

SINCLAIR HOOD

A BAETYL AT GOURNIA ?

In the Spring of 1948 I visited Gournia for the first time and was impressed by a large rough slab of stone set upright on edge in the paved stretch of road flanking the south-west corner of the palace (A on Fig. 1, Plate 1, 2). In my notebook I recorded my impression that this might be a baetyl.

The stone is marked, but without comment, on the original plan of the excavations¹. The appearance of the stone, and the way that it has been set in the middle of a paved space at a different angle to the main lines of the adjacent palace, suggest that it was in some way sacred and connected with cult. I am still inclined to think that it was a baetyl in the strict sense of the term: that is, a λίθος ἔμψυχος, regarded as the dwelling place of a god or spirit². It is a pleasure to offer this suggestion to Professor Stylianos Alexiou, who has contributed much to our understanding of the religion of Bronze Age Crete, and whom I met in the company of the late Mr and Mrs Piet de Jong at Knossos not long after my first visit to Gournia.

In the Summer of 1983 with the kind permission of Dr Costis Davaras, who was then in charge of the antiquities of eastern Crete, I spent a day at Gournia with the architect, Mr William Taylor. Mr Taylor obliged me by drawing the basic plan and elevation which are published here as Fig. 1. The eastern part of the plan, however, is adapted with his generous permission from a state plan of the palace which Professor Jeffrey Soles has made. The levels have been taken from, or harmonised with, those which appear on this plan.

The cult of stones, whether natural or shaped by human hands, was once very widespread throughout the world, and it survived in Greece into Greek and Roman times³. As Nilsson observed: 'Baetyls, sacred stones, columns and cairns being so

I am most grateful to Dr Costis Davaras for allowing me to work at Gournia, to Mr William Taylor for drawing the basic plan and elevation of Fig. 1, and to Professor Jeffrey Soles for his generosity in letting us amplify this from his new plan of the palace. Mr Peter Goodliffe took the photograph on Plate 8. Professor Peter Warren has kindly permitted me to refer to his forthcoming article on baetyls and the cult that may have been associated with them.

1. Harriet Boyd Hawes, *Gournia* (1908) 25 fig. 10 and Plan opp. 26. Hereafter referred to as *Gournia*.

2. For baetyls e.g. *RE* ii 2779-2781 s.v. Baitylia. A.J.Evans, *Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult* (1901) 14 ff. C.Picard, *Les religions préhelléniques* (1948) 195 f.

3. M.W. de Visser, *Die nicht menschengestaltigen Götter der Griechen* (1903) for the testimonia.

frequent in later Greek and Semitic cults and in other parts of the world, it would certainly be astonishing to find them absent in Minoan and Mycenaean Greece⁴!

Our assumed baetyl at Gournia (A on Fig. 1, Plate 1,2) is a rough slab-like block of conglomerate with a more or less rounded top. There is no sign that any attempt has been made to shape it or dress its surface. While many of the sacred stones of the Aegean Bronze Age were evidently pillar-like or worked in some way, there are representations of what appear to be natural stones. An irregularly shaped sacred stone or baetyl of this kind seems depicted with wild goats flanking it on top of the central part of the shrine on the Zakro relief rhyton⁵. The highest part of the Gournia baetyl is c. 0.75 m above the level of the surrounding pavement. At its base the baetyl is 0.95 m wide, but it is only c. 0.25 m thick. The baetyl has been set in the paving at an angle to the palace facade and with the width aligned more or less due east-west. This orientation is clearly deliberate, and is in harmony with the idea that the stone served a religious purpose.

The baetyl stands in effect in the middle of a small paved court where three ways meet. This court is approached from the south-east by the road which runs around the south facade of the palace from the large "Public Court" as the excavators called it. A broad flight of three steps leads from the court with the baetyl down the slope to the west. A narrow road continues northwards from the court along the west facade of the palace. It is just possible that this road was a kind of tunnel, bridged over to link the palace with a structure to the west described by the excavators as a "terrace". This "terrace", that is to say, might have formed a kind of annexe to the palace in the way that the Unexplored Mansion evidently did to the Little Palace at Knossos⁶.

