

## Two Knights and a Goddess: Sir Arthur Evans, Sir James George Frazer, and the Invention of Minoan Religion

Cynthia Eller

Department of Philosophy and Religion, Montclair State University, Montclair, New Jersey, 07043 USA

E-mail: [ellerc@mail.montclair.edu](mailto:ellerc@mail.montclair.edu)

### Abstract

*Recent biographies of Sir Arthur Evans and histories of his excavations at Knossos have made it clear that Evans's description of Minoan religion was not solidly based on the material evidence at Knossos. By the time Evans wrote The Palace of Minos he was fully committed to the belief that the Minoans worshipped a single Great Mother Goddess in many guises, along with a subordinate male deity, her son. There are two key questions about Evans's vision of Minoan religion: first, when did Evans arrive at the conclusion that the Minoans' principal deity was a goddess? And second, why did he prefer this goddess-centered explanation of the material facts when so many other stories could be told about the religious meaning of the same objects? The most common answers to these questions are that Evans thought Minoan religion was goddess-centered from the time he first began to explore Bronze Age Crete, and that he was drawn to the figure of a Mother Goddess because he lost his own mother when he was only six years old. Both of these suppositions are almost certainly mistaken. Evans did not bring the goddess thesis with him to Crete, and whatever his lingering feelings about his mother's death, they were not responsible for his conversion to the goddess thesis for Minoan culture. This paper argues that by far the most significant factor in Evans's creation of the Minoan Goddess was his exposure to the work of Sir James George Frazer, both directly and through the auspices of classicist Jane Ellen Harrison.*

**Keywords:** *Minoan Crete, Minoan religion, Arthur Evans, James George Frazer, goddesses, matriarchy, Jane Ellen Harrison*

### Introduction

Recent biographies of Sir Arthur Evans and histories of his excavations at Knossos have made it clear that much of what Evans had to say about the nature of Minoan religion was not solidly based on the materials he uncovered during his excavations on the island of Crete. By the standards of today's archaeology, not only Evans but most of his colleagues granted themselves remarkable interpretive license. Observations quickly became speculations—sometimes

quite detailed and fantastic—which then just as quickly became acknowledged truths about prehistory, at least for the general public. Provided early archaeologists spoke with sufficient charisma and confidence, they could easily be regarded as having a mysterious yet piercing insight into the shadows of prehistoric times. After all, they had uncovered, touched, seen and examined the objects using their own senses: they were *there*.

Evans had charisma and confidence; he sold his story well. But there is now general agree-

ment that Evans's recreation of Minoan religion as the worship of a Mother Goddess and her son, the Boy God, was the product of his fertile mind rather than a reasonable conclusion based on the artifacts he found (or even on the forgeries later available to him). Still, there are two key questions about Evans's vision of Minoan religion that have not yet been adequately answered. First, when did Evans arrive at the conclusion that the Minoans' principal deity was a goddess? And second, why did he prefer this goddess-centered explanation of the material facts, when so many other stories could be told about the religious (or secular) meaning of the same objects?

The most common answers to these questions are that Evans thought Minoan religion was goddess-centered from the time he first began to explore Minoan sites and artifacts, naturally leading him to see lots of goddesses in the material remains; and that he was drawn to the figure of a Great Mother Goddess because of the repressed trauma he suffered at his own mother's death when he was only six years old. Historian Cathy Gere has argued the latter point most intensely, referring repeatedly to the decisive role played by Evans's 'most intimate sorrows and desires' and his 'unresolved grief' related to his mother's death (2009: 14-15, 51, 135; but see also MacGillivray 2000: 6, 193). But both of these suppositions are almost certainly mistaken. Evans did not bring with him to Crete a belief that pre-classical Greek religion centered on a Great Mother Goddess (several archaeologists and historians have previously noted this: Ucko 1968: 409; Hamilton 1996: 282-83; Hutton 1997: 93).

Had Evans thought about it in advance, he doubtless would have assumed that he would find female deities in prehistoric Cretan religion. Contemporaneous religions in the Mediterranean included important goddesses, as did the religions that followed in Crete and on the Greek mainland, and the reigning anthropological dogma of the era was that there had been a universal matrilineal, goddess-worshipping phase

during humanity's long childhood. But Evans did not suspect that there was any significant cult associated with a female deity when he first started investigating prehistoric Crete in 1894, let alone that the culture's preeminent deity was a Great Mother Goddess, with the corresponding God no more than her child and satellite. It was not until 1901 that Evans began to speculate about a prehistoric Cretan goddess. He granted her increasingly greater significance in Minoan religion with each successive year of excavation. However, the notion that the Minoan Goddess was singular (other apparent female deities being manifestations of the one Great Goddess) and that a male deity was youthful and subordinate to her was not really reached until the end of his excavations at Knossos in 1905. Even then, Evans's story of the Great Mother Goddess and the Boy God did not reach its full flower until Evans wrote his *magnum opus* about the Minoan excavations, *The Palace of Minos* (1921), begun well after he first directed workers to put their spades into the ground at Knossos.

This in itself suggests that his mother's death was not the primary factor in Evans's embrace of a goddess-centered religion for Minoan Crete. Evans was nearly 50 years old when he began excavating Knossos and well into his seventies when he spoke most confidently and freely about the Minoan Great Goddess. If his mother's death predisposed him toward the invention of goddess religions, it seems odd that Evans came to the goddess thesis so late in life—especially after having had and bypassed many prior opportunities to 'find' a prehistoric Great Goddess in the British Isles and the Balkans, where he spent significant time exploring. Thus it is likely that there were more proximate factors behind Evans's creation of a goddess religion for Minoan Crete. In this study, I argue that by far the most significant factor in Evans's creation of a Great Minoan Goddess was his exposure to the work of Sir James George Frazer. Always keen to tell a good story, when it came to Minoan religion, Evans did not create that story himself, but rather

found it in Frazer's theory of a near-universal religious cult of a Great Mother Goddess and her son/consort. But this is where the meeting of the minds ended. Frazer saw the story of the Mother Goddess and her son/consort as an example of primitive psychology, long surpassed by modern humans (or at least by the British). For Evans, in contrast, the story positively oozed with a romantic vision of a world whose loss could only be mourned by those with an eye for beauty and spirituality. Nevertheless, the marriage of these odd bedfellows in Evans's analysis of Minoan religion was enormously appealing in the early 20th century and, for many, remains so today.

