

The Great Goddess and the Priest-King

Minoan Religion in Flux

POLYMNIA MUHLY

"Gods also have their history and are subject to change"

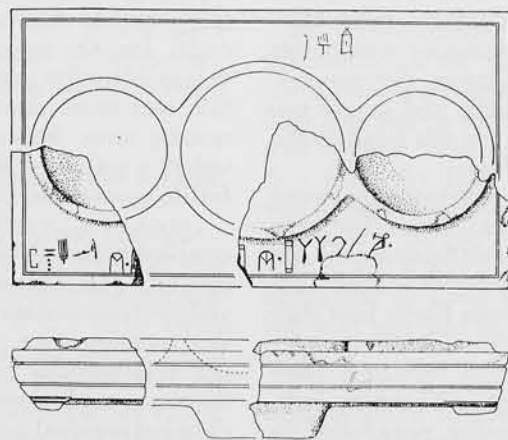
(Nilsson 1950:391)

The discussion of practically every aspect of Minoan civilization begins with the work of Sir Arthur Evans, who, almost half a century after his death, still casts a giant shadow over Aegean archaeology. Religion is certainly no exception: Evans's ideas shaped much of the conceptual framework within which Minoan religious beliefs and practices are still discussed.

In the massive volumes of *The Palace of Minos* and other studies by Evans, religion is presented as a powerful force that permeated both private and public life in Minoan Crete (1). A large part of the great palace at Knossos consisted of shrines; religious symbols such as 'horns of consecration' and double axes abounded, and the subjects of the paintings decorating the walls were concerned directly or indirectly with religion. The Linear A script, in use during the period of the second palaces (ca. 1700-1650/1425 B.C.), was 'extensively' used on religious objects (2). Bull leaping, the

1
"little chapels existed in the private houses as well as the Palace sanctuaries"

(Evans 1928:279)



2
"the most interesting of all Minoan cult objects, the [inscribed] black steatite Libation Table from the Cave Sanctuary of Psychro"

(Evans 1921:625)

favorite Minoan "sport," had a religious function and so did dancing (3).

Presiding over the palace was a Priest-King, who could be recognized in a figure restored from fragments of painted plaster relief (4). The king was the adopted son of the Great Goddess, the supreme divinity of the Minoans, who had many benign aspects but also a dark side, evident in representations such as the famous faience statuette from Knossos (5). The Goddess was sometimes associated with a male figure, a youthful god, the Minoan equivalent of the oriental Adonis or Tamuz, who died and was reborn, personifying the decay and revival of nature.

The Minoans worshiped in caves and on mountain peaks, where they dedicated clay figurines in 'ash altars' (the accumulated remains of carbonized material). Evans himself explored the shrine on top of Mt. Juktas near Knossos in 1909 (6); other archaeologists had already excavated another peak shrine on Mt. Petsophas in east Crete and the great Psychro cave on Mt. Dikte in central Crete, where the votive material of the Minoan period included bronze figurines and stone vessels. The latter were associated with deposits of ashes, carbonized material, and faunal remains.

For Evans these sites were more than sacred places. The peak of Mt. Juktas was the primary object of cult as the "indwelling place of the God-head," while the caves "representing a visible access to the underworld" were provided with stalagmites, i.e., natural baetyls or sacred stones. In a special study, Evans (1901) discussed various types of Minoan symbolic representations of the divine, ranging from pillars and free-standing columns to double axes, all of which represented the material form or the dwelling place of divinities. The same was true of the living trees, which in some representations were surrounded by built enclosures. From these images evolved gradually the anthropomorphic representations of deities, who might manifest themselves if invoked in proper fashion, as in scenes



3
"a dancer inspired with ecstatic motion"

(Evans 1930:70)



4
"a priest-king after the order of Minos"

(Evans 1928:779)

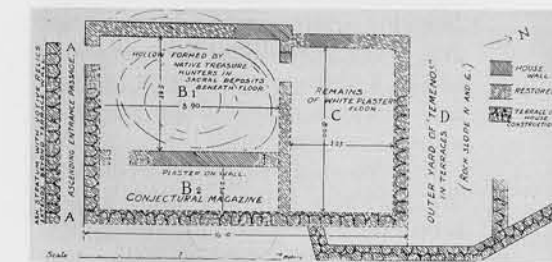


5
"a goddess...apparently the Under-World form of the Great Minoan Goddess"

(Evans 1921:500)

6
"here...was the sacred peak of the Mother Goddess"

(Evans 1921:154)



depicted on sealstones and finger rings (7).

