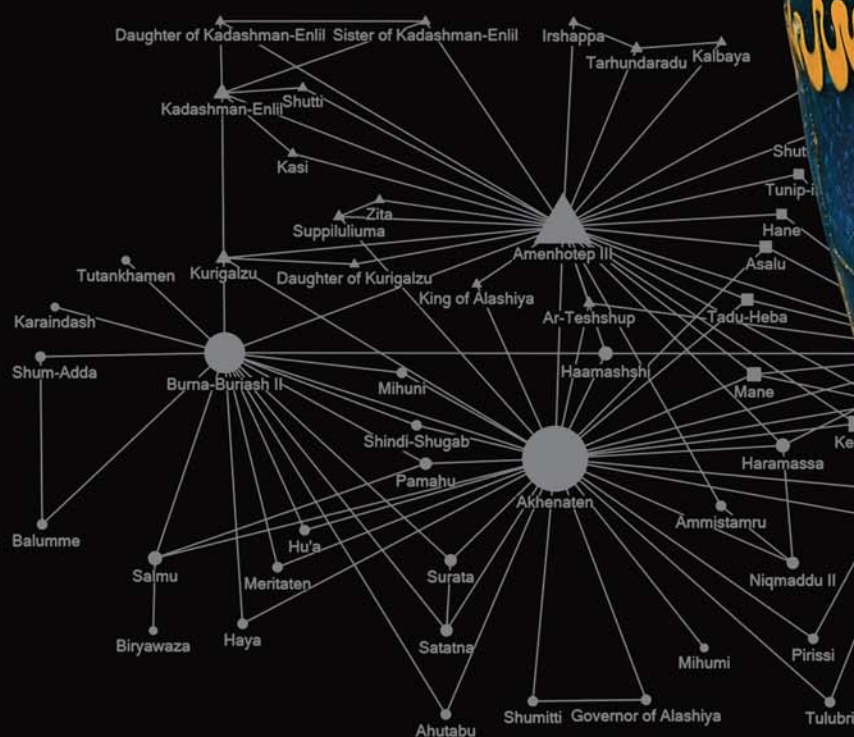
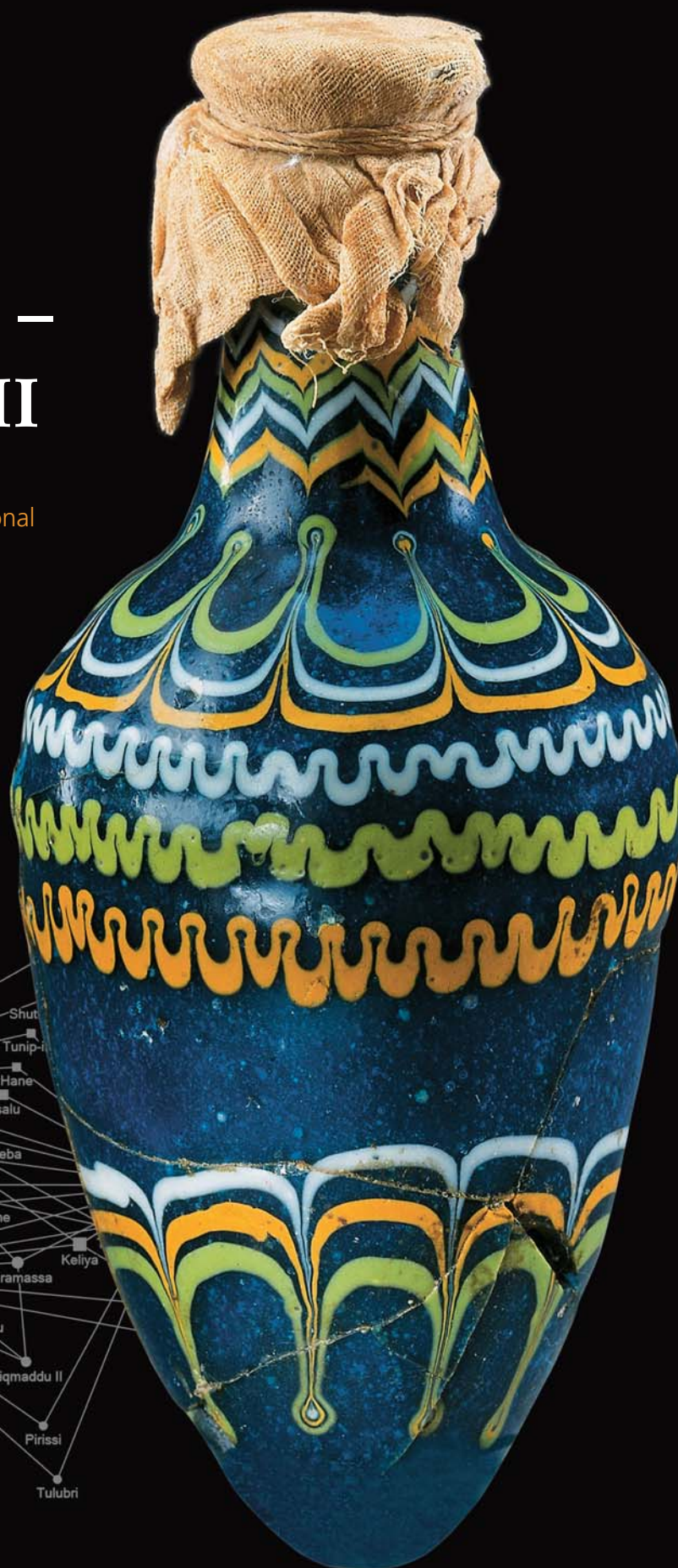