Affection for Minoan Crete was probably over-determined from the start. The notion of a sophisticated Bronze Age society on the island of Crete was greeted as proof of European excellence, of a 'European spirit' that blossomed in an era hundreds, even thousands of years before classical Greece (Papadopoulos 2005: 90). Evans's initial attraction to Crete was based on preliminary evidence of a written script that antedated classical Greek (and may not have been, as the Greek alphabet was, borrowed from the Phoenicians in Asia). As early as 1900, Evans was proclaiming the superiority of the Cretan script, arguing that 'some distant analogy may be recognised with the tablets of Babylonia, but the letters here are of free upright "European" aspect, far more advanced in type than the cuneiform characters. They are equally ahead of Egyptian hieroglyphs, though here and there the pictorial original of some of these linear forms can still be detected' (1899/1900: 57). Minoan Crete was 'the most ancient centre of civilized life in Greece and with it, of our whole Continent' (Evans 1933: 7-8). It is interesting that no one seemed to question the 'Europeanness' of Crete at the time. True, Crete is only 70 miles off the Greek mainland, but it is also only some 110 miles from Asia and 200 miles from Africa. Evans (1925: 1) acknowledged Crete's proximity to three different continents and discussed its relationships with these other lands quite freely and frequently,

but never hesitated to claim Minoan Crete for Europe.

As well as elevating the 'European' above its former place in world history, Evans's generation was also clearly motivated by the desire to kick over some of the idols of the previous generation, especially the near-fetishization of classical Greek culture and the uniqueness of Christianity. Evans himself was always eager to take classical Greece down a peg, proclaiming victoriously in a 1911 lecture that 'the truth is that the old view of Greek civilization as a kind of "*enfant de miracle*" can no longer be maintained' (quoted in MacGillivray 2000: 258). He did the same for Christianity as he tried to make the case that the cross was a religious symbol from Minoan times (1902/1903: 88-92). Throughout Evans's work is the unadorned desire to make Minoan Crete first and best, and reduce classical Greece to the status of latecomer. As MacGillivray (2000: 244-45) comments, 'Evans never concealed his wish to find the antecedents for every aspect of Schliemann's Mycenaeans', which Evans described as 'merely a later offshoot of a much older culture' (1931: 3).

### Evans and the Minoan Goddess, 1894–1905

These are the motivations Evans brought to his work at Knossos, and they continued to propel his work for the rest of his life. What Evans did *not* bring to his work at Knossos was a desire to discover the Great Mother Goddess of Minoan Crete. Even after three years of digging at Knossos, the goddess thesis was not Evans's dominant explanation of Minoan religion: the best he granted the Goddess was that she was half of a divine pair, the other half being a male deity. At the outset, Evans concentrated on the sagacious if sometimes cruel reign of King Minos and the aniconic worship of 'Cretan Zeus', born in a cave on Mount Ida. Evans chose Zeus as the reigning deity of Minoan Crete because classical Greek myth claimed that Zeus had been born on Crete, when his mother Rhea fled there to

avoid seeing her latest son eaten by his father Kronos.

One might suspect that Evans changed his views about Minoan religion—from an emphasis on ‘Cretan Zeus’ to the ‘Minoan Goddess’—because the materials he unearthed caused him to revise his theories to suit the evidence. Indeed, it seems that this played a role in the Goddess’s gradual elevation to a higher status in Minoan religion in Evans’s estimation between 1901 and 1903. But an examination of Evans’s writings after 1903 reveals that Evans merely acquired a new theory, and then rearranged the evidence to fit it, beginning rather tentatively in his later excavation reports, but concluding very expansively in *The Palace of Minos*.

Evans first set foot on the island of Crete in the spring of 1894 at 42 years of age. He quickly set his sights on excavating Knossos, which was widely known to be an ancient site. Evans worked patiently and persistently to buy the land under which the coveted ruins lay, assuming—correctly, it turned out—that this would give him priority when the time became opportune to excavate. In the meantime, Evans happily explored all over the island of Crete. In his notebooks from these explorations, Evans described his travels, the people he met, and the sites he visited. But more than anything else, he wrote about the objects he bought. His pages are full of sketches of seal stones he either purchased or was unable to purchase, and his delight in ownership is palpable (Brown 2001). Anyone who has ever stepped into a bazaar—or a shopping mall for that matter—and suddenly felt overcome by a lust to possess one of everything for sale can identify with Arthur Evans’s state of mind. Yet it is nevertheless impressive to see how much Evans’s zeal for prehistoric Crete was fired by things, and particularly by things that he could touch and hold and call his own.

Evans was especially tantalized by so-called γαλόπετρες (*galopetres*), literally ‘milk stones’. These Bronze Age seal stones, picked up off the ground over centuries by local Cretans,

were prized by Cretan women for their ability to promote or eliminate lactation, depending on whether they were worn on the front or the back of the body (MacGillivray 2000: 92-93). Many of the seal stones Evans saw or purchased included images of women. Evans unfailingly described them as ‘female figures’ or ‘a figure of a woman’. None were perceived to be goddesses, as they surely would have been a decade later. Only one was given any sort of sacred status in Evans’s estimation: she was a ‘female votary at [a] shrine’ (Brown 2001: 245). Clay figures of women were also not declared goddesses: they were ‘cult idols’ or simply ‘female figures’ (Brown 2001: 93, 243-45). A year after his first visit to Crete, as Evans prepared a paper for the British Association, he again did not speak of goddesses, but of ‘primitive European “idols”’ found throughout the Aegean islands (quoted in MacGillivray 2000: 142). In his 1895 publication, *Cretan Pictographs and Prae-Phoenician Script*, he specifically discounts the possibility that these female figures represent ‘Istar or the Mother Goddess’, whom he regards as ‘an intrusive form [in the Aegean islands] beside the more primitive idols which... had [been] handed down from Neolithic times’ (Evans 1895: 124-32).

