorated.¹¹ In the northern Levant, by contrast, courtyards were more abbreviated and the main structure holding the cult statue often took on a tower-like form.¹² But whatever the precise layout, these were buildings that were inhabited by an object, the cult statue.¹³

The first scholars to excavate in the Aegean were sufficiently familiar with some of these forms as to expect to find something similar in the places they were excavating. They quickly found spaces and assemblages of objects that fit the bill. The first two examples were found on Crete. At Knossos in 1902 Arthur Evans unearthed a small room equipped with a bench running along its back wall on which were placed terracotta anthropomorphic figures, horns of consecration, and a tiny stone double axe (*Fig. 1*). In front of the bench a low circular tripod table was cemented into the floor.¹⁴ This room became known as the “shrine of the double axes”. A year earlier, Harriet Boyd-Hawes had revealed a small room at Gournia with a similar set of objects. Here the roots of a carob tree had disturbed the context but, as at Knossos, the room seems to have had a bench running along one wall and to have contained a number of terracotta anthropomorphic figures. *In situ*, on

⁶ Such as Knossos, see Whitelaw *et al.* 2018.

⁷ Currently, the most long-lived seem to be Kato Syme Viannou on Crete (Lebessi 2009) and Lykaion in the Peloponnese (Romano & Voyatzis 2014).

⁸ The quote here is from Asad 1993, 47 and was originally stated as a mischaracterisation of the work of Clifford Geertz.

⁹ O’Brien 1993; Budin 2016, 11–14; MacGillivray & Sackett 2000.

¹⁰ This kind of thinking is implicit in classic discussions of religion in Greek prehistory, such as part 1 of Burkert 1985.

¹¹ On Egyptian temples, see Quirke 2015, 80–97; on Hittite: Zimmer-Vorhaus 2011.

¹² On Levantine temples, see Nakhai 2001.

¹³ Walls 2005, provides an introduction to the role of cult statues in each of these cultures.

¹⁴ Evans 1901–1902, 95–105.



Fig. 1. The “shrine of the double axes” at Knossos as photographed in 1902. Photograph: British School at Athens Archive SPHS 01/2039.5248.

the floor of the room was a low circular tripod table, like that at Knossos, but this time surrounded by tubular terracotta stands emblazoned with horns of consecration, the same symbol that was prominently displayed on the bench at Knossos.¹⁵

Over the following six decades only three more strong candidates for this type of context were found, all on Crete (at Karphi, Gazi, Kannia).¹⁶ But the fact that these spaces closely fitted modern expectations of what an ancient shrine should look like, meant that scholars sometimes also felt confident to extrapolate such spaces from the discovery of objects alone. The best example of this is the case of the temple repositories at Knossos.¹⁷ Here faience figures and plaques were found with a wide range of other materials deliberately deposited in cists under the floors of the palace. Evans immediately supposed that they had originally been the furniture of a room similar to the shrine of the double axes, even though the majority of the objects in the context did not obviously conform to that view. Martin P. Nilsson, in the first comprehensive treatment of religion in Greek prehistory, regarded spaces like these as the typical, and effectively the perennial, cult places of the Bronze Age built environment.¹⁸

The mid-20th century was a turning point for our picture of “bench shrines”. In a couple of articles Stylianos Alexiou and Geraldine Gesell examined some of the objects typical of these contexts: cylindrical anthropomorphic figurines and tubular stands.¹⁹ They demonstrated conclusively that the clearest examples of the type that had been uncovered thus far (the shrine of the double axes at Knossos, the shrines at Gournia, Karphi, Gazi and Kannia) were not as widely distributed in time as had previously been thought. Instead, they all dated to a relatively small window of time: between the 13th and 11th centuries BC (LM IIIB–LM IIIC). Around the same time, examples of similar contexts started to turn up for the first time on mainland Greece, at Mycenae and Tiryns. These mainland examples were also dated within the same window, to the 13th and 12th centuries BC (LH IIIB–LH IIIC).²⁰

This is the background to Colin Renfrew’s major contribution to the study of religion in Greek prehistory.²¹ He had excavated yet another example of this type of context at Phylakopi on the island of Melos. It too dated to the 13th and 12th centuries BC and so he naturally treated these contexts as a geographically widespread but chronologically limited phenomenon. They were a phenomenon that was characteristic

¹⁵ Boyd-Hawes 1908, 47–48.

¹⁶ Pendlebury 1937–1938, 75–76; Marinatos 1937; Levi 1959.

¹⁷ Evans 1902–1903, 38–94.

¹⁸ Nilsson 1950.

¹⁹ Alexiou 1956; Gesell 1976.

²⁰ Taylour 1970; Kilian 1981.

²¹ Renfrew 1985.