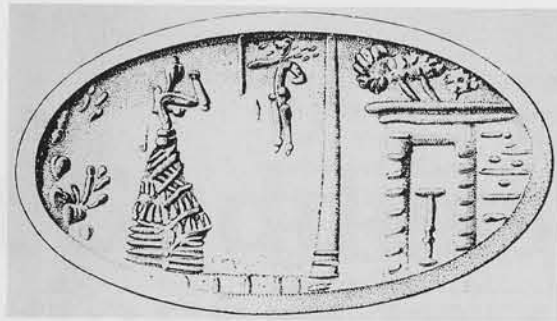
The work of Evans was continued by scholars from many countries, but only in the fields of ceramics and religion were his contributions reassessed and further developed by scholars whose stature came to rival his own. Martin Nilsson's study of Minoan-Mycenaean religion appeared in 1927; the second, revised edition, with preface signed in 1949, is still indispensable reading for both scholars and laymen interested in the subject.

The first part of Nilsson's study was based on the archaeological evidence, which was examined systematically in chapters devoted to "nature" and "house" sanctuaries, cult objects, symbols, idols, and representations (8). The second part was taken up with an examination of the evidence for continuity and survival between Bronze Age and Greek religion (9), a subject that was of marginal interest for Evans but of great importance to historians of Greek religion.

Nilsson agreed with Evans's ideas in many respects, but disagreed in others, and steadfastly refused to commit himself when the evidence seemed insufficient (10). He accepted the concept of a goddess worshiped as a Nature divinity on peaks and perhaps also in caves, and of a domestic goddess whose association with snakes did not imply a connection with the Underworld. He refuted, however, the concept of a dying god and also rejected the idea of Minoan monotheism, opting instead for several female divinities.

Because of the intervening war years Nilsson had little more material than had been available to Evans, and his study appeared on the eve of a spate of new discoveries. He did not even take into account the decipherment of the Linear B script. The clay tablets written in this script that were found on the mainland and at Knossos in post-15th century B.C. contexts revealed the names of some Olympian gods (11).

For the study of Minoan religion, the archaeological evidence that accrued as the pace of investigation in Greece intensified after the war



7
"an armed divinity brought down by
due ritual"

(Evans 1930:140)

8
"our best method will be to interpret
the monuments without
preconceived ideas"

(Nilsson 1950:405)

9
"it is probable, almost certain, on a
priori grounds that the Minoan
religion survived...and was merged
into the Greek religion"

(Nilsson 1950:447)

10
"we cannot always decide with
certainty whether the tree is holy on
its own account or as the
embodiment of a deity, or simply
because it belongs to a sacred grove"

(Nilsson 1950:264)

11
di-ka-ta-jo/di-we
To the Diktaian Zeus...

a-ta-na-po-ti-ni-ja
To Mistress Athena...

po-se-da-[o-ne...]
To Poseidon...

(Ventris and Chadwick 1956:305,311)

was of equal and even greater importance. Already in 1951 a study of peak shrines listed 11 sites as opposed to only 4 discussed by Nilsson. The impact of these discoveries was reflected in a decided shift of scholarly interest that resulted in a series of studies written by archaeologists dealing exclusively with various types of cult places. Since the new evidence came from salvage excavations and surface surveys, and publication did not keep pace with discovery, these works, including those reissued recently in new format, were essentially descriptive; in their pages echoes of Evans and Nilsson are all too frequent (12).

More recently and especially in the last decade, a definite change can be discerned in Aegean studies that can be traced mainly to the influence of anthropological theory on Aegean archaeology and studies of Greek religion (13). The recent proliferation of congresses devoted to all aspects of Aegean archaeology is symptomatic of the interaction between the old and the new. It would be an exaggeration to say that in the study of Aegean religion traditional attitudes have been superseded, but this interchange has had a decided effect on the field. A comparison between two volumes on the proceedings of symposia sponsored by the Swedish Institute in Athens is revealing. In the first (Hägg and Marinatos 1981), the 1970s style of the title—*Sanctuaries and Cults in the Aegean Bronze Age*—corresponds to the contents, which consisted primarily of presentations of material evidence; nevertheless, a concern about some basic questions, boldly articulated by Colin Renfrew, is also discernible in the discussions that followed the papers and in the final summation. The title and contents of the fourth volume—*The Function of the Minoan Palaces* (Hägg and Marinatos 1987)—reflect more clearly a growing interest in criticism and interpretation. Although this congress was not specifically devoted to religion, many of the papers were directly or indirectly concerned with religious and cultic matters.

The potential of new discoveries and publications to revitalize a field

of study must also be taken into account. In this case, recent finds from the Cyclades and mainland Greece have provided a wealth of information about religion and cult. The rich imagery of the wall paintings from Thera (Marinatos 1984; Morgan 1988), the large terracotta statues from Kea (Caskey 1986), and the shrines and idols from Mycenae, Tiryns, and Phylakopi on Melos (Renfrew 1985) have redressed to a considerable extent the lack of balance between the archaeological evidence from Crete and that from other areas of the Aegean that Nilsson and other scholars had to contend with. The renewed discussion of religious and cult interconnections within the Aegean has led to a condemnation of Nilsson's unified and largely synchronic approach (14), but so far appraisals of the new evidence have been cautious and, in general, aware of the pitfalls awaiting hasty assessments.