There and Back Again – the Crossroads II

Proceedings of an International
Conference Held in Prague,
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edited by Jana Mynářová,
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THE MANY-FACED “MINOAN GENIUS” AND HIS ICONOGRAPHICAL PROTOTYPE TAWERET. ON THE CHARACTER OF NEAR EASTERN RELIGIOUS MOTIFS IN NEOPALATIAL CRETE

Fritz Blakolmer

Minoan Crete owed a lot to Egypt and the Near East, and it is beyond any doubt that the oriental influences and stimuli exerted on Crete outnumber by far the Minoan elements which can be found in the Near East (see esp. Karetsou – Andreadaki-Vlazaki 2000; Panagiotopoulos 2004; Aruz 2008; Phillips 2008).¹ It therefore appears tempting, at least at first sight, to assess Minoan Crete as being part of an “Eastern Mediterranean *koiné*” as has been highlighted in particular in the past few years.² However, especially with regard to Minoan iconography and the repertory of symbolism, the methodological approach of looking for comparanda in the Near East is both fruitful and hazardous at the same time. When detecting interregional parallels in iconography, the question arises whether or not we are confronted with identical or similar meaning, concepts of ideology and belief.³ Although looking for parallels counts amongst the key-competences of archaeologists in approaching the complex matter of trans-cultural interaction, detecting similarities is not the goal but merely the starting-point of actual scholarly discourse. Thus, in the first part of this contribution I will present the iconographical motif of the so-called Minoan Genius inspired by Egyptian *Taweret* as an example for demonstrating its considerable distance in form and meaning between Minoan Crete and the Near East. In the second part, I will briefly present an explanatory model for the reason why Near Eastern elements were adopted and integrated into Cretan iconography by the Neopalatial period, during the 18th–17th centuries BCE.

¹ I am very grateful to the organizers of this conference for their kind invitation and hospitality as well as to Veronika Dubcová for fruitful discussions and to Sarah Cormack for revising the language of this paper.

² Marinatos 2007a; *ead.* 2009; *ead.* 2010. See further Owens 1996; MacGillivray 2000; Aruz 2008: 228–229.

³ See, e.g., Phillips 1995; *ead.* 2006: 297–299; *ead.* 2008: I, esp. 229–230; Panagiotopoulos 2004: 39–44.

Iconography and Morphological Development of the Minoan Genius

Although the so-called Minoan Genius probably constitutes the most thoroughly investigated, even though controversially discussed, hybrid creature in the Aegean Bronze Age, its character, iconographical development and meaning are anything but clear.⁴ Its derivation from an Egyptian standing hippopotamus deity, generally called *Taweret* today, was already remarked by the late 19th century.⁵ As Judith Weingarten, Jacqueline Phillips and others have demonstrated, his immediate morphological prototype might have been *Ashaheru* as represented on magic wands of the 12th Dynasty (Fig. 2), an aggressive male god composed of a hippopotamus with leonine paws and feet, a long dorsal appendage and holding a long broad knife in one hand (Sambin 1989: esp. 79–85; Weingarten 1991: esp. 6–10; Phillips 2008: I, 156–161). This divinity was responsible for the protection of women and children, childbirth and the underworld, and in the early New Kingdom, this deity had been absorbed by the female deity *Taweret* with comparable functions.

Although the composite creature called Minoan Genius by Aegean archaeologists was clearly inspired by Egyptian prototypes, the differences in form and function outnumber by far the similarities. His iconographical development can be followed in four stages and we can discern three different variants of the figure (Fig. 1).⁶

1. On seal impressions from MM IIB contexts (around 1750 BCE) in Phaistos (Fig. 3) (CMS II.5, nos. 321–322) and Knossos,⁷ the Genius appears for the first time in a “Minoanised” form: a lion or hippopotamus head with an open mouth, lion mane, arms and legs of a lion or hippo and a dorsal appendage, occasionally knobbed, in standing position and holding a single-handled jug of Minoan type unknown in Egypt.⁸ Due to his considerably large belly, typical of the earlier examples, I will call this type the “belly variant”. Thus, the main iconographical definition of the Minoan Genius took place already at the beginning, and there is generally a linear process of development until the end of the Aegean Bronze Age with a definite break at the beginning of LM IA, if not earlier. The only example of the Minoan Genius which can be convincingly dated to the succeeding MM III

⁴ Evans 1935: 431–444, 452–467; Gill 1964; *ead.* 1970; Weingarten 1991; *ead.* 2000; Sambin 1989; Rehak 1995; Chrysosoulaki 1999; Phillips 2008: I, 156–167.

⁵ Winter 1890: 108; Cook 1894. See further Milchhöfer 1883: 54–55, 67–69, bringing the “dämonische[s] Ungeheuer mit Pferdeköpfen” in connection with classical Greek mythology.

⁶ This table presents a typology of the Minoan Genius irrespective of his activities in the images. For clarifying his morphological development, only the better dated examples are included in this synopsis and presented in right profile view.

⁷ CMS II. 8, no. 195. For the dating of this seal to “MM II–III” in the slightly later “Hieroglyphic Deposit” in Knossos, see *ibid.* 145.

⁸ For this vessel form, see esp. Stürmer 1985; Phillips 2008: I, 162.