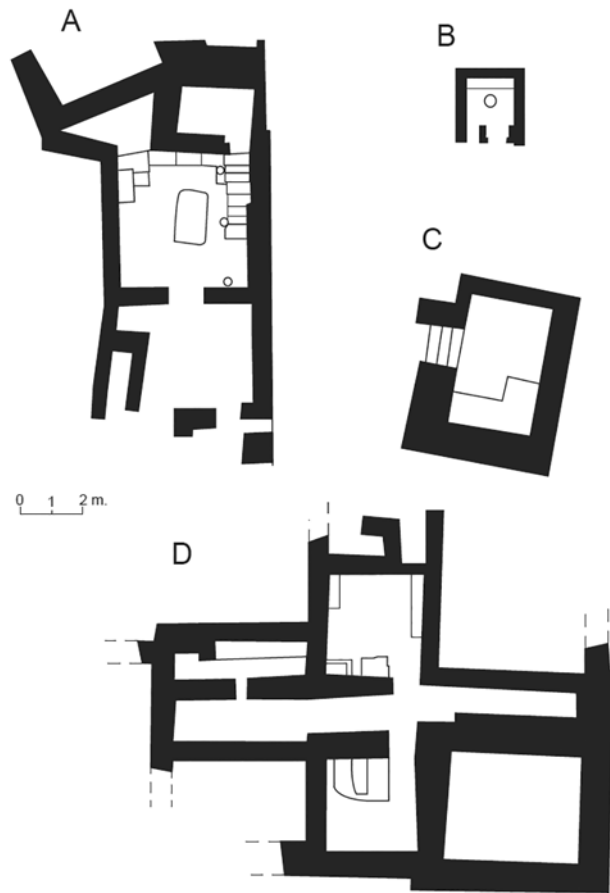


Fig. 2. Plans of some of the most well understood 13th century BC bench shrines: a) Mycenae, “temple”; b) Knossos, “shrine of the double axes”; c) Gournia, “town shrine”; d) Kannia (the shrine reoccupied a small portion of a larger ruined 15th century BC “villa”—only rooms with 13th century BC finds are depicted).

of a wide area of southern Greece, the Cyclades and Crete but limited to the last couple of centuries of the Bronze Age.

The same year that Renfrew’s contribution was published, Gesell’s monograph on Cretan Bronze Age shrines in the built environment also came out.²² Even though she had been instrumental in demonstrating the confined chronology of the main Cretan examples, this book took a very different tack. She defined “bench shrines” simply as a room with a bench on which cult objects were set and proceeded to argue that it was present on the island in every phase of the Bronze Age throughout the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC. This argument was initially received negatively. Reviewers pointed out that in order to lend the type such a long history she had to bring together a large and disparate set of phenomena from earlier

²² Gesell 1985.

periods: that whereas the 13th and 12th century BC “bench shrines” were a coherent and consistent phenomenon, those of earlier periods identified by Gesell were disparate and incoherent.²³ This was a point that was even conceded by Gesell herself.²⁴ Nevertheless, Gesell’s view has won widespread tacit acceptance. The “bench shrine” has become a widely used term, and the paradigm of a shrine consisting of a bench displaying idols, sacred symbols or other objects has become sufficiently established throughout the Cretan Bronze Age that excavators can regularly interpret finds in these terms, even when it is only individual elements of such a picture that have been found.²⁵ This, in turn, has caused a bifurcation in the understanding of these contexts between “bench shrines” as a long lasting phenomenon on Crete and those elsewhere as a more transient one.

The materiality of 13th century BC (LH/LM IIIB) shrines

In order to assess the degree to which 13th century BC “bench shrines” represent a departure from previous assemblages of religious material culture in the Aegean we must first consider some of the key features of these contexts. Two examples emerge with particular clarity from the published information: the so called “temple” at Mycenae and the shrine of the double axes at Knossos (Fig. 2a–b). The second of these has been briefly described above.²⁶ The first consisted of a small suite of rooms, accessible from a courtyard, under the shadow of the citadel’s fortification wall, which may once have

²³ Hägg 1987.

²⁴ Gesell 1985, 146.

²⁵ See, for example, Davaras 1997, 120–121 who identifies a 15th century BC (LM IB) example at Makrygiallos on the basis of a bench alone, or Shaw 2004, 143–145, who identifies a 14th century BC (LM IIIA) example, at Kommos, on the basis of a single tubular stand together with some sea shells and a scoop.

²⁶ Because the publication image of this context is clearly staged it is worthwhile pointing out that the original excavation records align with Evans’ final publication. Mackenzie’s daybooks (1st–3rd March 1902) record in words and sketches the discovery of a male figure and a female figure in the two northern corners of the room, sitting on the pebble bench, the tripod “offering table” in front of the bench, and a group of closed vases just to the south of the “offering table”. An excavation photograph in the Ashmolean Museum accords with this, Popham 1964, pl. 9f. A sketch by Fyfe, dated 24th May 1902, depicts the horns of consecration and female figure on the bench, the female figure leans on her side as if *in situ*. The shrine is dated to LM IIIB (13th century BC) on the basis of the pottery, Popham 1964, 7–8; Hatzaki 2007, 235. The LM IIIA (14th century BC) stylistic date for the figures suggested by Rethemiotakis 1998, 67–68, should be treated with caution given the small corpus of stratified comparanda.

been alongside one of the fortress' gateways.²⁷ The main room featured a low rectangular platform at its centre and stepped benches along the north wall, farthest from the entrance. In the northeast corner a window-like space above these benches gave access to a triangular alcove, while along the room's west side a set of stairs led up to a small back room, the door to which had been bricked up. On the benches of the main room sat a cylindrical anthropomorphic figure, in front of which was a circular tripod table, both made of terracotta. In the back room and alcove were more terracotta figures, tables and snakes, along with a variety of other finds.