Evans received permission to excavate Knossos in the spring of 1900. In his report on the first season of excavation, he states quite clearly that ‘the chief indigenous divinity’ of Knossos was ‘the Cretan Zeus’, whose presence could be detected in the symbol of the double axe (Evans 1899/1900: 32-34, 64-65). He does not identify female images as goddesses, but instead notes finds of a ‘primitive female image’, ‘a Queen’, or simply evidence that the artisans of Knossos were already creating ‘sculpture in the round of the human form’ (Evans 1899/1900: 6, 13, 31). Coming upon a vase in the form of a dove—which Evans would later regard as a symbol of the Goddess—he notes only that the vase ‘tends to prove the early domestication of this bird in Crete’ (Evans 1899/1900: 7). His only reference to goddesses is in a footnote suggesting that ‘the

leading part played by Goddesses and female votaries in the cult-scenes [on signet rings]’ was a ‘survival in the domain of religion of ideas attaching to the matriarchal system’ (Evans 1899/1900: 42, n. 1). One suspects that here Evans was simply bowing toward the then still common belief among anthropologists in a universal matriarchal stage in human social development—especially since he clearly states that ‘the matriarchal system’ was present only in remnants and ‘survivals’ by the time of Bronze Age Crete. It does not suggest that Evans believed that Bronze Age Crete was itself matriarchal or that its religion emphasized Goddess worship. (Indeed, in his later work, the term *matriarchy* does not show up at all [Marinatos 2011].)

Evans’s preoccupation with ‘Cretan Zeus’ at the expense of any purported goddess is also evident in Evans’s first published treatment of prehistoric religion, *The Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult and its Mediterranean Relations*, published in 1901. (The term ‘Mycenaean’ then referred to what Evans would later denominate ‘Minoan’.) In this book (also published as an article in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*), Evans outlines a schema of early religion consisting of the worship of sacred trees, stones and pillars, not only in Crete but in ancient Britain, for example, in the form of the henge monuments (Evans 1901: 106). (Evans lectured on the religious significance of the henge monuments and other prehistoric materials in 1885, but these lectures were never published. Discussion of their content can be found in Harlan 2011.) According to Evans, the ‘tree and pillar cult’ of Bronze Age Greece consisted of aniconic worship of gods and goddesses (Evans 1901: 123). The divinity was believed to inhabit a natural object such as a stone or tree, or a constructed artifact such as a pillar, but was not yet displayed in anthropomorphic form. Evans’s argument was in keeping with the thoughts of other archaeologists of preclassical Greece at the time. For example, Christos Tsountas, who excavated Mycenae after Schliemann, and his co-author, J. Irving Manatt, asserted in 1897 that

it is hardly probable that there were in the Mycenaean age many structures built expressly for the gods, and set apart for their worship. The temple, as we have seen, is still an unfamiliar thing in Homer, nor was it a necessity of primitive religion... the groves were God’s first temples, literally so, with the Greeks as well as with the North Europeans (Tsountas and Manatt 1897: 307-308).

In a prefatory note to *The Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult*, Evans states that ‘the views here expressed regarding the character of Mycenaean worship... were, in their main outlines, first put forth by me in a paper on “Pillar and Tree Worship in Mycenaean Greece”, read in the Anthropological Section of the British Association at Liverpool in 1896’ (Evans 1901: v). Yet the 1901 text incorporates material from the first season of Evans’s excavations at Knossos, and when it does, it speaks almost exclusively to the presumed presence of the ‘Cretan Zeus’ in the excavated materials. On the book’s first page Evans announces: ‘In the great South-western Court, and again in the Central Area of the Palace of Knossos, have now... been brought to light the foundations of what seem to have been two rectangular altars; and the special relation in which this building stood to the God of the Double Axe makes a dedication to the Cretan Zeus in this case extremely probable’ (Evans 1901: 2). He consistently sees in the votive double axes found in Cretan caves and incised on blocks at Knossos ‘the presence of the God himself’ whose ‘actual image in anthropomorphic shape was not needed by the religion of that time’ (Evans 1901: 100, 123, 132).

*Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Worship* does give one hint of what was to follow in Evans’s reconstruction of Minoan religion. After a discussion of the significance of lions in Minoan art (in which Evans notes several times that lions can be the sacred animals not only of goddesses such as the later Kybele and Rhea, but also ‘of the Sun-God’), Evans (1901: 168) comments:

It is probable that in Mycenaean religion, as in the later Phrygian, the female aspect of

divinity predominated...The male divinity is not so much the consort as the son or youthful favourite. The relationship is rather that of Rhea than of Hera to Zeus, of Adonis rather than of Arès to Aphroditè.

This statement is in keeping with Evans's interest in 'Cretan Zeus', who is after all only on the island of Crete because he is born there as the child of Rhea, but it does hint at his later Mother Goddess interpretation of Minoan finds. Significantly, however, in this first systematic treatment of Minoan religion, Evans quickly drops the Mother Goddess/Boy God interpretation for the remainder of his text. He instead turns to a discussion of the 'divine pair', an apparently equal Goddess and God, and then to interpretations of artifacts that he reads as evidence of the pillar cult referenced in his title. Evans's interpretation of one of these artifacts, a gold signet ring (Figure 1), is particularly telling. The large female figure in the foreground is not identified as a goddess. Rather she is 'a female figure' who 'raises her hand in the familiar attitude of adoration'. The small, nude male figure, on the other hand, is 'the God'. The tall obelisk in the center is also the God, 'the male form of the aniconic image'. The action depicted in the scene is, according to

Evans, that of the God 'being brought down by the ritual incantation of his votary to his earthly tenement of stone' (170-71). The female figure is then, at best, a priestess, though Evans does not use even this term to describe her.

In sum, in his first extended analysis of pre-classical Greek religion, Evans alludes to the notion of a Mother Goddess paired with a Boy God, but the interpretation that dominates his text includes both goddesses and gods, mainly in aniconic forms. If amidst this wash of interpretations one deity emerges as supreme in his analysis of materials from Knossos, it is certainly 'Cretan Zeus' or the nameless male deity who is worshipped in the form of trees and pillars.

