



The jewels of the necropolis of Siderospilia

Rossella Gigli, Andrea Patanè
CNR- ISPC Catania

The jewellery found in the graves of the Siderospilia Necropolis in Priniàs (Crete) during excavations carried out by the University of Catania in the 1970s mainly consists of small gold artefacts - pendants, rings, earrings, necklace beads, decorations for textiles - and rock crystal, faience, glass, and hard stone beads, most of which were once part of necklaces. This group of precious objects represents one of the most important complexes of materials of this type, more numerous than those found in the necropolis of Knossos and inferior in amount only to those of Eleutherna. The presence within the necropolis of gold ornaments, often associated with bronze objects, e.g. fibulae or imported vessels, provides much information on the social status and wealth of the site's inhabitants at the beginning of the first millennium BC and may be indicative of foreign contacts. Closer comparisons can be found especially with Cyprus, where gold-leaf jewellery continued to be produced even after the end of the Mycenaean civilisation, only to be re-exported to the Greek world in the Early Geometric period. However, it is not unlikely that the earliest examples arrived in Priniàs from outside, following the flow of eastern influences and imports that seem to involve various aspects of Cretan material culture in this period. The same can be said for the spread of other precious items in faience, glass and rock crystal. The gold products mostly come from the first phase of the necropolis, characterised by pit graves (with cremated individuals) and tholoi or rock-cut chamber tombs with tholos roofs (with inhumed bodies). They were not always part of the grave goods, but in many cases they were found in pits dug into the rock or the ground near the graves, together with the remains of burnt materials - coal, bones - and fragments of weapons and metal vessels probably used for burial rituals, the dynamics of which are still unclear. The clothing ornaments mostly consisted of thin sheets of gold obtained from the original ingot by hammering and then decorated with the embossed technique - often accompanied by lines of small dots in relief obtained with the use of a small stamp - or by the use of a mould.

The extreme thinness of the foil has made its condition extremely precarious, often making it difficult to reconstruct the original form (1). The most represented category is that of

gold discs, which once had to be sewn onto garments (2). The custom of adorning clothing or shrouds with gold elements dates back to the Mycenaean period. The Mycenaean tradition seems to survive in Cyprus, where discs with rosette motifs are common in geometric contexts; from there, it would have spread to Crete and other areas of Greece. For this jewellery, some scholars have hypothesised a purely burial function, due both to its extreme fragility and to the not always accurate manufacturing technique.

In the category of clothing ornaments also fall the two small laminas P 45 and P 46 (3), found together in Trench 39, which is not a tomb but a sort of rectangular pit with considerable traces of combustion, inside which several weapons and bronze objects were also discovered, including a ribbed bronze cup, which suggests a date to the full Geometric Age for the entire complex. Decorated in relief, they have a row of dots along the edges in the dot repoussé technique and, further inwards, a zigzag motif, obtained with raised dots simulating the granulation technique; in the central part there is a bilobed shield motif, which finds parallels with the decoration of a shield from the Antro Ideo with hunting scenes and with miniature bronze models, such as an example from Kommòs also considered to be a robe ornament and dated to the CFI. The swastika is frequent on vases from the necropolis of Priniàs in the same chronological context; combined with the bilobate shield it recurs on some geometric vases from the Dipylon.

Gold earrings, rings and beads of various shapes are very common in Priniàs tombs. There are also gold foil bands (4) used as diadems or decorations for the forehead of the deceased. Such bands have been attested since the Minoan period and are also present in Cyprus. Among the pendants (5), P 428 represents a rarity in the repertoire of Priniàs jewellery, as it provides one of the very few examples of granulation, a technique of ancient tradition that reappeared in Crete around the 9th century BC after a long period of absence. Even more interesting is the fact that, in this case, it is associated in the upper edge with the filigree technique. The pendant is reminiscent in shape and decoration of the bull's head earring type, common in Late Cypriot II and III jewellery, which features the same type of granulation marked by rather large spheres arranged in a disorderly pattern. Also noteworthy is the pendant P 125, in the shape of a star inscribed in a circle, which features a complex working technique involving carving, filigree, twisted wire and soldering. The six-pointed star motif, probably of oriental inspiration, is attested in Mesopotamia, where it is linked to astral symbolism.