The theological identity of the figures in these rooms has a tendency to become central to the debate over their interpretation: are they gods, mortals or something else?²⁸ The fact that establishing the identity of anthropomorphic images can be difficult even in well understood historical contexts should serve as a warning.²⁹ Thinking through materiality offers a more direct starting point: a consideration of the material syntax of these places, the ways in which the spaces and objects moulded behaviour. Both were clearly distinct from quotidian space, both spatially and in terms of their contents. Both were independently accessible from open air spaces—they were destinations in themselves. Both were also small confined rooms, placing limits on the freedom of action of those entering them. This is most extreme at Knossos, which could only be comfortably entered by one individual at a time (*Fig. 2b*). Such an individual was immediately presented with the objects on the bench and the tripod table in front of them. Tables invite something to be placed on their surface. If they are sited between two or more beings they structure this ability to frame things placed upon them, creating a relationship. In contemporary and near-contemporary iconography tripod tables serve precisely this function, placed between individuals, structuring a commensal or transactional relationship.³⁰ Objects with faces, like the figures in the Knossos shrine, have certain innate abilities to influence human behaviour. Our eyes are inextricably drawn to them, we can make eye contact with them, and we have a natural tendency to attribute to them being-like status.³¹ The table at Knossos, which has its own tendency to structure relationships between beings, placed inescapably between the visitor and these potential beings, in a setting that was clearly delineated from the everyday,

could only have produced a set of interactions in which the objects on the bench were imbued with beinghood.

At Mycenae visitors had more freedom of action than at Knossos (*Fig. 2a*). The space can only be entered by two or three individuals comfortably, but one can conduct activities turned away from the bench in a way that is not possible at Knossos. Nevertheless, the placement of the bench directly opposite the entrance combined with the restricted space made it a natural focal point, while the placement of the tripod table between the figure on the bench and the visitor means that the same structured relationship between a visitor and a potential being was established. In this context, there might be additional clues that the figures were imbued with beinghood. It has been suggested that beads and other ornaments found with the figures in the back room could have been used to adorn them. A number of scholars have concluded on the basis of the way the figures were rendered that they were meant to be dressed with separate pieces of jewellery, headgear and clothing.³² The excavators supposed that the figures in the back room were carefully placed there after a single destruction episode. An alternative would be to see this as the remains of a more cyclical processes whereby figures spent some time out on the bench before being bricked up in the back room. In either case, this represents a structured and elaborated end to the lifecycles of these potential beings: an entombing mirroring that given so elaborately to contemporary human beings.

No two of the candidates for 13th century BC "bench shrines" are the same and none of the others is so well preserved as Knossos and Mycenae. As is always the case in archaeology, interpretation requires tentatively progressing from the best-known examples to the aurora of less well-preserved candidates. The first step in the progression is to Gournia (*Fig. 2c*).³³ The shrine here, like the two primary examples, is divorced from quotidian space and independently accessible from the open air. It is small enough to be nearly as restrictive of possibilities as the Knossos case. The bench, terracotta figures and table provide exactly the combination to construct the relationship found at Knossos. The shared symbol of the horns of consecration strengthens the link between the contexts. An additional element here is the tubular stands. These have the potential to function like tables, to present and frame something placed in a shallow bowl (*kalathos*) on their top. Additionally, or alternatively, if the shallow bowls held oil and a wick they could serve as lamp-stands.

²⁷ Taylour 1969; 1970; Moore & Taylour 1999; French & Taylour 2007.

²⁸ In the Cretan cases, compare, Gesell 2004 and Gaignerot-Driessen 2016. In the case of Mycenae see Moore & Taylour 1999, 93–101; Morgan 2005, 166; Whittaker 2009, which summarise the debate. Renfrew 1985, 22–24, 372–373 gives the distinguishing of "portrayals of deities or of spirits" an important place in the interpretation of cult places generally and Phylakopi's shrine specifically.

²⁹ See, for example, Keesling 2003; or Salapata, *Chapter 13* in this volume.

³⁰ See Wright 2004, 162 and *fig. 13*.

³¹ Gell 1998, 118–121.

³² Taylour 1969, 92; 1970, 272; Moore 1988, 220–221, 223; French 1981, 173; Whittaker 2009, 104–106.

³³ Boyd-Hawes 1908, 47–48.

Kannia is the next strongest candidate (*Fig. 2d*).³⁴ A large quantity of 13th century BC (LM IIIB) material was found in the reoccupied eastern portion of a large house of the 15th century BC.³⁵ The material included cylindrical anthropomorphic figures, other forms of figure and figurine, tubular stands, *kalathoi*, and several decorated plaques. As with the previous examples, this is an independently accessible structure divorced from the materiality of contemporary everyday life. The excavators believed that several of the spaces were focal points of activity, the best preserved, however, was room V.³⁶ Various objects sat on the room's two benches, stone vases on the northern, the base of a cylindrical figure and a relief plaque on the southern. In front of the bench with the figure were three large bowls with bases designed to be slotted into a stand.³⁷ This is perhaps a tempting candidate for a similar structured relationship, with bowls between figure and visitor, as that found at Knossos and Mycenae. But there is clearly something more complicated going on. The head of the figure was found some distance away. More large cylindrical figures, pottery, plaques, tubular stands, a pendant and figurines were scattered on the floor of the room. The overall syntax of the space is more complex, with benches on opposite walls and a third feature on the east wall that contained sea shells and a quadruped figure. To go along with the more complex space is a much greater diversity of objects and iconography than was found in the three previous cases.