In his 1901 excavation report, Evans discusses finds of seal impressions showing female figures, and he identifies some of these as goddesses, others as female votaries. One seal impression in particular stands out: that of a female figure flanked by lions, holding out a staff. A male figure stands before her while behind her are at least three 'horns of consecration' (Figure 2). Evans makes the obvious connection to the Anatolian Goddess Kybele, who is often flanked by lions, and describes this figure as 'the Lion-Guarded Goddess' (1900/1901: 28-30). Aside from this identification of female figures with lions as

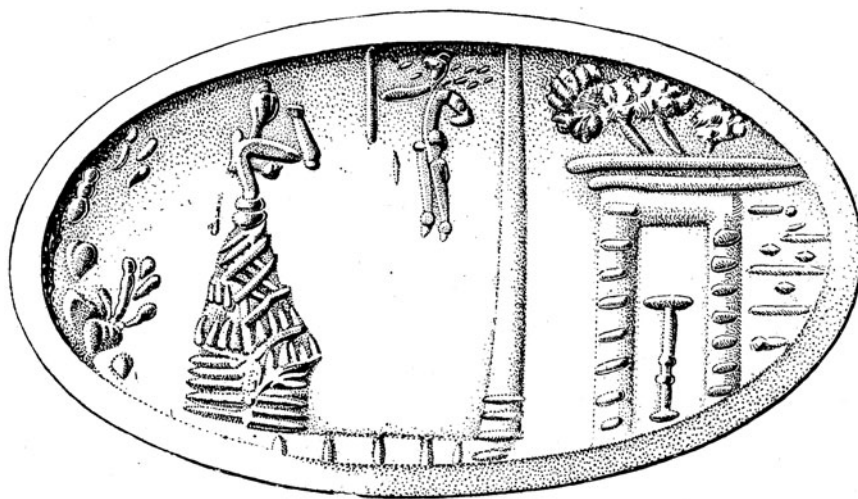


**Figure 1.** Gold signet ring from Bronze Age Crete (Evans 1901: 170, fig. 48).

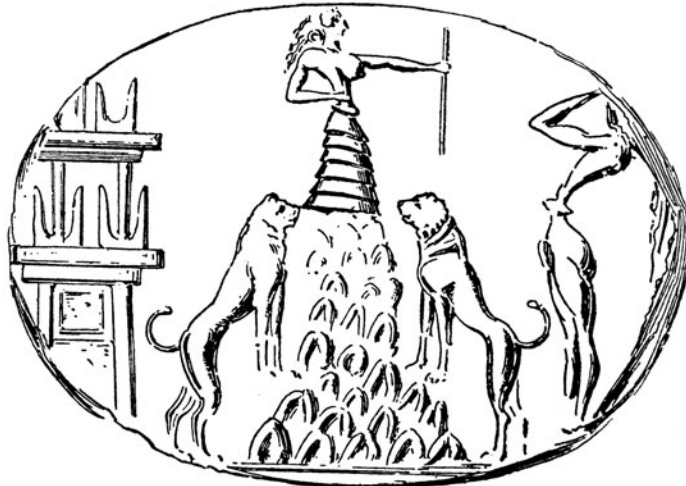


**Figure 2.** Seal impression from Knossos (Evans 1900/1901: 29, fig. 9).

goddesses, Evans says no more on the subject of female divinities, though he does return to 'the God', present in aniconic form in the double axe (1900/1901: 52-54).

In the 1902 excavation report, several finds inspired Evans to put more emphasis on female deities. One is a group of small terracotta pillars topped by doves found in a ritual context; another is a cylindrical female figure with a dove resting on her head. Evans speaks freely of a 'cult of the Dove Goddess' (though interestingly, in a footnote he specifies that the dove is a symbol of 'divine descent' that 'is not necessarily a female divinity, for the dove also appears as the "Messenger" of Zeus in later Greek myth' [Evans 1901/1902: 29, n. 3]). Evans here refers to a 'divine pair' more frequently, a god and goddess, and for the first time he notes that since the double axe is sometimes found with the goddess as well as the god, it is possible that it is a symbol or an object of aniconic worship that may apply to both deities (Evans 1901/1902: 101-102).

The following year, Evans (1902/1903: 36) continues to speak of a 'divine pair', and is more confident in identifying them with the double axe and with the pillars that he previously regarded as the object of aniconic worship of 'Cretan Zeus'. At one point, he analyzes two seal

stones (Figure 3) showing human figures with lions, one of whom he recognizes as 'the God' and the other as 'the Goddess'. (The figure holding a staff, which he describes as 'the Goddess', is very like a figure from a seal stone Evans acquired on Crete prior to his excavations at Knossos. At that time, Evans described the figure as a man in a long dress [Brown 2001: 453, cat. no. 292].) Evans later terms these figures 'Cretan Zeus' and Rhea and specifically describes the male deity as the Goddess's 'satellite' (Evans 1902/1903: 86). This is the first time Evans suggests the preeminence of the Goddess since his footnote on survivals of an earlier matriarchy in Minoan religion in the 1900 excavation report. Further on in the 1903 report, in a discussion of a 'stepped theatral area' toward the northern entrance of Knossos, Evans suggests the precedence, though not the preeminence, of a female deity in the Minoan era. Speculating that this paved area was used for ceremonial religious dances, Evans notes the presence of dancing women on Minoan frescoes and seal impressions and suggests that dances there would have been performed in honor of Ariadne, who was 'perpetuated in the Greek Aphrodite'. (Here Evans was drawing on Homer, who wrote of a 'green' created by Vulcan that it was 'just like the one Daedalus made on wide

Knossos for beautiful-haired Ariadne' [*Iliad* 18. 591-92].) This 'choros', Evans writes, eventually passed from Ariadne to her consort, Dionysos (Evans 1902/1903: 110-11). It seems most likely that here, as in his 1900 excavation report, Evans is referring to the survival in Minoan religion of an earlier matriarchal stage of human evolution. Ariadne, or rather the 'great Goddess of the spot' as Evans also titles her, is not described as the only or most important deity of Minoan religion (Evans 1902/1903: 111). More importantly, the god with whom she is associated and to whom her rite passes, Dionysos, is her consort rather than her son. In other words, she is a Great Goddess, but not the (Virgin) Mother Goddess that Evans (1921: 51-52, n. 1) would later identify as the centerpiece of Minoan religion.