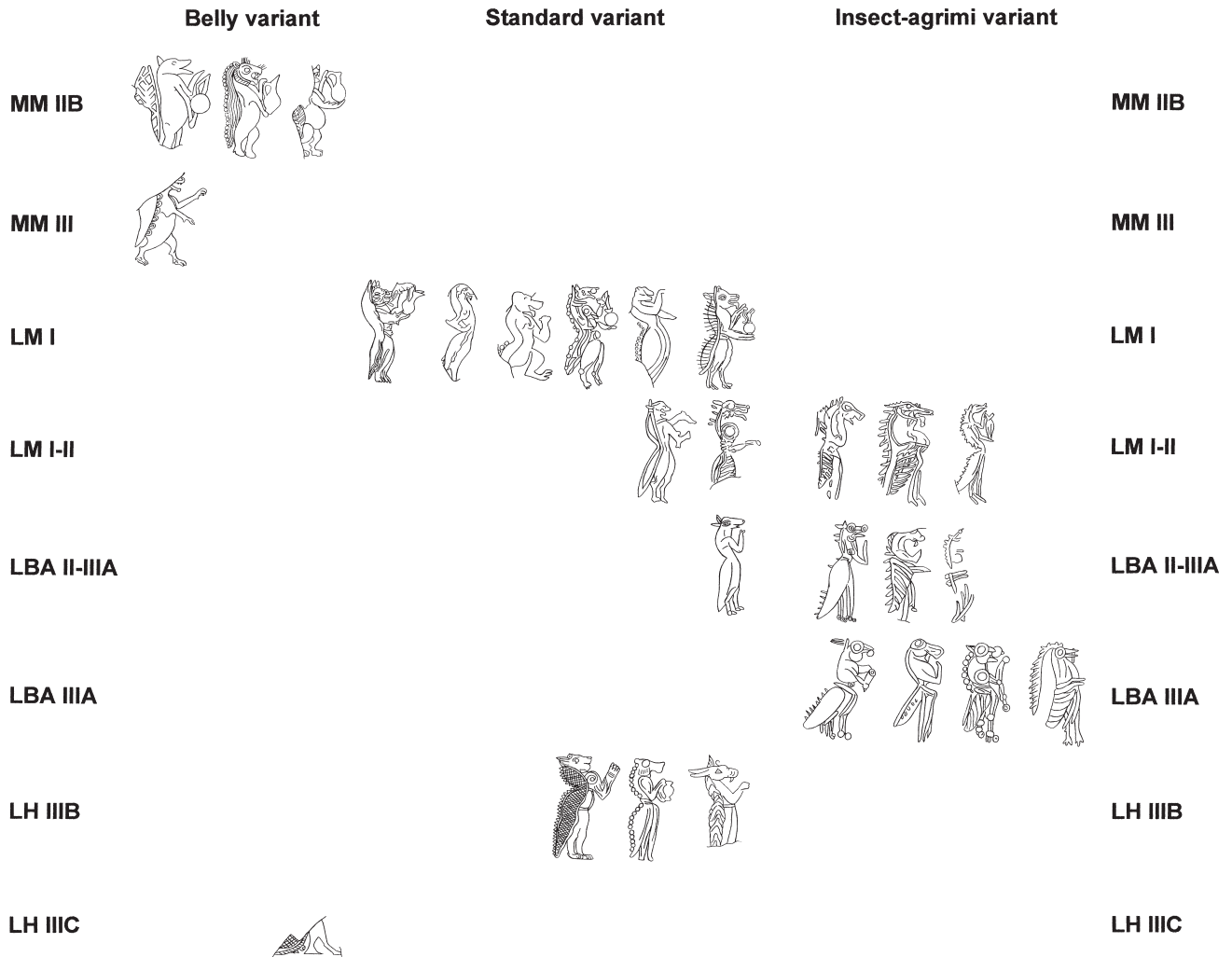


Fig. 1
Typological synopsis
of the Minoan Genius
(drawing by the author).

period is a cushion seal from Kalyvia (Fig. 4).⁹ It shows the Genius, for the last time, in the “belly variant” with the mouth of a hippopotamus¹⁰ transporting a quadruped, probably a hind.

2. By LM I, the heyday of the Neopalatial period, from 1680 BCE onwards, the Minoan Genius gradually changed his form along with an advancing “Minoanisation” and became an important figure in Minoan art, represented in many different iconographical contexts (Gill 1964; van Straten 1969: esp. 111–119; Rehak 1995). By

⁹ CMS II.3, no. 105. For sealings from Malia said to represent MM III versions of the Minoan Genius (Weingarten – Hallager 1993), see CMS II.6, nos. 170 and 222.

¹⁰ Cf. the hippopotamus head of Apophis on a contemporary MM III sealing from Knossos: CMS II. 8, no. 234. Marinatos 2007b: 358–360, figs. 5–6; *ead.* 2010: 177–180, figs. 13.9–19; Dubcová 2009: 26, figs. 9–10; Blakolmer 2010a: 35–36, fig. 10.