In the case of Phylakopi our view of the 13th century BC is hindered by the continuous use of the building in the 12th century BC. It is not until the latter period that *in situ* deposits are preserved.³⁸ As with the other examples, the building is an independently accessible structure unlike quotidian space. A range of objects were found on a bench of the largest room: figurines, jewellery, vases and a stone columnar lamp that bears similarities to the Cretan tubular stands in form and possible function.³⁹ There was no preserved sign of the relationship between figure, receptacle and visitor found at Knossos or Mycenae. The range of objects is much more on a par with Kannia than the other examples and a structured logic to their deposition may have been preserved with an in-

teresting sexual division between male figurines and animals in the northern part of the room and female figurines in the southern.⁴⁰ Signs of the curation of multiple broken figures, in a room that communicates with the main room through a window-like niche, is reminiscent of Mycenae and may similarly reflect objects undergoing being-like lifecycles within the building's confines.⁴¹

At Gazi we have the key elements of a "bench shrine" assemblage, five cylindrical figurines, a rectangular "offering table", and two tubular stands, scattered in a small room with no preserved benches.⁴² It was but a single room of a larger structure that could not be excavated, so we may well be looking at a small portion of a suite of rooms equivalent to the "temple" at Mycenae or the buildings at Kannia and Phylakopi. At Tiryns and Midea 13th century BC material appropriate to this type of shrine has been found but it is not *in situ*.⁴³ In the case of Tiryns a sequence of 12th century BC "bench shrines" are supposed to be successors to the 13th century BC deposit.⁴⁴ In the last three phases these small and restricted rooms had benches built against the wall directly opposite the entrance. In the last two phases anthropomorphic figures were found lying directly in front of the benches as if fallen from them. In the penultimate phase the figures were together with a bowl and a *skyphos*. This means that we have here the makings of the same relationship between visitor, receptacle and figure in a restricted space as found at Mycenae and Knossos in the preceding century.

Methana may present us with a definite edge to the phenomenon.⁴⁵ This context consisted of a very large number of figurines (*c.* 150) with an unusual number of rare types (bull-jumpers, charioteers, ox-drivers) within a room that also had an instillation for cooking. The meals prepared there appear different from those elsewhere on the site—predominantly roast piglet.⁴⁶ There may not be any doubt that this is a religious context, but the fact that it is embedded within a larger building with signs of engagement with a range of quotidian activities makes it distinct from the other examples, which were independently accessible spaces containing restricted and highly distinctive assemblages of material culture.⁴⁷

³⁴ Levi 1959.

³⁵ The reoccupation is dated primarily on the basis of an LM IIIB stirrup jar but the preliminary reports of the ongoing republication project talk of LM IIIA–IIIB pottery and of some later features in the pottery assemblage, Cucuzza 2009, 929; 2017; 2018.

³⁶ Levi 1959, 246–248.

³⁷ Levi 1959, 247; Cucuzza 2009, fig. 5.

³⁸ Fragments of figures in earlier strata and objects with good 13th century BC stylistic dates in the 12th century BC strata makes some degree of continuity from one century to the next unproblematic, Renfrew 1985, 377–383.

³⁹ Assemblage B is a group of objects found *in situ* on one of the benches, Renfrew 1985, 109–110, 345, pl. 66a–b.

⁴⁰ Compare assemblages A and B: Renfrew 1985, 105–110.

⁴¹ Renfrew 1985, 112–117.

⁴² Marinatos 1937.

⁴³ Tiryns: Kilian 1981, 53; Albers 1994, 104–111; Whittaker 1997, 180–181. Midea: Walberg 2007, 196–197.

⁴⁴ Kilian 1978, 460–465; 1981, 53–56.

⁴⁵ Konsolaki 2002; 2003; 2004; 2016.

⁴⁶ Hamilakis & Konsolaki 2004.

⁴⁷ Even the intramural child burial within the building is a sign of engagement with normal quotidian domestic practices, in the context of the time.

The novelty of 13th century BC (LH/LM IIIB) shrines?

The 13th century BC “bench shrine” emerges as clearly as it does in part because this is an era of large scale dislocations in the archaeological record, destructions and abandonments leaving vistas open to the archaeologist’s gaze. Rewinding time, the next such large-scale dislocation we come to is in the 15th century BC (LM IB) and primarily affects Crete. As we have seen, while it is generally accepted that on the mainland the “bench shrine” was a new phenomenon in the 13th century BC, it has been given a much earlier ancestry on Crete. The widespread 15th century BC destruction horizon—the greatest archaeological dislocation in the island’s history—gives us ample evidence through which to test this suggestion.

The best place to start is with Gesell’s list of potential 15th century BC “bench shrines”. These can be divided into two categories. First, there is a large and disparate group of rooms identified primarily on the presence of benches alone, with little or no supporting artefactual evidence.⁴⁸ Some of these, like the fixed table alongside the court at Malia, are clearly representatives of different phenomena—in this case it is a monumentalised version of one of the *kernos* rings frequently found on the flagstones of streets and public spaces on palatial Crete.⁴⁹ In some cases, as with the throne room at Knossos or Phaistos room 24, the benches are almost certainly meant for people to sit on. In other cases, as with the “bench” on the outer wall of the villa at Vathypetro, or the balustrades in Knossian halls, the feature could simply be decorative. A second group assembled by Gesell consisted of rooms containing pouring utensils that are conventionally regarded as religious, principally *rhyta*.⁵⁰ Parallels for *rhyta* in the Near East and in later Aegean history demonstrate that they were used as serving vessels in a general sense. Robert Koehl has discussed the practical functions of *rhyta* on several occasions.⁵¹ Generally, on Minoan Crete the closest associations of *rhyta* in the buildings in which they are found is with liquid storage vessels or drinking sets. The act of going to get a pouring utensil from the shelf of a room is clearly very different from that presented to visitors of 13th century BC shrines.