Overall, the 1903 excavation report gives an inconsistent picture of Minoan deities: sometimes the God appears dominant, while at other times the Goddess and God function as an equivalent pair; and, in that one brief mention, the Goddess's status is higher than that of the God, who is her divine child. It is relevant to note that whenever Evans refers to a Mother Goddess and her child in these early excavation reports, he references Rhea and Zeus. He is drawing these later Greek deities backward into

Bronze Age Crete rather than establishing an indigenous, goddess-dominant religion for the Minoans.

Something very special happened at Knossos in 1903 that would cause Evans to speak more confidently about a Minoan Goddess in future years. Towards the close of that season's work, Evans's team made an exciting discovery as they unearthed a small room at Knossos. In addition to several implements of apparently ritual significance, they found three faience figurines, some of the finest sculptures recovered before or since from Bronze Age Crete. Collectively known today as images of the 'Snake Goddess', none of the three were complete upon excavation. One of the larger figures had only her top half remaining; another figure of approximately the same size had only parts of her bottom half remaining. The more complete of the two large figures held her arms downward, and around her arms were twined snakes. Evans identified her as the 'Snake Goddess'. The other larger figure, which survived only as a flounced skirt and apron, was deemed by Evans to be a 'votary' (1902/03: 92). A third, smaller figurine was headless and had only one arm, though her torso and skirt were well preserved. The smaller figurine held her only surviving arm out from

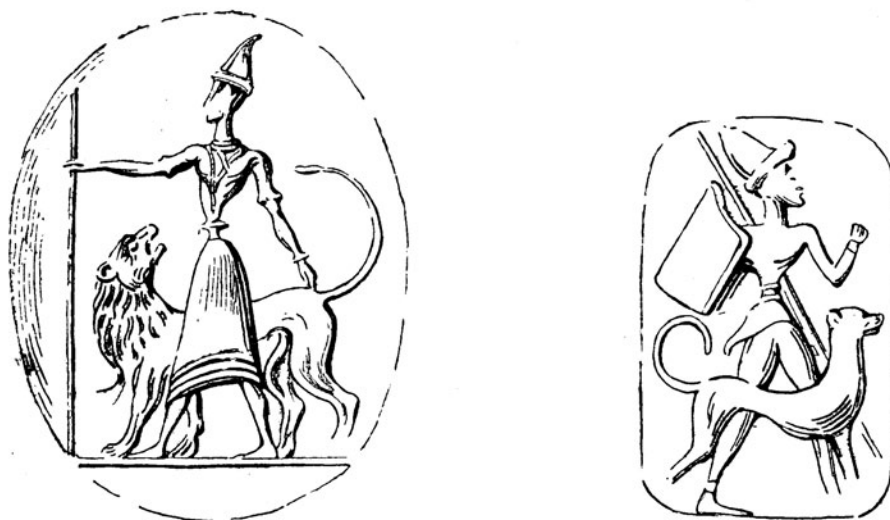


**Figure 3.** Seal impressions from Knossos (Evans 1902/1903: 59).

her body, and in her upraised hand she held something, which may or may not have been a snake. (MacGillivray [2000: 223] notes that the object held by the figurine was unlike any known snake, while Lapatin [2002: 87] speculates that it could be a necklace or a sheaf of grain.) Because she was the smallest of the faïence figurines, Evans (1902/03: 78) named her the 'Snake Priestess'. With his well-known penchant for 'restoring' the artifacts he found (Hamilakis 2002: 3), Evans immediately com-

missioned Danish artist Halvor Bagge to give the 'Snake Goddess' a skirt (based on the skirt of the large figurine who lacked a top half) and the 'Snake Priestess' a head, face, second arm, and snakes to hold in each of her upraised hands. A tiny figurine of a cat, excavated in the same room as the female figures, was believed by Bagge to belong on top of the head of the 'Snake Priestess' since the cat was attached to what he believed to be a beret (Figure 4). There they remain to this day (Lapatin 2002: 62, 64, 87).



**Figure 4.** Trio of faience figurines uncovered at Knossos in 1903: The 'Snake Goddess' (above, left; Evans 1921: frontispiece), which was reconstructed with the assistance of the bottom half of another figure (above, right; Evans 1921: 523, fig. 382); and the 'Snake Priestess' before (below, left; Evans 1921: 502, fig. 360) and after restoration by Halvor Bagge (below, right).

In the months following the excavation of these faïence figures, Evans offered a variety of interpretations of them without settling on any one. He found the 'Snake Goddess' motherly, commenting on her 'pronounced matronly form' (an apparent reference to her exposed breasts) and noted 'the sacral value' of her girdle, on which 'the plaited snakes... encompass the loins of the divinity' (Evans 1902/1903: 85). (Evans was not predisposed toward reading Minoan costume as sexual display. Indeed, he repeatedly compared the sexualized goddesses of the Near East to the 'purer' goddess of Minoan Crete, noting that 'no single representation has been brought to light of an indecent nature' [quoted in MacGillivray 2000: 302].) These features led Evans to identify her tentatively as 'a Goddess of Maternity', 'a specially chthonic aspect of the cult of the same Mother Goddess whose worship is otherwise so well illustrated [at Knossos]'. But he immediately followed this suggestion with an alternative possibility, suggesting that the 'Snake Goddess' might be 'an associated divinity, a σύμβωμος [*sybomos*] having a shrine of her own within the larger sanctuary' (Evans 1902/1903: 85). Indeed, Evans appears at least as interested in the marble cross found in the same area as the 'snake goddesses', deeming it to be the 'central cult object of aniconic character' in this shrine (Evans 1902/1903: 91), and hinting at an underlying continuity between Minoan religion and Orthodox Christianity.

Evans had little to say about Minoan religion in his 1904 excavation report, though he reiterated his belief that the Minoans worshipped their deities in aniconic forms such as pillars (Evans 1903/1904: 43). But any indecision regarding the centrality of the 'Mother Goddess' of Minoan Crete was gone by the time of his 1905 excavation report. Oddly, Evans's clearest enunciation of the notion that the Minoans worshipped a Mother Goddess accompanied by her divine male child came as a response to finds that were far less clearly female or divine

than many other items he had uncovered or purchased previously. Up to this point, Evans's gradual conclusion that the Minoan Goddess was more prominent than he originally thought appears to have been provoked by material finds suggestive of goddess worship. But with his discovery of a 'curious natural block' in a building set some way off from the palace proper (it is usually termed the 'Little Palace') Evans allows his imagination to soar. 'From the quasi-human aspect of this block,' Evans writes, 'itself a limestone concretion, I at once expressed the opinion that we had to do with a fetish image, which indeed from its characteristic conformation might well be that of a Mother Goddess'. With further excavation Evans's instinct was confirmed, at least to his own satisfaction: 'The presumption that this grotesque concretion was an object of fetish cult received striking corroboration when the small adjoining space to the North came to be dug out. The relics there found supplied in fact the clearest evidence that, during the concluding period of its occupation, this balustraded area had served the purpose of a domestic chapel' (Evans 1904/1905: 8).