modifying the “belly variant” into a more leonine and, at the same time, anthropomorphic form, the Genius was presented in what I will name the “standard variant” (Figs. 5–7): his body becomes more slender and human-like, while the head, arms and legs appear more leonine than before. The Genius loses his female breasts and the sex of the hitherto female creature changes to an obviously male one. Although it has been claimed that the crocodile on the back of the Egyptian *Taweret* had been transformed by the Minoans (see, e.g., Marinatos 1993: 197), this seems not to be the case, given the fact that already *Ashaheru* of the Middle Kingdom possesses only a dorsal appendage (Fig. 2) (Sambin 1989: 93; Weingarten 1991: 5; Phillips 2008: I, 161). By now, the dorsal appendage of the Minoan Genius has received his standardised conch-like form, sometimes possibly alluding to the Minoan figure-of-eight shield (cf. Baurain 1985: esp. 103–109), and the activities of the Genius allow us to attribute a human-like character atypical of hybrid creatures in Aegean iconography.¹¹ Thus, the “standard variant” of the Genius answers the new stylistic trends, a necessary response to the naturalistic artistic tendencies in Neopalatial Crete. Although the original Minoan motif of the Genius holding a jug with both hands continues to be the most common one in the Neopalatial period (Figs. 5–6), the functions of the Genius have been deliberately enlarged: he appears in an antithetical form, pouring the jug (Fig. 6) (Baurain – Darcque 1983; Baurain 1985: 95–97, fig. 1), holding a lion (CMS II.6, no. 98), killing a bull with a lance (Fig. 7) (CMS II.7, no. 31) and participating in further activities (Fig. 8) (see esp. Rehak 1995: 215–231; Phillips 2008: I, esp. 163).

3. In the Late Palatial period of Crete, from LM II onwards (after 1500 BCE), as well as on the Mycenaean Mainland, the “standard variant” of the Minoan Genius continued and this also seems to have widely been the case concerning his iconography and functions. Motifs such as a Genius accompanied by or leading a lion or a bull and antithetical Genii flanking a column or a plant (Figs. 9–10) became more popular and conformed to the prevalent iconographical schemes on seals of the advanced Late Bronze Age. In addition to the “standard variant”, now, there developed a new stylistic form in seal glyptic which I will name the “insect-agrimi variant” (Figs. 9–12, 15–16). Probably evolving from the “standard variant”, this new form presents the Minoan Genius with an ovoid body, long thin legs and often with double-drilled eyes reminiscent of a wasp-like insect (Milchhöfer 1883: 58–60; Phillips 2008: I, 164–165). Moreover, in addition to the dorsal appendage of the Genius, a long curved knobbed stripe growing out of the head, similar to the horns of the Cretan wild-goats (agrimia), can occasionally be observed (Figs. 10–11).¹² This new variant, limited to seal images, not only constitutes a sim-

¹¹ Among the sporadic exceptions are a griffin with a stag in front of an altar (CMS IX, no. 20D) and monkeys: Marinatos 1987a; *ead.* 1987b; Rehak 1999.

¹² For Minoan Genii with a horn-like appendage, see the following seal-images: CMS II.3, no. 112 b; II.8, nos. 196, 542, 545–547; VI, no. 309; VIII, no. 65; XII, no. 302. There can be observed also the chin-beard of a goat: see CMS VIII, no. 65.

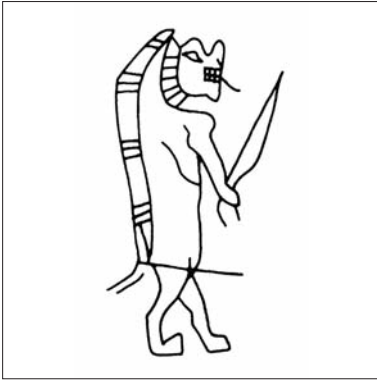


Fig. 2
Egyptian hippopotamus deity,
12th Dynasty (after Phillips
2008: I, 160, fig. 17, A1).



Fig. 3
Seal image from Phaistos
(after CMS II.5, no. 322).



Fig. 4
Seal-stone from Kalyvia
(after CMS II.3, no. 105).



Fig. 5
Seal-stone from Vapheio (after
CMS I, no. 231).



Fig. 6
Stone-triton from Malia,
detail (after Baurain – Darcque
1983: 17, fig. 14).



Fig. 7
Seal image from
Kato Zakros
(after CMS II.7, no. 31).

plification of the composite creature but also implies a continued “Minoanisation” by an approximation to the autochthonous Cretan wild-goat.

4. The latest examples of the Minoan Genius mostly derive from the Mycenaean Mainland and Cyprus and occur in other artistic media than seal glyptic. They clearly demonstrate the continuity of the “standard variant” lasting until the 13th century BCE, as in the case of a LH IIIB1 ivory plaque from Thebes (Fig. 17) (Symeonoglou 1973: 48–52, pls. 70–73). A fresco fragment from Pylos presents a white-skinned Genius in close connection with a Sacred knot or flounced gar-



Fig. 8
Seal-stone from Kakovatos
(after CMS XI, no. 208).



Fig. 9
Seal-stone in Oxford (after CMS
VI, no. 310).



Fig. 10
Seal-stone in the Collection
J. M. Dawkins (after CMS VIII,
no. 65).



Fig. 11
Seal-stone in New York
(after CMS XII, no. 302).



Fig. 12
Seal-stone in Berlin (after
CMS XI, no. 38).



Fig. 13
Seal-stone from Voudeni, Patras
(after CMS V Suppl. 1 B, no. 153).



Fig. 14
Seal-stone in Rome
(after CMS XI, no. 290).



Fig. 15
Seal-stone from Mycenae
(after CMS I, no. 172).



Fig. 16
Seal-stone in London
(after CMS VII, no. 95).

Fig. 17

Ivory plaque from Thebes, Boeotia (after Symeonoglou 1973: pl. 73, fig. 230).