Only a couple of the 15th century BC cases cited by Gesell have a stronger claim to be ancestors to the 13th century BC phenomenon: the “west court sanctuary” at the palace of Phaistos and the “sanctuary room” at the palace of Malia.⁵² The first of these consists of a group of female figurines found in rooms adjoining the west court of the palace at Phais-

tos. The context, consisting of food preparation vessels and benches with grinding and drainage installations, suggests food preparation. This association between figurines and food preparation is a consistent pattern of the period, found also in the south wing of the palace at Zakros, Palaikastro room 5 of house B1-22, and perhaps the south-west wing of the villa at Aghia Triada.⁵³ Whatever the significance of this, the important thing for our purposes is that the installations on the benches indicate they were meant for the food preparation rather than display, and the contemporary association of the figurines is with the practice of preparing food in a variety of different settings. The Malia example consists of two terracotta feet with some other unusual objects.⁵⁴ Nanno Marinatos and Robin Hägg convincingly demonstrated some time ago that terracotta feet, which are frequently found on their own in otherwise nondescript settings, are not the remains of cult statues.⁵⁵ Indeed, the symbol of the foot is one of the longest lived Aegean symbols, appearing in various guises throughout the Bronze Age: as amulets in the Prepalatial period, as complete terracotta objects in various buildings around Minoan settlements, and in tombs of the Mycenaean mainland.⁵⁶ The more general setting of the Malia find consists of a series of rooms that contained a wide variety of objects and the setting could easily be to do with storage and exchange, with materials moving into and out of the palace.⁵⁷

More generally, objects that are conventionally identified as religious are very wide-spread through the built environment of 15th century BC Crete.⁵⁸ Some excavators, influenced by the idea of “bench shrines” as perennial features of Aegean prehistory, tend to rationalise scattered finds into the furniture of such a shrine. The example of building N at Palaikastro is typical of such a case.⁵⁹ The excavators gathered the building’s “religious” objects (a set of horns of consecration, two “double-axe bases” and an agrimi *rhyton*) into a putative shrine on the building’s upper floor, from which they are supposed to have fallen. The double axe bases did indeed fall from above, but the horns of consecration were stratified in a stairwell underneath the fallen blocks of the stairs themselves and so cannot have fallen from an upper floor. The *rhyton*,

⁵³ Zakros: Platon 1965, 199; 1971, 210–211. Palaikastro: Bosanquet 1901–1902, 313. Aghia Triada: Watrous 1984, 124.

⁵⁴ Gesell 1985, cat. 74.

⁵⁵ Marinatos & Hägg 1983.

⁵⁶ E.g. Branigan 1993, fig. 4.13; Paschalidis 2002–2003.

⁵⁷ The room containing the supposed shrine finds is part of a set of suites that open onto one of the main entrances to the palace. Nearby rooms contain a variety of pottery, tools and stone vases in various states of completion, Charnpouthier & Demargne 1962, 7–13; Pelon 1980, 210–221.

⁵⁸ This has been periodically acknowledged by excavators wondering at the phenomenon, e.g. Cunningham & Sackett 2009.

⁵⁹ Sackett & Popham 1965; Gesell 1985, cat. 99 (cat. 18, 64, the Aghia Triada villa and Knossos Royal Road North, are similar cases).

⁴⁸ Gesell 1985, cat. 34, 45, 47, 50, 73, 107, 129, 130.

⁴⁹ On this phenomenon, see Hillbom 2003; 2005.

⁵⁰ Gesell 1985, cat. 119, 132.

⁵¹ Koehl 1981; 1990; 2006.

⁵² Gesell 1985, cat. 74, 104.

meanwhile, was sandwiched between two *pitthoi*, in a context with liquid storage that is not only typical of the type but also entirely compatible with some of Koehl's suggested practical functions for *rhyta*. Understandable suspicion about this kind of "rationalisation" of scattered material into otherwise invisible shrines is starting to produce new types of interpretation that are more faithful to the actual distribution pattern of "religious" objects in the 15th century BC. These interpretations emphasize the removal of these objects from their find-contexts and their active recombination in temporally delineated rituals happening elsewhere in otherwise quotidian space.⁶⁰

In short, the 13th century BC provides us with multiple examples of distinct, independently accessible, spaces with coherent assemblages of objects that are markedly similar to one another but also different from those found in more quotidian space. The 15th century BC on Crete provides us with none of this. In the built environment, "religious" items are widely scattered and do not form coherent sets within independently accessible structures. They often appear to be in storage contexts and when consistent associations appear—as between *rhyta* and drinking—they seem mundane rather than otherworldly.

It is within this context that we need to understand some of the precious objects that one might most readily envisage serving as focal points within a shrine: objects like the Palaikastro *Kouros* or the faience figures from the "temple repositories" at Knossos. Eleni Hatzaki has dealt with the latter, demonstrating that the repositories constitute a structured deposit with signs of ritualized destruction of some of the objects including, most importantly, the figurines.⁶¹ The temple repositories containing these objects were once alongside the widest and most direct entrance to the palace's storerooms.⁶² Many of the objects found with the figurines, such as administrative tablets, decorated boxes, raw materials, unfinished stone vases, and transport jars, could very easily be interpreted as the kind of material that would be flowing backwards and forwards at the entrance of the palace's stores.⁶³ Given both of these arguments, the figurines could either have been meant specifically for ritual deposition or could have been prestige objects in a transitional phase of their lifecycle, where they were being administered/exchanged by the palace. We could combine these and imagine that the depositories resulted from some sort of singular ritual event; a form of tithe on the material administered by the palace.