In Crete the investigation of new cult sites has slackened considerably. The three excavations currently sponsored by the Greek Archaeological Society—at the Idaeian Cave, at the peak shrine of Mt. Juktas, and at the Kato Syme sanctuary—are long-range, systematic projects. The great cave on Mt. Ida has so far produced mainly post-Minoan material that is unstratified, as is to be expected from a site that had been unsystematically explored and looted for generations. Juktas did not escape unscathed; nevertheless, the new excavations have revealed remains of monumental Minoan architecture within a completely different layout from that presented by Evans (15; cf. 6), as well as much material with 'palatial' associations (Karetsou in Hägg and Marinatos 1981:137-153).

The Syme sanctuary, discovered accidentally on the southern slopes of Mt. Dikte in central Crete in 1972, has some similarities with Juktas, but does not really fit into any 'type' of Minoan cult place. While various Minoan sanctuaries were reused in Greek and Roman times, Syme is the only one that has so far provided architectural and artifactual evidence of continuous occupation from the Minoan through the Greek and Roman periods, when it was

12
"there is much evidence...that
the chief divinity of the Minoan
pantheon is the Great Mother.
She has many aspects"

(Gesell 1985:1)

"we propose a distinction be
drawn between the sacred
places outside the settlements
and those inside the
settlements"

(Rutkowski 1986:225)

13
"the lack of a consistent
theoretical framework for the
analysis and interpretation of
religious data...is as acute in the
archaeology of the Old World
as it is in the New"

(Renfrew 1985:4)

"much scholarship has been
devoted to the study of Minoan
and Mycenaean religion, but
much more effort has gone into
attempts to establish the nature
of deities, beliefs and cult
practices, than into the social
and political aspects of religious
ideology"

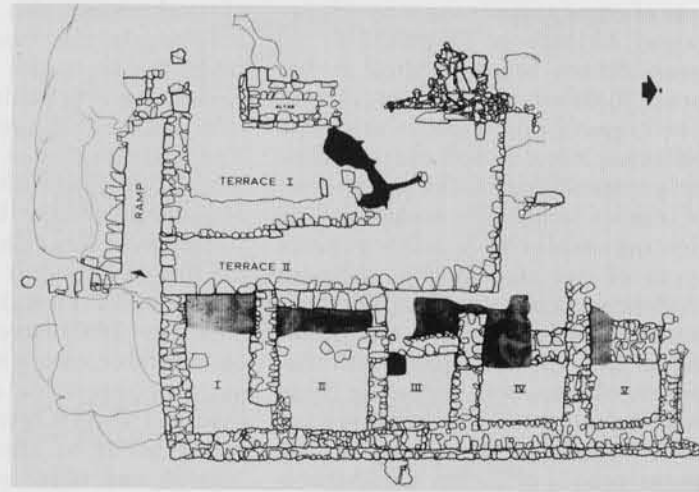
(Cherry 1984:34)

14
"while the early assumption of
a broad degree of religious
uniformity within the Aegean
no doubt once facilitated the
identification of the main
features of a 'Minoan-
Mycenaean' religion, that term
is now much too generalized
and no longer has any
usefulness or validity for serious
analysis"

(Renfrew 1985:394)

15
Plan of Mt. Juktas.

(after Karetsou in Hägg and Marinatos 1981: fig. 5)



dedicated to Hermes and Aphrodite (Lebessi 1975-76; Lebessi and Muhly 1987). During the period between the late 8th to the 5th century B.C., ceremonies connected with maturation rituals and carried out in the open left deep deposits of carbonized material mixed with animal bones and horns, pottery, and votive objects. In recent seasons the investigation of Minoan levels has brought to light extensive buildings of that period, including an open-air precinct that was surrounded by a massive wall flanked by a paved road. It may very well be that this complex is the first actual example of a Sacred Enclosure, the type of outdoor shrine depicted in the representations that Evans connected with a tree cult. Within the precinct carbonized deposits with faunal remains and Minoan votive objects (16) underlay those of the Greek period, showing that most of the enclosure area had been used for similar rituals for about a millennium (Lebessi and Muhly 1990). Continuity of place, ritual, and architectural plan, and reuse and even rededication of older votive objects are all aspects of the cult at Syme that have to be explained.

Although Juktas and Syme are still under investigation, they have become central in discussions of some basic problems. Nilsson's assumptions regarding continuity between Aegean and Greek religion have been repeatedly challenged; the appraisal of the Syme sanctuary in this respect has ranged from enthusiastic to cautious, as the very concept of religious continuity is seemingly in the process of being redefined (17).