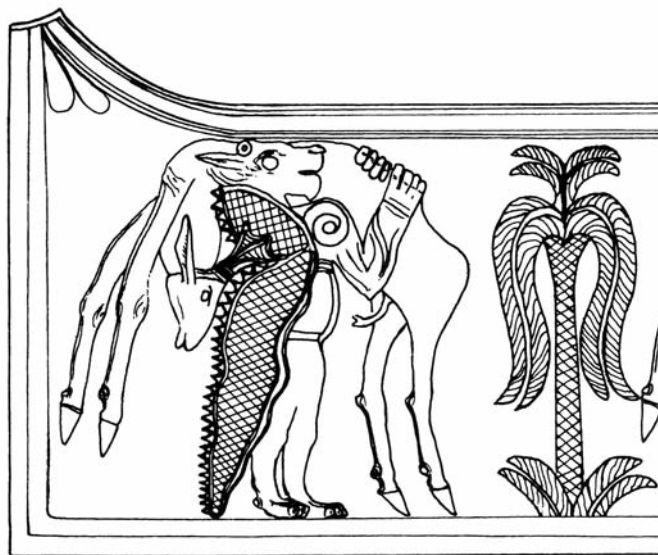


Fig. 18

Fresco fragment from the Cult Centre of Mycenae (after Demakopoulou 1988: fig. on the lower part of p. 181).



ment (Lang 1969: 79, pls. 26, C; Gill 1970: 404, fig. 1; Boloti *in press*). On a fresco fragment from the Cult Centre of Mycenae the lion heads of the Genii have been transformed into the heads of donkeys with long ears (Fig. 18) (Kritseli-Providi 1982: 21–28, A 1–5, figs. 2–3, pl. 1; Immerwahr 1990: 121, 192, My No. 8) showing quite plainly that the Aegean process of transforming this enigmatic hybrid crea-

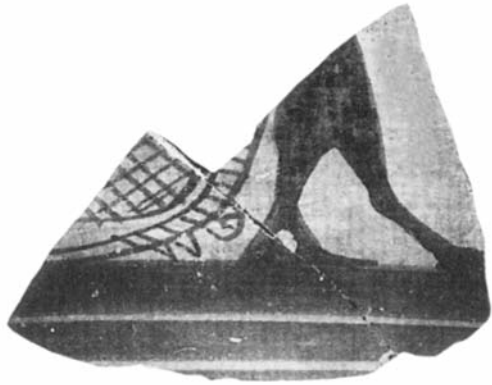


Fig. 19

LH IIIC crater from
Phylakopi, Melos
(after Benzi 2009: 9,
fig. 1).

ture into a more familiar one had not yet come to an end. It is worth mentioning that only the finest and most detailed versions belonging to the “standard variant” of Neopalatial Crete were used as iconographical models for the motif of the Minoan Genius in Late Mycenaean palatial contexts as well as in metal relief from Cyprus. If Mario Benzi is correct in his interpretation of the pictorial motif on a LH IIIC Middle crater from Phylakopi on Melos (Fig. 19), this shows a post-palatial Minoan Genius in large scale and possibly depicted in the “belly variant”.¹³

From a typological point of view, we might postulate that for the earliest examples of the “belly variant” known so far (Figs. 3–4), individual Egyptian models, to which the gesture of holding a jug was attached, were used. By the attribution of a Minoan jug and the characteristic position of the arms it becomes clear that a certain standardisation and unification of the motif of the Minoan Genius took place already in MM IIB, and this is despite the obvious variability of the figure by this period. Nevertheless, based on these earlier versions, we remark in LM I a truly conceptualized pictorial fixation of the Genius by the “standard variant” and its integration into numerous iconographical themes. Although in LM I the Minoan Genius occasionally takes a more lively posture (Fig. 7), his appearance becomes more leonine and more abstract. It is the highly innovative “standard variant” of the Minoan Genius which required a conceptual approach by an influential group of artists and/or priests in a dominant centre of authority and arts in Crete. Although we can observe a certain stylistic variability among the LM I examples of the Genius, the new “standard variant” generated the most homogeneous versions and remained the predominant one even when the figure is involved in more lively activities (Figs. 8, 12 and 13). After LM I or slightly later, a certain preference for the Genius in static motifs and in less narrative scenes can

¹³ Benzi 2009: esp. 9–10, fig. 1. For a reconstruction close to the Middle Minoan “belly variant”, see *ibid.* 11. For this sherd, see further Sakellarakis 1992: 113, no. 249; Mountjoy 1999, II: 924–925, no. 195, fig. 377 (“? Genius with a bird behind”).

be observed, be it in isolated form, as antithetical pair (Figs. 9–11) or in heraldic compositions (Fig. 14). The Neopalatial “standard variant” continuously functioned as the model for the images of the Genius during the entire Late Bronze Age. In Mycenaean palatial contexts, as mentioned above, exclusively high-quality versions of the Neopalatial “standard variant” of the Minoan Genius were used as models, leaving apart some stylistic variations in seal glyptic as well as individual transformation by misinterpreting the standardised components of this creature as evidenced by the fresco fragment from Mycenae (Fig. 18).

Chantal Sambin, Jacqueline Phillips and others¹⁴ have already highlighted, with regard to the functions of the Minoan Genius as reflected by iconography, that the only functional aspect shared by both the Egyptian hippopotamus deities and the Minoan Genius is the association with liquid and fertility (cf. also Phillips 2008: I, 167). The connection with fertility was borrowed in MM IIB and expressed by Minoan means (Fig. 3), but later on largely remained a pure formula and thus it may not have played any role in his wider function. Moreover, the Genius never shows any connection with childbirth. Thus, especially since LM I, this figure with its strongly “Minoanised” phenotype, its Minoan attributes and its altered character had very little in common with the Egyptian models. None of the standard attributes of the Egyptian prototypes (long knife, long “string”) “were ever adopted on Crete. Only the figure itself attracted Minoan attention.” (Phillips 2008: I, 166. See also Gill 1964: 4, 10; Panagiotopoulos 2004: 41).