The chryselephantine Palaikastro *Kouros*, meanwhile, found smashed on a street, is suggested to have come from a "bench shrine" within the neighbouring building. But this building looks like a typical contemporary house.⁶⁴ It contained raw materials for stone vase production (a chunk of steatite), tools, and incomplete broken or offcut objects of ivory. In addition, there is evidence from the building of a familiarity with styles and administrative practices from ivory's Near Eastern homelands.⁶⁵ Altogether, this make for a neat assemblage concerned with the acquisition of raw materials, tools, and products at various stages of manufacture in the closely related activities of stone vase and ivory carving.⁶⁶ This is not to doubt the religious identification of the Palaikastro *Kouros* itself, but to doubt the religious identification of its immediate context. When it comes to understanding the ultimate destination of the object, our best clue is its form. It is identical in every particular, from its stance to its specific haircut, to the hundreds of terracotta male figurines that were left at the nearby open-air sanctuary at Petsophas.⁶⁷ To import a shrine type from another era, rather than associating the *kouros* with a contemporary sanctuary that is inter-visible with its find-spot and with which it shares the particularities of its symbolism, seems perverse.

The lack of even a single clear Cretan 15th century BC equivalent to the 13th century BC phenomenon is no minor quirk, to be dismissed as a matter of differential survival. This is one of the best preserved and most extensively explored archaeological horizons in Mediterranean archaeology.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ This is acknowledged in the volume dedicated to the "*kouros*", Driessen 2000a, 42.

⁶⁵ MacGillivray *et al.* 1989, 426, 438–444; 1991, 130, pl. 10. A so-called "baetyl" in the "shrine" is a lump of serpentine most likely in storage as a raw material for the production of carved stone vases, see Driessen 2000b, 88, who seems to acknowledge the problems with the baetyl interpretation. For raw stone for vase manufacture stored in houses elsewhere, see Betancourt & Davaras 1998, 82–83; Soles 2003, 114.

⁶⁶ The lack of processing debris may prevent the house being the actual site of the workshop but not from being involved in the logistics of production, Sackett *et al.* 2000, 32.

⁶⁷ This too is acknowledged in the volume dedicated to the "*kouros*", MacGillivray 2000, 126–127, 129; Koehl 2000, 131.

⁶⁸ It is in this context that we need to understand the "temple" at Aghia Irini on Kea. This consisted of a large deposit of 15th century BC terracotta female figures in one room of a long-lived building, together with scattered fragments of similar figures elsewhere, Caskey 1986, 4–23. Over the course of the many centuries of its lifetime the building had several of the features of the "bench shrines" we have been looking at. But at the current state of publication it is not clear the extent to which these were present concurrently, either at the time of the figures or at the time of the later "bench shrines", Caskey 1981; 1998; 2009. This, combined with the lack of "bench shrines" elsewhere in the 15th century BC, opens the possibility that something else was going on in the building. This means that, while the building is undoubtedly important to the prehistory of religion in the Aegean, unless it is fully published it cannot make a secure contribution to the debate here.

⁶⁰ E.g. Betancourt & Davaras 1999, 137.

⁶¹ Hatzaki 2009.

⁶² Panagiotaki 1999, 245–257, 271–276.

⁶³ For the contents see Panagiotaki 1999, 74–148. For a parallel case of the use of inlaid boxes for the storage of administrative documents see room xvi in the west wing of Zakros, Platon 1971, 148–154; Hallager 1996, 74–77.

A recent contribution by Florence Gaignerot-Driessen, recognising that the “bench shrine” phenomenon is a novelty that needs explaining, has sought to trace the crystallisation of “bench shrines” over the course of the 14th to 13th centuries BC on Crete.⁶⁹ She identifies a series of contexts in which the tubular stands found in these shrines are also found in houses. She proposes that the “bench shrines” origin lay as shrines within the houses of the elite and that they only later emerged as distinct public buildings in “the advanced LM IIIB and LM IIIC periods”. It was at this point that they acquired cylindrical figures, which, she hints, may have been no more than an anthropomorphization of the pre-existing stand.⁷⁰ Unfortunately, the empirical basis for this neat narrative is weak. Her “stand shrines” consist of stands with a motley array of other objects—pots, tools, seashells, in different combinations in every case—in small spaces within larger buildings. They could just as easily represent items stored in cupboards as “shrines”, especially given the widespread distribution of stands through the built environment of LM III Crete.⁷¹ Most of her examples of elite household “stand shrines” date to LM IIIB—the same period as the “bench shrines” reviewed above. Only a couple date to LM IIIA. Precise dating of the starting points of the “bench shrines” is difficult but the excavators date the construction of the building at Phylakopi to LH IIIA. The *terminus post quem* for the Knossos shrine is the LM IIIA2 destruction of the palace. The recent republication project at Kannia refers nebulously to LM IIIA as well as LM IIIB pottery. And, while there is no direct pottery evidence to date Gournia, there is no reason to doubt its dates correspond to those of the broader settlement to which it is attached, LM IIIA–LM IIIB. In other words, Gaignerot-Driessen’s contexts are contemporaries of the shrines reviewed here, not precursors of them. As for the idea that the cylindrical figures are anthropomorphic versions of the stands, this ignores the clear and continuous typological development of cylindrical figures from earlier figurine types, found most frequently at extra-urban sanctuaries in earlier centuries, described admirably by Giorgos Rethemiotakis.⁷² In short, Gaignerot-Driessen’s study simply illustrates the continued distribution of supposedly religious items through domestic space on 14th and 13th century BC Crete, something that can also be illustrated in

the contemporary distribution of objects such as figurines,⁷³ and something that continues into the 12th and 11th centuries BC.⁷⁴