What Evans found noteworthy in this 'domestic chapel' were three figures reminiscent—to the present author, anyway—of snowmen (Figure 5). To Evans's eyes, the largest resembled 'a woman of ample and matronly contours', while 'another smaller nodule curiously suggested an infant'. The third figure Evans described as an ape. Excluding the ape from further comment, Evans said he found it 'difficult not to conclude in view of the contents of this shrine that we have here to do in its most primitive guise with the traditional Cretan cult of Mother Rhea and the infant Zeus,—the divine offspring actually appearing in the form of his sacred stone or βαίτυλος [*baitylos*]' (Evans 1904/1905: 11). At this point, it seems clear that Evans believed that in Minoan Crete, a Mother Goddess reigned supreme while the only other deity of interest was a Boy God (though he continued to relate this arrangement to the later Greek myth

of Rhea and Zeus). Evans sounded quite enthusiastic in his evocation of the Mother Goddess and her Divine Son, but notably he described the cult as 'primitive' and 'archaic'. The house in which these 'uncouth natural fetishes' were found dated to a later period than the earlier excavated 'Snake Goddesses'. Evans saw them as 'the rustic recrudescence' of an earlier time, surfacing because Minoan elites had less power to insist on a more sophisticated cult of the Goddess. 'More plebeian elements' were rising at this time, said Evans: 'the kings are less, the people more', and 'the standard of wealth and the standard of art fell' as a result (Evans 1904/1905: 14).

### The Palace of Minos

Evans discontinued his early excavations at Knossos in 1905, owing mainly to a lack of funds required to continue work (MacGillivray

2000: 237). But his reputation had already been secured. Arthur Evans was knighted in 1911, and in the years following his excavations at Knossos, he continued his relationship with the site. He wrote and spoke about Minoan Crete, consulted on museum exhibitions, and supervised extensive 'restorations' in reinforced concrete at the excavated ruins of the palace at Knossos (Papadopoulos 2005: 110, 116). He also began the lengthy task of writing a grand summation of the excavations at Knossos that would be entitled *The Palace of Minos*, published in four volumes between 1921 and 1935.

By the time Evans sat down to write *The Palace of Minos* in the 1910s, his conversion to belief in a single Great Minoan Goddess was quite complete. In Volume 2 of *The Palace of Minos* (published in 1928, though perhaps written earlier [Momigliano 1999: 494]), Evans (1928: 277) writes a veritable hymn to the Great Goddess in her many guises:



**Figure 5.** Finds from the 'Little Palace' at Knossos (Evans 1928: 346).

The Goddess, indeed, is seen with doves perched on her head in a celestial relation, or with serpents twined round her as Lady of the Underworld and averter, we may believe, of the constantly recurring scourge of earthquakes. As Mother Goddess we see her with her hands on her matronly breasts, but with the same tiara, and the same apparel even to the patterns on her dress. As the source of all vegetation, she holds corn and poppy-capsules and lilies, and rises from the ground like Demeter in later myth. With bow and arrow she hunts the roe like Artemis, or, wielding her symbolic double axe, takes on an Amazonian aspect. At times she holds an anchor as Mistress of the Sea. But throughout these changing impersonations we still feel ourselves in the presence of essentially the same divinity rather than with separate mythological entities, like those of later Greece.

Evans's belief in goddess monotheism for Minoan Crete was restated in a lecture given at Cambridge University in 1931 titled 'The Earlier Religion of Greece in the Light of Cretan Discoveries': 'It seems to me', said Evans, 'that we are in the presence of a largely Monotheistic Cult, in which the female form of divinity held the supreme place' (Evans 1931: 41).

When challenged on this point by Swedish scholar of religion Martin P. Nilsson during the 1920s, Evans prevaricated, saying, 'There is one explanatory observation about my own views... that I should like to make. I have always in mind the possibility that the Goddess who appears in so many relations in Minoan scenes and impersonations may cover what were really regarded as separate divinities with separate names—equivalent to Artemis, Rhea, Athena, Aphrodite, etc. But as a provisional procedure it is convenient, in default of more definite knowledge, to treat the Goddess as essentially the same great Nature Goddess under various aspects—celestial with the dove, chthonic with the snake, etc., etc.' (quoted in Nilsson 1927: 337-38, n.1). In his post-excavation writings, however, Evans's belief in Goddess monotheism

for Minoan Crete never sounds like a manner of speaking adopted for convenience; rather, it sounds like a definite conclusion based on solid evidence (Gere 2009: 81). As Morris (2006: 70) points out, whatever his attraction to the idea of a female deity, monotheism would have appealed to him as a means of making the Minoans 'more evolved, more modern, and by extension more European than their Near Eastern polytheistic neighbours'.

Evans's adoption of Goddess monotheism for Minoan Crete is especially clear in his mentions of the symbol of the double axe (or *labrys*) in *The Palace of Minos*. As we saw earlier, when Evans began exploring, interpreting and excavating Minoan Crete, the double axe was the hallmark of the God, Cretan Zeus. It suggested to Evans (1901: 110-11) the God's aniconic form, the pillar. Evans connected the term *labrys* to the word *labyrinth* to argue after his first season of excavation at Knossos he was actually unearthing the legendary labyrinth constructed by King Minos's architect Daedalus to contain the minotaur, the beastly child of his wife Pasiphae's intercourse with a bull (Evans 1899/1900: 32-34). Yet in the second volume of *The Palace of Minos*, Evans found evidence of the Minoan Goddess's singularity in 'distinctive symbols like the Double Axe, which... is of constant recurrence in her changing impersonations' (Evans 1928: 277). By 1931, in the aforementioned lecture at Cambridge University, the presence of a double axe coded directly as the presence of 'the Minoan Mother Goddess'. Identifying an altar in the Dictaeon cave in Crete as belonging to the Goddess, Evans asserts 'the finding of her votive double axes in the crevices of the stalagmite pillars confirms this conclusion' (Evans 1931: 6)—an opinion he maintained in a later essay written for an exhibition of Minoan artifacts by the British School at Athens (Evans 1936: 7-8). In a move that Evans never explicitly justified, the double axes that once either belonged to the God or actually embodied him, or were perhaps a shared symbol of a divine

pair, became the sure sign of the presence of the Goddess.