Set in the paving of the court at the base of the palace facade just to the east of the baetyl is part of a stone slab which had a ring of cupmarks (B on Fig. 1, Plate 3. Cf. Plate 6). Stones like this with rings of cupmarks are often interpreted as tables of offerings⁷. In this case the stone is incomplete; but Professor Soles has suggested that it might have been connected with the baetyl, and it is tempting to think that it was.

There are indications that the whole of the southern part of the palace near the baetyl was devoted in some special way to religious cult. On the east this southern section of the palace was flanked by a "stylobate" (as it is called in the excavation report) running from south to north and facing on to the "Public Court" (Plate 4)⁸. This "stylobate"

4. M. Nilsson, *Minoan-Mycenaean Religion* (1950) 258. The classic treatment for baetyls and sacred stones in Bronze Age Greece remains A.J. Evans, *Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult* (1901).

5. B. Rutkowski, *The Cult Places of the Aegean* (1986) 84, 89, 142. See *Ἱστορία τοῦ Ἑλληνικοῦ Ἔθνους*, A', (1970) 185 for a good illustration.

6. D. Preziosi, *Minoan Architectural Design* (1983) 80 f. Cf. *Ibid.* 43, 68 f., 217 fig. I.3, for the suggestion that Tylissos House B was similarly linked as an annexe to House A, and *ibid.* 87 for a possible bridge joining the North-West Treasury to the palace at Knossos.

7. For a discussion with references see S. Hood, "Games at Knossos?", in *Aux Origines de l'Hellénisme: Hommage à Henri van Effenterre* (1984) 39 f. Cf. S. Swiny, *Report of the Dept of Antiquities Cyprus*, 1976, 51 f.

8. *Gournia* 25.

