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 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 deity 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 Tamon, 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 1899 (6); other archaeologists had already excavated another peak shrine on Mt. Psokas in east Crete and the great Psycho cave on Mt. Diktos 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 Godhead," while the caves "representing a visible aspect of the underworld" were provided with stalagmites, i.e., natural barytes or sacred stones. In a special study, Evans (1901) discussed various types of Minoan symbolic representations of the divine, ranging from pillars and freestanding 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 as invoked in proper fashion, as in scenes

1 "little chapels existed in the private houses as well as the Palace sanctuaries" (Evans 1926:279)

2 "the most interesting of all Minoan cult objects, the [inscribed] black steatite libation Table from the Cave Sanctuary of Psycho" (Evans 1921:625)

3 "a dancer inspired with ecstatic motion" (Evans 1930:70)

4 "a priest-king after the order of Minos" (Evans 1923:77)

5 "a goddess...apparently the Under-World form of the Great Minoan Goddess" (Evans 1921:300)

6 "here...was the sacred peak of the Mother Goddess" (Evans 1929:154)
was of equal and even greater importance. Already in 1951 a study of peak shrines listed 11 sites as opposed to one presented 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 religious places. Since these shrines and idols from Mycenae, Tiryns, and Phylakopi on Melos (Renfrew 1985) have readdressed 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 interactions 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 Idaean Cave, at the peak shrine of Mt. Juktas at the Kato Symme 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 Den (15) and others. As well as material with palatial associations (Kareou 1985), the new excavations have revealed remains of monumental Minoan architecture within a completely different layout from that presented by Den (15).

The Symme sanctuary, discovered accidentally on the southern slopes of Mt. Dikte in central Crete, 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 not been too generalized and no longer has any usefulness or validity for serious analysis (16).

References

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

13 "we propose a distinction be drawn between the sacred places outside the settlements and those inside the settlements" (Rockwell 1966:225).

14 "the lack of a consistent theoretical framework for the analysis and interpretation of religious data... is acute in the archaeology of the Old World as it is in the New" (Renfrew 1985:4).

15 "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 1984:14).

16 "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 too generalized and no longer has any usefulness or validity for serious analysis" (Renfrew 1985:396).
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).

17 “at Symi... Aphrodite and Hermes replaced the Minoan pair of goddess and male associate”
(Dienrich in Hagg 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 Hagg 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 1980:3)

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 [are Minoan] 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 1982:239)

19b “Young Prince and Officer on Hagia Triada Cup”
(Evans 1926:791)

“a rite of passage”
(Koehl 1986:109)

“a youth engaged in an initiation ritual”
(Devil 1986:216)

a god before an abbreviated representation of a shrine
(Niemiier 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 are on the way. Great gaps in the archaeological evidence remain to be filled, theory and methodology must continue to be developed, 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.

Bibliography