Likewise, the pillars that were once identified with the God were now more often seen as aniconic images of the Goddess. 'In the middle of the [Dictaeon] cave,' Evans (1931: 8) wrote, 'rises a stalagmite pillar, which, in the half darkness, might itself suggest a standing female figure in long robes'. Given that a male and a female in long robes look pretty much the same, it seems evident that Evans's interpretation was not guided by his eyes, but by his now established theory of the Goddess's preeminence. Even the 'horns of consecration', a Minoan motif Evans (1901: 137) at first associated with the horns of bulls and a god to whom cattle were sacrificed, were later assimilated to the Minoan Goddess (Cottrell 2003: 167).

In his press toward goddess monotheism for Bronze Age Crete, Evans made wholesale changes in his interpretation of finds he had described earlier, without citing any reason for his change of heart. The Minoan signet ring shown in Figure 1, first described by Evans in his 1901 *Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult*, was discussed again in Volume 2 of *The Palace of Minos*, in Evans's 1931 lecture and in his 1936 essay for the British School at Athens. In these later publications, the larger figure on the signet ring is identified not as 'a female figure' but as 'the Goddess herself' or 'the Minoan Mother Goddess'. She is absorbed not in 'adoration' (as she was in his 1901 interpretation), but in 'prayer or incantation' as she 'brings down' the 'warrior youth' (formerly 'the God' [Evans 1901: 170]), who is 'her paramour or her actual son' (Evans 1928: 160; 1931: 15).

Evans initially claimed to have found this signet ring on-site at Knossos during his first visit to Crete in 1894, yet his notebooks from the time state clearly that it was purchased in Iraklion from Jean G. Mitsotakis, the Vice-Consul for Russia and an antiquities dealer. The notebooks say the ring came from Arkadi, though this is then crossed out and 'Vianos' is substituted,

which is crossed out in its turn and finally left as 'Knossos' (Brown 2001: 6-7). In the exhibition catalog for the British School at Athens, the ring is cited by Evans as being as 'From the site of Knossos, acquired by A. E. in 1904' (Evans 1936: 32). This change of date may have been a simple error, but then again, it may have been an intentional falsehood. As German (2005) has shown, Evans doctored a number of photographs between the time they were published in his early excavation reports and their inclusion in *The Palace of Minos* decades later. Sometimes these modifications merely sharpen the image, but at other times, they alter the stratigraphic record and suggest different find spots for specific artifacts, such that the evidence better accords with Evans's theories. Other archaeological transgressions committed by Evans are also well documented (German 2005: 209, 211, 218, 224). So the possibility that Evans wished to date the gold signet ring, a favorite artifact in his collection, to the time of his own excavations and to the ground at Knossos, rather than to a purchase years earlier, must remain open.

We are left then with this sequence: from 1894 to 1902, Evans's mentions of the Minoan Goddess are rare, while 'Cretan Zeus' comes in for frequent treatment and is associated with distinctive Minoan symbols such as the double axe. In spite of the presence of numerous human figures, male and female, on seal stones, terracotta figurines and eventually frescoes, Evans persists in viewing Minoan religion as largely aniconic. From 1902 to 1905, Evans increasingly entertains the possibility of an important Minoan Goddess and God (usually, though not always, associated with Rhea and 'Cretan Zeus'), and makes reference in his 1903 and 1905 excavation reports to a Mother Goddess/Boy God pair that would later dominate *The Palace of Minos*. Overall, Evans's analysis of Minoan religion in this early period seems to rest on three factors: the belief that 'primitive' religions were mainly aniconic; the view that matriarchal societies preceded patriarchal ones worldwide, leaving

pockets of goddess worship behind them (a view Evans held rather lightly); and Evans's yearning to find precedents for all of classical Greek culture in his beloved Minoan society (Papadopoulos 2005: 97), which surfaces in his attempts to view Minoan figures as precursors of later Greek deities. Finally, in 1905, Evans's analysis of Minoan religion shifted to that of a Great Mother Goddess and her son, who, though divine, does not equal her. While notions of an aniconic tree and pillar worship were not entirely absent in 1905, for the first time the mother/son unit took center stage where before it was only one cult among others.

Something more dramatic occurred in the years after 1905. From the time Evans began work on *The Palace of Minos* in the 1910s, and for the rest of his life, the Great Mother Goddess was without question the dominant deity of Minoan religion, invoked with every double axe and pillar formerly reserved for 'Cretan Zeus' (or 'the Minoan God'). Analogies to goddesses of later Near Eastern religions—Ishtar, Isis—are infrequent, and comparisons usually insidious, with the Minoan Goddess being 'simpler' (that is, closer to the original mother goddess archetype) than her Near Eastern sisters, who complicate the innocent filial piety of the Boy God by allowing him to attain sexual maturity and become the consort of the goddess (a relationship Evans does not find in Minoan artifacts). Excavated seal stones portraying armed males are regarded by Evans (1930: 465–66) as 'wholly un-Minoan' figures, 'cult images of an adult male God [that] were a late and exotic intrusion' into Minoan society. Excavated bronze male figurines are described as votaries, 'male adorants' intended to represent the Goddess-worshipping Minoan men who presumably commissioned them (Evans 1930: 459–62). 'Cretan Zeus', who so dominated discussion of Minoan religion in Evans's excavation reports, all but disappears in *The Palace of Minos*. The 1936 index for the four-volume work lists only one sub-entry under 'God' and

it is 'God, Minoan youthful'. Meanwhile, the entry for 'Zeus, Cretan' has only three citations and is followed by a reference back to 'God, Minoan youthful' (Evans 1936: 59, 221).