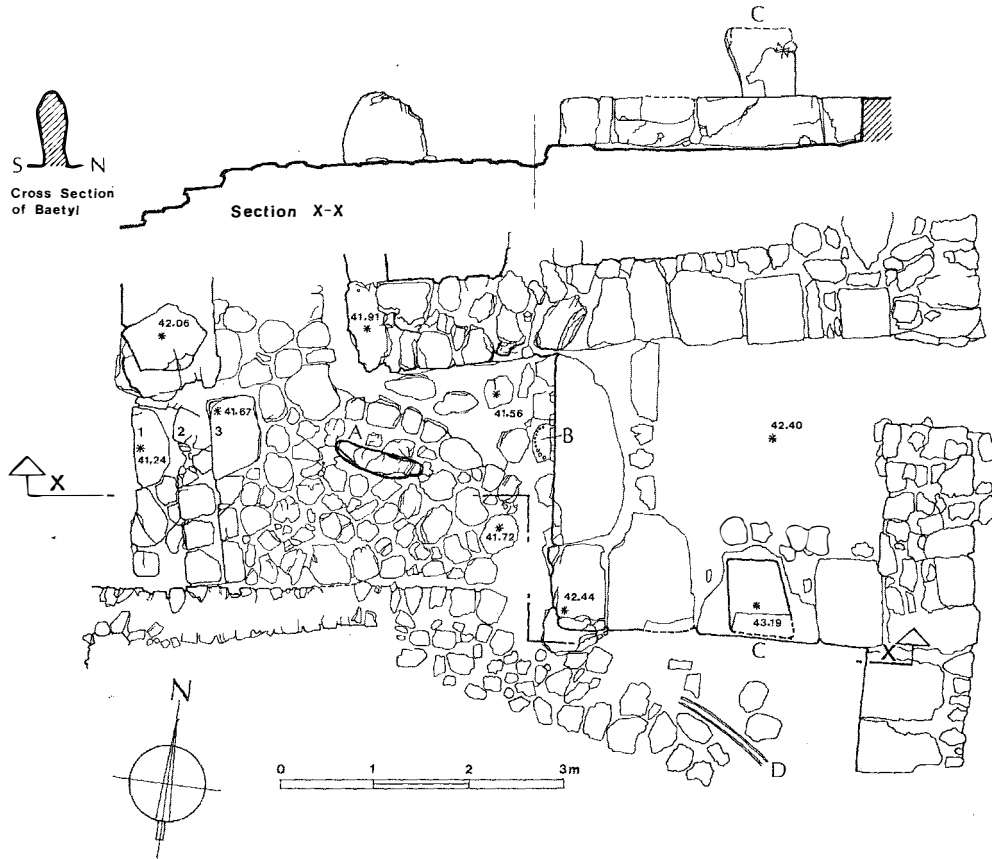


Fig. 1. Court with (?) baetyl (A) outside south-west corner of palace at Gournia

may have supported some construction like the Tripartite Shrine which Evans reconstituted in an equivalent position on the west side of the Central Court of the palace at Knossos⁹.

The southern quarter of the palace at Gournia has been much destroyed. But several stones with cupmarks have survived in the area. These cupmarks may have been made to receive offerings or libations. A huge slab with large cupmarks in its upper surface is shown on the published plan beyond the north-west corner of the "Public Court" immediately north of the "stylobate" (Plate 5)¹⁰. It is interesting that some of the pavement slabs in what may have been open air spaces adjacent to the shrine building north of the palace have similar cupmarks. To the west of the huge slab with cupmarks in the palace there is a smaller stone with a rough circle of little hollows (Plate 6). This is a complete example of the class often described as tables of offerings like stone B on Fig. 1 (Plate 3)⁷. A large stone horns of consecration found in the north-west corner of the "Public Court" may have adorned a cornice overlooking it as the excavators believed¹¹. Its discovery here serves to confirm that this part of the palace was set apart for sacral functions.

It is suggestive that the only sign of the class known as mason's marks found at Gournia is on the dressed outer face of a poros block in a stretch of the palace facade a few metres south-east of the presumed baetyl (C on Fig. 1, Plate 7)¹². The sign is a double axe, lightly engraved like comparable double axe signs in the palaces at Knossos and Zakro. Lightly engraved signs like this appear to be assignable to the Late Minoan I period, when in the opinion of the excavators the palace at Gournia was established¹³. The signs known as mason's marks are a feature of the Middle Minoan and the beginning of the Late Minoan period in Crete. While their function is disputed, the weight of opinion favours the view that they were cut with some religious or magical purpose in mind¹⁴. A stretch of open terracotta drain (D on Fig. 1) in the part of the road south of the facade with the double axe sign might have had some connection with cult installations here, serving to carry away libations for instance; but this is highly speculative, and other explanations for the drain occur to mind.

The assumed baetyl A on Fig. 1 is not the only stone visible in this part of the site at Gournia with a claim to a sacred character. Some twelve metres to the south of it, on the west side of a stretch of paved road here, another unusual stone can be seen, and this, unlike our baetyl, attracted the notice of the excavators. This stands c. 0.49 m high and is circular in section like a column drum. It has been carefully shaped, and the sides

9. A.J.Evans, *PM* II 804-810. J.W.Shaw, "Evidence for the Minoan Tripartite Shrine", *AJA* LXXXII (1978) 429-448.

10. *Gournia* 25 fig. 10.

11. *Gournia* 25, 48 pl. XI no. 25.

12. *Gournia* 25 fig. 9.

13. *Gournia* 24.

14. S. Hood, "Mason's Marks in the Palaces", in Robin Hägg and Nanno Marinatos (edd.), *The Function of the Minoan Palaces* (1987) 205-212. Cf. C. Picard, *Les religions préhelléniques* (1948) 196.

curve inwards towards the top, which is flat and some 0.57 m across. The drum is not fixed in place like the baetyl, but it seems to be standing more or less where it was originally found by the excavators¹⁵. The stone is a light greyish green in colour, and there are traces of a vein of white on the flat top. The original block from which the drum was made appears to have been split along this vein.