Explaining the emergence of 13th century BC “bench shrines”

In line with the idea that religion consists of a tough stringy core of beliefs with a superficial coating of material culture, a common approach to “bench shrines” has been to see them as just one period’s material manifestation of age-old beliefs. The most well-developed version of this line of thought is the idea that they are a survival or resuscitation of the cult of the goddess whose worship is thought by some to have been the focus of Cretan palatial religion in the first half of the 2nd millennium BC. This builds on the long-standing model of Minoan religion as goddess-centred and prioritizes the figures from the temple repositories at Knossos as a key piece of evidence demonstrating the ancestry of the beliefs encapsulated in “bench shrines”.⁷⁵ The goddess-centred model of Minoan religion has, of course, been extensively and robustly criticised from multiple angles.⁷⁶ In our particular case there is a worrying degree of circularity in the argument. The idea of an earlier palace goddess was constructed in large part as a response to the discovery of the very shrines we are discussing at the dawn of Minoan studies and the mistaken idea that they had been a perennial feature of Cretan prehistory. This is not to say that the idea that the 13th century BC Cretan shrines made reference to the past is without credit. Noticeably, all the Cretan versions of these shrines are built in the ruins of 15th century BC buildings. The shrines at Knossos and Kannia contain curated antique materials. They combine in their furnishings a wide range of old symbols, from birds, bulls, double-axes and horns of consecration to sphinxes. But a key point here is that these are novel combinations.

Any interpretation of the 13th century BC shrines that reaches, in the first place, to Cretan traditions faces the problem that this is not a parochial Cretan phenomenon but an Aegean-wide one emerging in an era of unprecedented inter-regional contact. An alternative explanation for their origins, developed by scholars working outside Crete, acknowledges this. It suggests that the 13th century BC “bench shrines” represent the import of religious ideas from the Near East where,

⁶⁹ Gaignerot-Driessen 2014.

⁷⁰ Gaignerot-Driessen 2014, 512.

⁷¹ The LM IIIC (12th–11th century BC) site of Vronda, where every excavated building contains at least one stand, is an extreme but symptomatic demonstration that stands were widespread in quotidian space, Day 2009, n. 25.

⁷² Rethemiotakis 1998. He also emphasises the stylistic interactions with the Mycenaean mainland, which fits the approach taken here but not Gaignerot-Driessen’s Cretocentric view.

⁷³ For the general point see Hallager 2009. The wide distribution of figurines in the houses of LM III Kommos provides a good example, Shaw & Shaw 1996, 290–294.

⁷⁴ See also Haysom 2019.

⁷⁵ This is most clearly articulated by Gesell 2004.

⁷⁶ E.g. Talalay 1994; 2012.

as we have seen, built shrines centred on cult statues were of deep antiquity.⁷⁷ The most exhaustive analysis of this suggestion, however, has rejected it, demonstrating that any precise typological links with the Near East are illusory.⁷⁸ Instead, it emphasises the combination of local traditions in the architecture and artefact assemblage that underpin “bench shrines” wherever they are found.

Renfrew struggled with squaring the concept that the origins of 13th century BC bench shrine must lie in the spread of an idea with the problem of a lack of a convincing precursor whether on Crete, Kea or further east.⁷⁹ In the end, he constructed a more complex narrative by which ideas were transported from Crete to the mainland, remoulded there and then, in that new form, spread back to Crete and the islands. Even this, he recognised, was incompatible with the actual evidence for the chronological development of the type, since it first appears everywhere within the shortest unit of archaeological time—the pottery phase.⁸⁰

A second route we could go down in interpreting these shrines is in line with the idea of religion as a fundamentally social phenomenon. Scholars of late prehistory commonly see in the archaeological record the strategic manipulation of material culture by elites. Certainly, in some places there is evidence of a strong elite connection in these cults. The example at Mycenae is within the walls of the palatial citadel and may have been directly linked by a ceremonial route to the palace’s main *megaron*. The proposed 13th century BC shrine at Tiryns is also within the citadel. Both sites host wall paintings depicting people handling cylindrical figures like those found in the shrines.⁸¹ At Tiryns the people seem to be carrying the figures in procession, accompanied by parasol bearers. The contexts of the wall paintings leave no doubt that the people in them are members of the elite. The smallness of these shrines and their position within the citadels would necessarily restrict access to them. The ability of members of the elite to periodically carry the figures from the shrines in procession would emphasise their very close relationship with objects that normally populated a space of highly limited accessibility. The potential impact of this on any audience, if that restricted space was perceived as a font of cosmological power, should be obvious.