The Minoan Genius constitutes a species of fantastic creature occurring remarkably often in narrative contexts. He fulfilled a wide range of activities and appears to be the most human amongst the hybrid beasts in Aegean iconography (cf. esp. Gill 1964; Marinatos 1986: 44–46; Rehak 1995; Chryssoulaki 1999: 114–17). In his wide range of activities he can hardly be compared with other mythological creatures such as the griffin, sphinx or “Minoan dragon”. He occurs in hunting and offering scenes, leads a bull or a lion (CMS VI, nos. 304–306), kills a bull (Fig. 7) (CMS II.7, no. 31) and carries a goat, a stag, a bull or a lion (Fig. 12) (CMS II.3, no. 105; II.6, no. 98; V, no. 209; V Suppl. 1B, no. 167; VI, no. 307; IX, no. 129; XI, nos. 37–39). Furthermore, the Genius could have fulfilled the outstanding function of substituting for man where man could not appear in iconography: this is possibly the case in the unique depiction of a “Minoan Genius” carrying on his shoulders a dead man on a seal from Voudeni, Patras (Fig. 13).¹⁵ Minoan Genii are represented as flanking and protecting anthropomorphic or divine figures¹⁶ (Fig. 14)

¹⁴ Nilsson 1950: 381; Gill 1964: 4; van Straten 1969: 120; Sambin 1989: esp. 91–94; Phillips 2008: I, 167. See further Marinatos 1993: 197; Panagiotopoulos 2004: 41; Warren 2005: 225–226.

¹⁵ See CMS V Suppl. 1B, no. 153. The author has proposed elsewhere that some kind of taboo could have existed in the depiction of a human carrying another human to be sacrificed and thus making it necessary to replace him by the supernatural Minoan Genius. See Blakolmer in press a.

¹⁶ CMS I, no. 379 (= Pini 1997: 7–8, no. 12, pl. 4); II 3, no. 282; II 8, no. 197; XI, nos. 36, 290.

and could even be flanked themselves by lions (Fig. 15), dogs and even men (Fig. 16) in the scheme of a “Master of animals”, thus unmistakably standing in the position of a deity.¹⁷

A further point deserves our interest: the Minoan Genius is, in a certain sense, an “animal of power” but never appears as a wild beast or in the position of a defeated creature. Neither does he attack, nor is he attacked by, animal or man. Instead, he was situated on a metaphysical level superior to humans, lions or griffins. This makes the Minoan Genius a creature unique and contradictory in Aegean iconography and possibly allows us to attribute to him, and him alone, the character of a minor deity in the Near Eastern sense.¹⁸

We can observe a further particularity: although the association with fertility can be ascribed to the Genius holding a jug even in Late Bronze Age motifs, as suggested by his connection with a spreading plant in front of him (Fig. 9), this seems not always to have been the case. In heraldic motifs the Genius can appear with or without a jug (Figs. 9–11 and 14) which demonstrates that holding a jug, occasionally, could have been perceived “rather as an attribute than part of a narrative scene recording a specific stage in a ceremony”, as observed already by M. A. V. Gill (1964: 10). At least the only example which clearly shows the Genius pouring a liquid from his jug is the stone triton from Malia (Fig. 6). Furthermore, given the highly naturalistic Minoan art of the Neopalatial period, it is noticeable that the original arm-position of the Genius holding a jug was maintained also in other activities in which this gesture does not fit at all.¹⁹ This formulaic, de-contextualised, frozen, “petrified” gesture was also applied when the Genius is depicted as supporting a man fighting with a lion (Fig. 8) (CMS XI, no. 208) or a Lion-man (CMS II.8, no. 200), as leading a bull (see, e.g., CMS VI, nos. 304–305) or in a neutral standing position (Fig. 16) (CMS VII, no. 95). This means that the original iconographical *locus classicus* of the Minoan Genius was perceived as a stereotypical iconic formula strongly connected with the creature itself. This is highly atypical of active, human-like figures in Minoan iconography and reminds us of the iconographical *topoi* of the crouching monkey or the recumbent griffin. Thus, although the Minoan Genius was transformed from his original models imported from the Near East, his image was fixed in two stages and firmly integrated and assimilated into the Aegean iconography; from this we gain the impression that he never really became a living figure in images but always maintained a static, somewhat abstract, formula-like motif of exotic, foreign character.

¹⁷ CMS I, nos. 161 (= Müller – Olivier – Pini 1998: 25–27, no. 12, fig. 4), 172; VII, nos. 95, 126 (“Genius-man”). See also Evans 1935: 461–462. For the “Potnios / Potnia theron” motifs in Aegean iconography, see esp. Müller 2000; Barclay 2001; Crowley 2010.

¹⁸ Cf. Nilsson 1950: 381: “They are not gods themselves, but the stuff of which gods are made [...], superior to animals and to man”. See also the assessment as “a force superior to or dominant over the zoological world” by Phillips 2008: I, 167.

¹⁹ For this observation, see already Morgan 1995: 179 with fig. 6; Weingarten 1991: 12.