The excavators of Gournia noted that this drum “suggests a wayside monument of sacred character”¹⁶. Professor Joseph Shaw has illustrated and described it¹⁷, and has aptly compared it with a couple of similar stone drums with flat tops from the palace at Knossos¹⁸. One of these is still in position in the middle of the room named after it the “Room of the Stone Drum” immediately north-west of the Throne Room (Plate 8). Evans called it a “column drum” or “drum”; but it has a couple of shallow compartments cut in one half of the flat top as if for the reception of offerings or libations¹⁹. Professor Niemeier has reasonably suggested that the drum was used as an altar²⁰: in the last period of their history at any rate the rooms behind the Throne Room in the palace at Knossos appear to have been devoted to cult as he has indicated. Possibly, however, this drum and the other cylinder-like stones of the same class, to which Professor Shaw has drawn attention, were in the nature of baetyls to which or upon which offerings and libations were made. In connection with the east-west orientation of our presumed baetyl A on Fig. 1 it is interesting that Evans describes the base of the pair of compartments cut in the top of the Knossos drum as “running almost exactly towards the magnetic north”. The baetyl at Gournia, that is to say, and the stone drum in the Room of the Stone Drum at Knossos appear to have had the same orientation.

The cult and beliefs that may have been associated with baetyls in Bronze Age Crete were discussed in an interesting paper given by Professor Peter Warren at the Sixth Cretological Congress held in Khandia in the Autumn of 1986. An expanded version of this paper with the title “Of Baetyls” is due to appear in *Opuscula Atheniensia*.

15. It appears to be indicated on the Plan in *Gournia* opp. 26 immediately south of the partition dividing rooms 75 and 77 in House Ef.

16. *Gournia* 26.

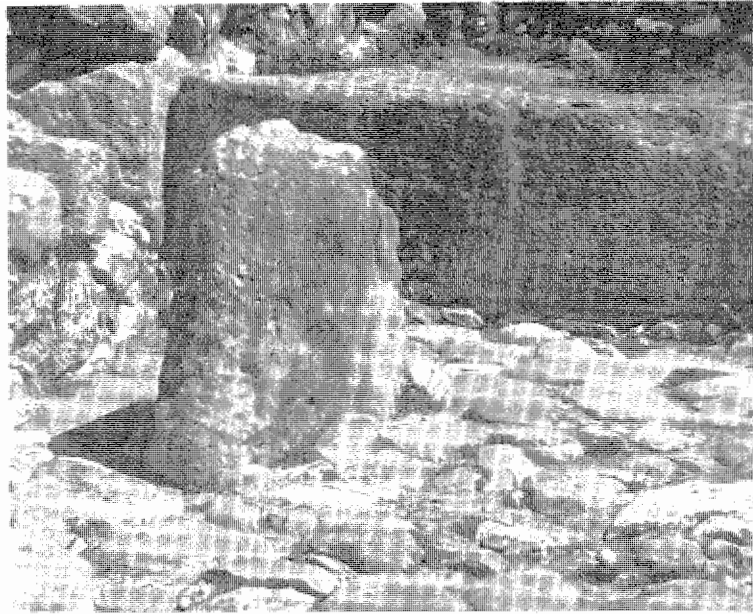
17. J. W. Shaw, *Minoan Architecture: Materials and Techniques* (1973) 117-120 fig. 146 c.

18. *Ibid.* 120 figs. 146 a, b.