The relationship between religion

16
Inscribed libation table from the Sacred Enclosure at Syme.



17
"at Symi...Aphrodite and Hermes replaced the Minoan pair of goddess and male associate"

(Dietrich in Hägg 1983:88)

"we must distinguish very sharply between beliefs in gods and the material form which the cult takes. Athena...may be a Mycenaean goddess in origin, but...the people of the Geometric period gave a totally new form to the cult"

(Rolley in Hägg 1983:114)

"continuity in religious practice does not imply lack of change in that practice and certainly cannot be taken as evidence of constancy of meaning"

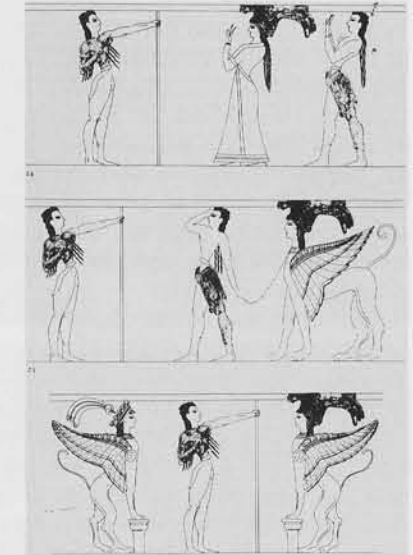
(Renfrew 1985:3)

and state is another problem that is being currently addressed from various points of view; the connection between peak shrines and palaces has become a particularly popular theme. Originally formulated as an inverse relationship (i.e., peak shrines were established when palaces were at their initial stage of development, but declined when the palaces became dominant), it has recently been revised (18), especially in the light of the obvious importance of Mt. Juktas during the period of the greatest expansion of palatial authority and power. Other scholars are attempting to come to grips with the same problem by investigating the spatial organization of the palaces themselves, or through the examination of representational art, especially frescoes (19a; cf. 3), finger rings, sealstones, and stone vases decorated in relief (19b).



19a
New reconstruction of Evans's "Dancing Lady" as a goddess in epiphany.

(after Niemeier 1987: pl. 10.2)



Alternate reconstructions of the pieces of the 'Priest-King,' in reality a pastiche of different figures.

(after Niemeier 1987: figs. 24-26)

18
when force is inadequate to protect emergent social inequality..., ideology must legitimize it"

(Cherry 1984:35)

"the so-called "abandonment" of many peak shrines in L[ate] M[inoan] I could instead be interpreted as a nucleation of the cult at a few select centers in an attempt by the Minoan elite to more closely control that sphere in Minoan life"

(Moody 1987:238)

19b
"Young Prince' and Officer on Hagia Triada Cup"

(Evans 1928:791)

"a rite of passage"

(Koehl 1986:109)

"a youth engaged in an initiation ritual"

(Davis 1986:216)

a god before an abbreviated representation of a shrine

(Niemeier 1987:83,93)



Whatever the approach, it is clear that currently religion and cult are not only being discussed in the context of the political, social, and economic organization of Minoan Crete, but are also becoming an important venue for approaching these constructs. It is no wonder that methodology is a prime concern, especially in the discussion of perennial problems, such as the identification of cult places, the proper application of comparanda from other cultural contexts, and the possibility of decoding the ideology of the past through archaeological or art historical analysis (20). Nor is it strange that there is general agreement that more data are needed to flesh out theories and to support interpretations (21).

The consensus over these points underlies a great diversity of opinion on practically every aspect of Minoan religion and cult. The wind (or rather breeze) of change has certainly swept away some past assumptions, but does this mean that the field is moving decidedly away from the tenets of Evans and Nilsson? This does not seem to be the case at present, nor is it likely that drastic changes of direction will come in the near future: great gaps in the archaeological evidence remain to be filled, theory and methodology must be more firmly grasped as well as more widely applied, and the scholarly past has to be viewed in perspective. The Priest-King may well be dead, but it is not yet clear who will succeed him.

20

"what we need more than theory is a well planned methodology for identifying sites of ritual activity"

(Cole in Wilkie and Coulson 1985:53)

"architectural analysis has to rely on a clear methodology and has to be paralleled by analysis in other areas"

(Palyvou in Hägg and Marinatos 1987:330)

"sacred objects and votive offerings are the only reliable indicators of Bronze Age cult places in Greece"

(Rutkowski 1986:224-225)

"in order to establish a positive identification of the cult room, distinctive architecture and cult objects both are necessary"

(Gesell 1985:2)

"we may...never be able to arrive at really 'objective' criteria for our classification"

(Hägg and Marinatos 1981:215)

21

"full publication of all data is essential"

(Cole in Wilkie and Coulson 1985:57)

"a plea for the full publication of the relevant find assemblages"

(Renfrew 1985:442)

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