It must be stressed that, on the one hand, the Minoan Genius certainly is a special case of a creature borrowed from the Near East and imported to the Aegean. Although he constitutes the most exotic and most “un-Minoan” creature, he had a remarkably widespread and long-lived popularity in Aegean art. On the other hand, the Minoan Genius exemplifies in an excellent way some typical features of the adoption of Near Eastern sacred motifs in 18th–17th century BCE Crete: de-contextualisation, “Minoanisation” in form and function by adaptation, new interpretation, misunderstanding and creativity as well as an extreme flexibility and ambiguity in iconography and meaning.²⁰ This leads us to the question: what happened in early Neopalatial Crete? What role did motifs borrowed from the Ancient Near East play in Minoan ritual iconography in this period of Crete?

Why Do Near Eastern Religious Motifs Occur in Neopalatial Crete?

In the second part of this paper I will briefly present a model of explanation for the Minoan quest for stimulation from the Near East in order to create a ritual iconography, especially in the emergence of an iconographical definition of divine figures and mythological creatures.²¹ To begin with, it is of crucial importance to emphasize that the Aegean Bronze Age civilizations, for a long time, did *not* have a pronounced image-orientated ritual and belief. It was not before the end of the Old Palace period, the 18th century BCE, that an iconography of religion made its appearance in Minoan Crete (Immerwahr 1985; Poursat 2008: 94–132). By this period, for the first time, there appeared imitations and adaptations of the griffin, sphinx, hippopotamus deity and other foreign creatures in different artistic media (Watrous 1987; *ead.* 1998; Carinci 2000). These motifs, inspired by Near Eastern prototypes, constitute the immediate predecessors of the splendid Neopalatial religious iconography and were strongly adapted *à la minoenne* (Aruz 2008: esp. 172–175; Phillips 2008: I, esp. 229–230; Dubcová 2010; Marinatos 2010). This applies also to imitations of iconographical schemata characterizing divine figures such as an enthroned position, the attendance by animals and hybrid creatures or variants of the “Master” or “Mistress of animals”.²²

At least in the Neopalatial era of Crete, the formative period of Aegean iconography, religion constituted a profoundly socio-political matter. This becomes obvious by the omnipresence of ritual activities in the archaeological and iconographical sources (Gesell 1985: 19–40; Dickinson 1994; Marinatos 1993; Adams 2004). In LM I, if not earlier, a process began of integration and unification

²⁰ For the phenomenon of “Minoanisation”, see Warren 1997; *ead.* 2005; Panagiotopoulos 2004: 39–44; Phillips 2006: 297–299; 2008: esp. 229–230.

²¹ Cf. already Blakolmer 2012a: esp. 23–26; Blakolmer *in press* b; Blakolmer – Dubcová *in press*.

²² For the Potnios/Potnia Theron, see *supra* (fn. 17).

of Minoan Crete initiated by the palace of Knossos. Its goal was the transformation from distinct regional polities in Protopalatial Crete to a state-centred polity under the dominance of the Knossian palatial authorities (see, e.g., Hood 1984; Warren 2002; Wiener 2007). Already in the early Neopalatial period some fundamental changes occurred at the intersection points of religion and power, such as the palatial appropriation of the traditional peak sanctuaries, the establishment of the system of the Minoan “villa”, standardised “palatial” architectonic forms, a common administrative network and, last but not least, an iconography standardised in style and content.²³

This political and social process of transformation could have been provoked by a ruling group of priests at Knossos by pursuing a programmatic strategy and by using religion as an integrative tool (Platon 1983; Hood 1995; Melas 1995: esp. 617–624; Betancourt 2002). The priesthood of Knossos could have initiated the systematisation of a Minoan *pantheon* which accommodated several aspects: it pursued the fundamental change of the hitherto abstract, “impersonal” religious concept towards a restructured, figure-orientated theological system. By now, for the first time, Minoan iconography appears highly standardised and conceptualized. “Minoan art” in Neopalatial Crete essentially means a “language of images” initiated by Knossos and expanding towards the wider Southern Aegean area—an outcome of centralized palatial power (Blakolmer 2010b; *ead.* 2012b). Images constitute a medium of communicative processes and form an excellent tool for exercising power and for manipulating a wider audience in a given society. Especially the sphere of religion represents a preeminent field for manipulative strategies aimed at unifying a society and to attain socio-political integration. As expressed by Ellen Adams (2007: 391) recently, there was an attempt to break with the past and to construct “a brave new world”.

Plenty of examples of comparable strategies in other periods and regions could be cited. This scenario, for example, is strongly reminiscent of many socio-political mechanisms and effects of Christianisation in medieval times and also in later periods and outside Europe (König 2008; von Padberg 2009. See also Watrous 1998: 26). Such a comparison with Minoan Crete was already drawn by John Bintliff (1977: esp. 160–164) in his “Monastery model”. As for the symbolism of religious iconography on architectonic walls, meant to reinforce the ideological foundations of Neopalatial Crete, Charles Gates (2004) has suggested comparisons with Italian cities during the Renaissance and Spanish colonies in 16th century South America.

Regarding the representation of deities in Neopalatial Crete, two different strategies were developed in particular, both of them targeted towards integrating

²³ Gesell 1985: 19–40; *ead.* 1987; Driessen 1989–1990; Peatfield 1990: esp. 126–130; Walberg 1992: esp. 142–143; *ead.* 1989; Adams 2004.

Fig. 20

Bronze sistrum from Mochlos, Crete (after Soles 2005: pl. XCIX f).