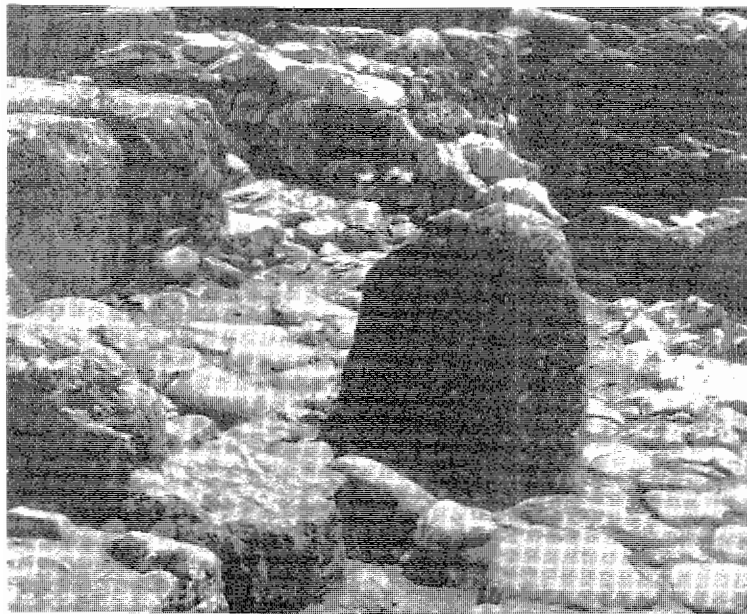
19. A. J. Evans, *PM* IV 925 f. fig. 898.

20. W. - D. Niemeier, «On the Function of the ‘Throne Room’ in the Palace at Knossos», in Robin Hägg and Nanno Marinatos (edd.), *The Function of the Minoan Palaces* (1987) 166.

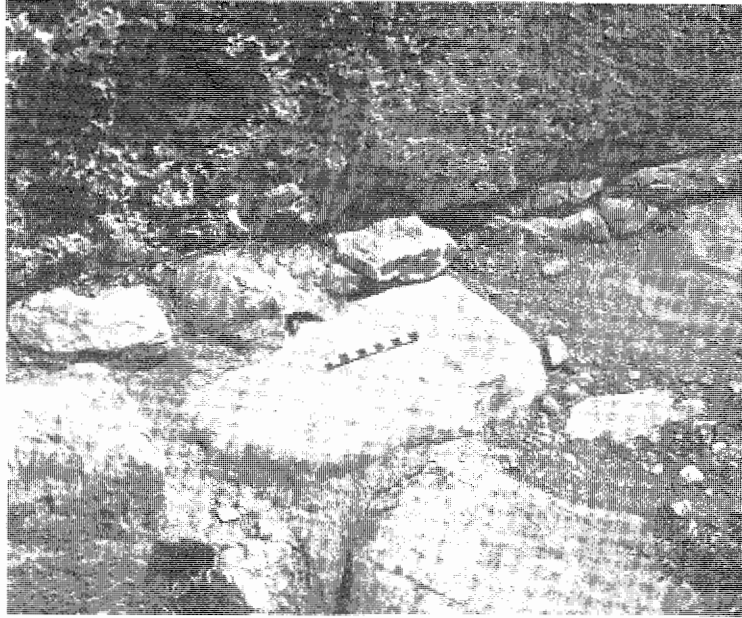
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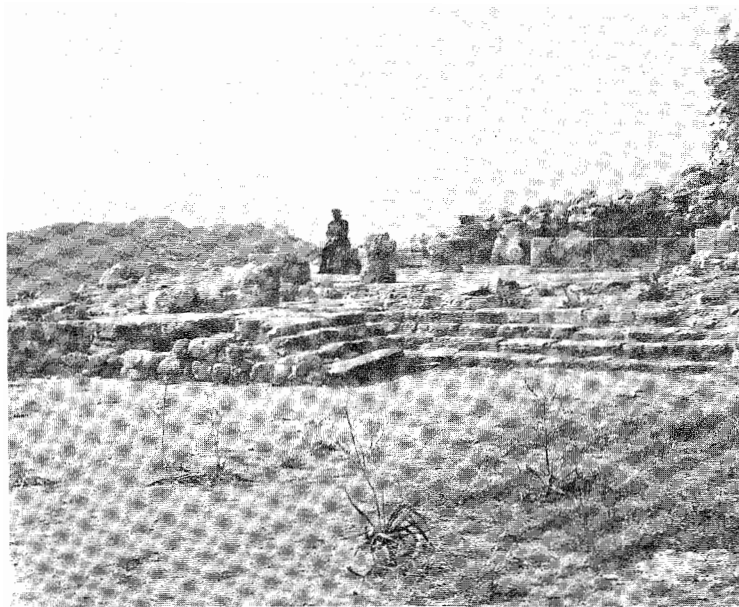
1. Gournia (?) baetyl from south-west