The problem is that this picture from the Argolid cannot be applied anywhere else. At Phylakopi and Gournia the shrines are on the edge of the settlement, at some distance from any probable seats of mortal authority and apparently

equally accessible to any member of the community. The same may well be true of Knossos and, while the immediate settlement context, if any, of Kannia is not clear, the shrine is three hours walk away from the major local political centre at Aghia Triada. In other words, across the Aegean these shrines show a wide variety of spatial relationships with local power structures. This point is vital because the materiality of these shrines everywhere from Mycenae to Gournia emphasises easily obtainable terracotta objects over items of more limited attainability. The 13th century BC is not an age of poverty. Kannia is a short walk not only from one of the largest *megara* in the Aegean but also the thriving international port at Kommos.⁸² The objects within it do reference contemporary elite symbolism, for example in the presence of a depiction of heraldic sphinxes. But this is a symbol we would normally expect to find on an ivory inlay not a terracotta plaque as found in the shrine.⁸³ This understated wealth, shared even with the “temple” at Mycenae, does not seem like elite monopolisation or competition once it is removed from the excluding walls of a palace.

An important development in the study of the Aegean in the 13th century BC has been the recognition that it probably hosted a wide array of different social structures and political forms.⁸⁴ The palace-states would only have been one of these. Elsewhere there were probably smaller scale or more heterarchical forms of social structure. This is the ultimate problem with a sociological explanation for the emergence of “bench shrines”. They were not adopted by “a society” but rather by a range of different types of society across the Aegean within a relatively short window of time.

This leads us back to materiality. One of the things that has accompanied the “material turn” is the argument that we have been too quick to jump to the society or the meaning “behind” material culture rather than considering the imminence of the material itself. Whatever the general merits of such a perspective this may be one instance where it can help. The communities that adopted “bench shrines” in the 13th century BC had very diverse cultural histories up to that point and had very different social structures. But, they also shared a greater amount of material culture than had ever been the case in the Aegean before. From the Peloponnese, through the Cyclades, to Crete people were buried in chamber or *tholos* tombs, drank from *kylikes*, wore dresses with weighted hems, and gathered in *megaron* halls. Could there have been a way in which this broader material world fostered the widespread emergence of the “bench shrine”?

⁷⁷ E.g. Negbi 1988; Morris 1992, 108–111; Cline 1994, 54.

⁷⁸ Whittaker 1997.

⁷⁹ Renfrew 1985, 435–436.

⁸⁰ Renfrew 1985, 436–437.

⁸¹ Mycenae: Jones 2009. Tiryns: Maran, Papadimitriou & Thaler 2015, fig. 7; Papadimitriou, Thaler & Maran 2015.

⁸² Watrous 1992, 173–183.

⁸³ See, for example, the ivory plaques from the House of the Sphinxes and House of the Shields at Mycenae, Tournavistou 1995, 171.

⁸⁴ E.g. Adrimi-Sismani 2007; Pantou 2010; Taranton 2010.

The scholarship on religious materiality emphasises that people need sensory analogues to frame belief and its expression. People's expectations of the numinous are formed by their experience of the material. A growing body of scholarship emphasises the compartmentalisation of public space and seats of terrestrial authority in the 13th century BC Aegean. There is a striking difference between Minoan palaces of the 15th century BC and Mycenaean palaces of the 13th century BC. Minoan palaces were easy to access, led you straight to their heart, and once there presented you with a multitude of options as to where you could go next; their circulation patterns have been accurately described as centrifugal.⁸⁵ In their latest stages, at least, Mycenaean palaces were much more restrictive, leading you on a few axial routes to the *megaron*-halls at their core: constricting the flow of visitors, with many doorways to prevent further access for the majority and much off-centred positioning of portals and architectural features to prevent the excluded from gaining a clear vision of what lay within.⁸⁶ There is some indication, even given the enormous problems with accessing archaeologically the earliest stages of Mycenaean palaces, that this change from access to exclusion may have been more gradual than previously assumed—though I do not mean by this that there had not always been a fundamental difference between Minoan and Mycenaean palaces.⁸⁷ At Pylos, for example, it has been argued that, as time went on, the palace increasingly restricted access, channelling and restricting visitors more and more.⁸⁸ It has even been suggested, on the basis of disarticulated foundations, that the original palace at Pylos may have looked somewhat Minoan.⁸⁹ Beyond the major palaces, it has even been argued that a shift from probabilistic to deterministic architectural arrangements can be found in smaller *megaron* complexes.⁹⁰ At the same time, of course, that *megaron*-centred architectural forms were first adopted by regions, with diverse architectural traditions, such as Crete and the Cyclades.

Big tectonic changes in the materiality of built space across the Aegean could have provided the impetus for a new conception of the place of the numinous in the built environment. Theoretical perspectives, which emphasise how the organisation of space exists in a reflexive relationship with shared imagination and how, through this relationship, changes in one sphere of life can radiate out to affect other spheres, are rel-

evant here. As people came to live in a world where terrestrial authority figures, both local and more distant, were inevitably approached through highly compartmentalised and deterministic built space, then it may well have become increasingly and unbearably incongruous that the great cosmological powers of their world were not also approached in such ways. This may be the best fit to account for the otherwise mysterious adoption of a novel form of religious space in a short space of time by a variety of very different communities across the Aegean. A newly compartmentalised conception of the numinous in the world had simply become congruous with the material realities of contemporary living. If this is accepted, then it becomes a prime example of the indivisibility of the religious and the material in the long-term change of religion argued in the introduction.

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⁸⁵ For patterns of access and circulation at Minoan palaces, see Adams 2007.

⁸⁶ For comparisons of space in the "Mycenaean" and "Minoan" Aegean, see Wright 2009.

⁸⁷ For a sophisticated attempt to reconstruct the development of Mycenaean palaces, see Wright 2006.

⁸⁸ Thaler 2009.

⁸⁹ Nelson 2017.

⁹⁰ Pantou 2014.

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