Fig. 21

“Harvester vase” from Ayia Triada, detail (after Marinatos – Hirmer 1973: pl. 104 below).



and absorbing the traditional regional cults and systems of belief. In addition to the omnipresent motif of a goddess in the form of an indistinct woman in a festive dress, the second centralizing policy was the adoption and adaptation of divine images and ritual equipment from Egypt and, even more frequently, from Syro-Palestine (Hiller 1987: esp. 61–63; Watrous 1987; Marinatos 1993: esp. 130; *ead.* 2009; Carinci 2000; MacGillivray 2000: 152–153; Aruz 2008: 228–229). This theological concept of constructing a normative and unified Minoan sacred ambience borrowed from abroad in order to give a new orientation to the entire society of Crete would perfectly fit a propaganda of religion.

With the Neopalatial strategy of the reception and imitation of Near Eastern motifs and concepts, a trend serving already in MM IIB as a vehicle for Minoan elite ideology was employed and intensified (Schoep 2006: esp. 52–53, 57–58. See also Nikolaidou 1999; Frankfort 1936–1937). This attempt was now reflected in the adoption of ritual instruments borrowed from the Near East, such as the sistrum²⁴ (Figs. 20–21) and the “fenestrated axe” (Figs. 22–23) (Evans 1935: 413–419; Kilian-Dirlmeier 1987: 203–204, fig. 4. See in general Miron 1992; Schiestl 2006), and also in the introduction of new ritual robes stimulated by the Levant, such as the long robe with diagonal bands (Fig. 23) (Nilsson 1968: 158–160; Marinatos 1993: 127–134; 2007c: 179–185; Rehak 1994) and the flounced skirt, the latter becoming the robe *par excellence* of high-status Minoan women (Jones 2005: 707–

²⁴ For sistra in Minoan Crete, see Sakellarakis – Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1997, II: 351–355, figs. 321–326; Betancourt 2005: 450, pl. CII c; Betancourt – Muhly 2006; Warren 2005: 223–224; Soles 2005: 433, pl. XCIX f.

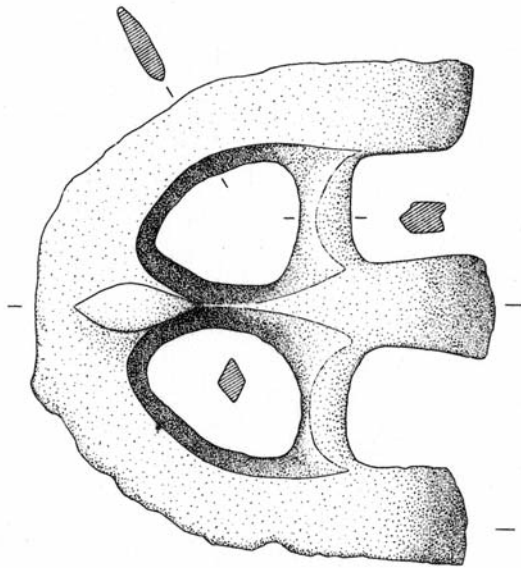


Fig. 22
“Fenestrated axe”
from Vapheio (after
Kilian-Dirlmeier 1987:
201, fig. 4).



Fig. 23
Seal from “Vathia”, Crete
(after CMS II.3, no. 198).

708; *ead.* 2013; Miller Bonney 2011; Dubcová 2012: 32–33). This attempt also includes the appropriation and standardisation of prominent and complex symbolic motifs, such as the double-axe, the horns of consecration, the sacral knot, the Minoan column, the tree, the bird, the snake, the snake-frame and the bucranium, some of them already having a long tradition in Crete (Rutkowski 1981; Gesell 1985: 62–63; Marinatos 1986; Moss 2005: esp. 195–205; Briault 2007). Symbols such as these were associated with the ideological apparatus of palatial elites rather than with the cult of specific deities, i.e. religion in its narrow sense.

The result of this suspected religio-political strategy conducted in Neopalatial Crete is neither the existence of a coherent and consistent iconography of individual deities with distinct functions, nor a clearly defined character of mythological creatures or “animals of power” (Blakolmer 2010c: esp. 50–61; *in press c*). The iconographical and semantic specificity of the deities, obviously, was of less importance than the omnipresence of divinities and ritual acts in images propagating the new palatial ideology. Instead, this attempt resulted in interchangeable iconographical formulae of defining the sacredness of indistinct male and female figures in deliberate ambiguity as “the lowest common denominator”, many of them strongly reminiscent of the “languages of images” in the Near East. However, even if the divine figures and mythological creatures of Neopalatial Crete constitute completely new elements borrowed from Syro-Palestine and Egypt, their contexts and meanings could have basically differed from the original ones in the Near East, as is well illustrated by the example of the Minoan Genius. As a consequence, impulses by foreign ritual requisites and iconographical motifs

such as these do not necessarily have anything to do with an “Eastern Mediterranean *koine*”.²⁵

A final point is worthy of our attention: only sporadically, the question has been raised why an Egyptian hippopotamus deity was selected by Cretans and why the Minoan Genius became a figure of enormous popularity and longevity in iconography as well as in the metaphysical mind-set of people in the Bronze Age Aegean.²⁶ One possible answer might be that this creature attracted the attention of Minoans and Mycenaeans because of its highly exotic and obviously “non-Aegean” appearance. As mentioned above, we gain the impression that the Minoan Genius always maintained his foreign, unfamiliar character and, thus, foreignness by itself could have functioned as a significant marker in the definition of the divine or liminal realm among Aegean elites.

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²⁵ For the model of an “Eastern Mediterranean *koine*”, see *supra* (fn. 2).

²⁶ See, e.g., Gill 1964: 5; Weingarten 1991: 12–13; Benzi 2009: 10.

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