2. Gournia (?) baetyl from north-west



3. Part of table of offerings (B on Fig. 1)



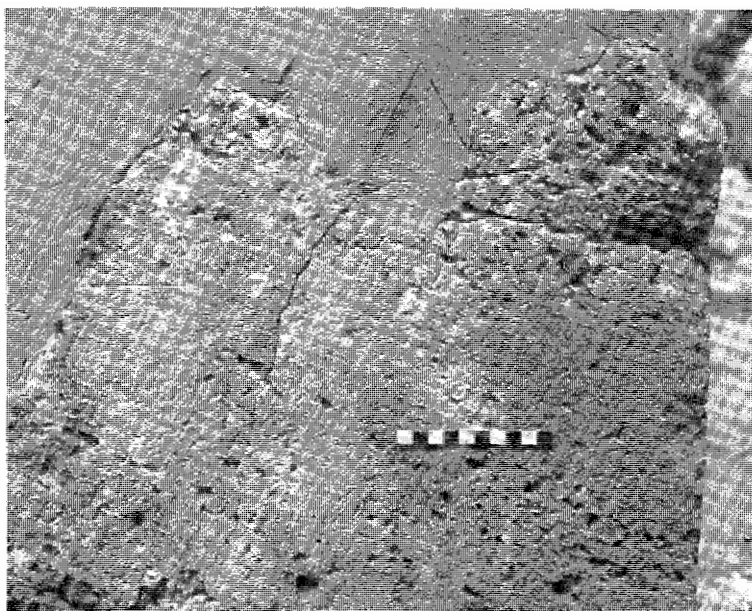
4. North end of "Public Court" at Gournia from south-east



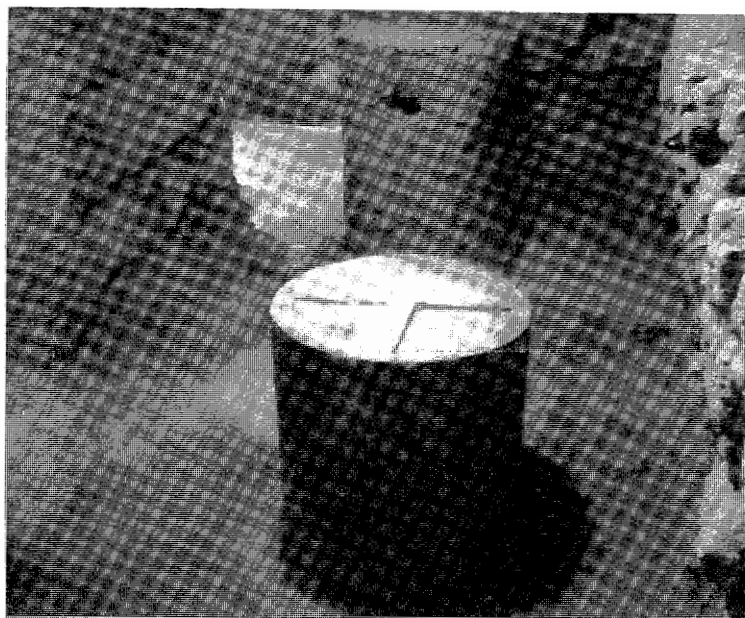
5. Large slab with cupmarks in south quarter of Gournia palace from north-east



6. Table of offerings in south quarter of Gournia palace from west



7. Double axe sign on south facade of Gournia palace (C on Fig. 1)



8. Drum in Room of the Stone Drum at Knossos from east