Thus there are two distinct shifts in Evans's assessment of Minoan religion. The first occurred very gradually in the period from 1902 to 1905, as excavations at Knossos proceeded. The other, more dramatic shift took place after the initial excavations were finished, as Evans continued to write and lecture about Knossos and prepare *The Palace of Minos*. What occurred in Evans's work or life to account for these shifts in the interpretation of Minoan religion? Important finds in 1903, particularly the 'Snake Goddesses', probably helped to motivate Evans's initial drift toward the Goddess thesis. The later shift to the goddess thesis in the 1910s could be attributed in part to the circulation of many forgeries of supposed Minoan artifacts, some of which were authenticated by Evans and used to make his case for the Great Mother Goddess of Minoan Crete in *The Palace of Minos*. But there seems a more obvious cause, one that can account for both the earlier and later shifts in Evans's estimation of the importance of the Minoan Goddess, and that is Evans's continued exposure to the very popular work of his contemporary, the anthropologist Sir James George Frazer.

### **Frazer's *Golden Bough***

It was in 1890, before Evans ever travelled to Crete, that Frazer published the first version of the book that was to captivate a generation, *The Golden Bough*, consisting at the time of two thick volumes. A third volume was added in a 1900 edition, and then, between 1906 and 1915, an edition containing twelve volumes was released to which was added a supplement in 1936 near the end of Frazer's life (and coincidentally, Evans's, who died just two months after Frazer [Fraser 1994: xl–xli]). Frazer came to England from Scotland in 1874 to attend Trinity College, Cambridge, where he studied

the classics before turning to anthropology and comparative religion (Malinowski 1944: 179). He wrapped up a dissertation on Plato and a translation of Pausanias's *Descriptions of Greece* and then began the work on totemism, magic and religion that would dominate his professional life (Fraser 1994: xiv-xv).

*The Golden Bough*, in all its iterations, was an enormous, sprawling work that fairly burst at the seams with talk of the Todas of southern India, the Samoyeds of Siberia, the Tuaregs of the Sahara, and virtually every other group of human beings that had ever come to the attention of Western anthropologists or missionaries. Only a couple of themes tied *The Golden Bough* into a coherent whole. Of these, the most significant was Frazer's theory of the evolution of religion. Frazer was an unrepentant evolutionist at a time when that orientation toward anthropology was fast fading out of style (Eller 2011: 168-78). He deemed evolutionary anthropology's project of 'run[ning] shafts down into this low mental stratum in many parts of the world, and thus to discover its substantial identity everywhere', to be 'one of the great achievements of the nineteenth century' (Fraser 1994: 53). Like his forebears, Frazer believed that humanity's ancient past lingered on in the lives of surviving 'Stone Age' peoples observed by anthropologists, who could be conveniently observed as specimens of primitive thinking (Fraser 1894: viii-ix).

In spite of his love affairs first with the classics and later with anthropology, there always lurked within Frazer's work the questions of a philosopher. Behind all the ethnographic details, Frazer's driving intellectual interest was the development of human thought, the cogitations of his imagined 'primitive philosopher'. The trajectory that Frazer laid out between savagery and civilization consists of three intellectual ages: magic, religion and science. Magic and science, fundamentally alike in character though different in execution, bracket religion, which operates on different principles. Roughly speaking, magic and science are both technologies, ways

in which human beings seek to control the conditions of their lives. Religion is quite different. It arrives on the scene when humans abandon magic because it does not reliably produce the desired results. Religion, according to Frazer, is the conviction that all things are controlled by a supernatural being or beings, and that to the extent that humans can have any control over their environment, it is only by petitioning and propitiating these greater powers (Fraser 1994: 47, 56). Religion later gives way to science with the resuscitation of the belief—previously held during the age of magic—that there are 'causal sequences in nature'. Science improves on the 'false analogies' of magic, trading them for the 'patient and exact observation of the phenomena themselves' (Fraser 1994: 61, 805).

The fact that religion is the odd duck in this sequence is of prime importance in understanding the popularity of Frazer's *Golden Bough*. From the beginning, Frazer's book had a 'shady reputation' (Fraser 1994: ix). Like *Peyton Place* in the 1950s, *The Golden Bough* was consumed furtively by flashlight under the covers—if not actually, then metaphorically. What *The Golden Bough* dared to flout was not sexual conventions so much as religious ones. Sex had already been brought out of the Victorian closet in the form of John Ferguson McLennan's primitive promiscuity, the assertion that our human ancestors happily copulated with any and all (Eller 2011: 72-79). Frazer participated in this titillating bit of imagined ancient history, but his real focus was on religion, which he daringly portrayed as being easily as superstitious and wrong-headed as the despised magic of primitives and savages (Fraser 1994: xxv), and probably more so. To the audience for whom Frazer played, this was highly inflammatory material.

Frazer was acutely aware of the potentially controversial nature of his assertions. In a letter to his publisher before the release of the first edition of *The Golden Bough* he wrote: 'The resemblance of the savage customs and ideas to the fundamental doctrines of Christianity is

striking. But I make no reference to this parallelism, leaving my readers to draw their own conclusions, in one way or another' (1994: xx). Frazer buried his polemic against Christianity in asides, footnotes and appendices, especially in the first and third editions of *The Golden Bough*. It was in the second edition of *The Golden Bough* that Frazer was most explicit about parallels between Christianity and pagan (and therefore 'primitive') religions, as in this passage: 'When we reflect how often the Church has skillfully contrived to plant the seeds of the new faith on the old stock of paganism, we may surmise that the Easter celebration of the dead and risen Christ was grafted upon a similar celebration of the dead and risen Adonis, which, as we have seen reason to believe, was celebrated in Syria at the same season' (Frazer 1994: 343). The dead and risen Adonis—and hiding behind him in the shadows, the dead and risen Christ—was no cultural oddity, according to Frazer. Both were examples of an exceedingly common religious pattern: that of the Great Goddess and her son/consort, the rising and dying God. According to Frazer, this mythic relationship between divine female and male is found in religions around the world and is frequently ritualized with the annual or periodic sacrifice of priests or kings who take the role of the Goddess's son/consort.

Frazer begins the story of *The Golden Bough*—and, certainly, it is more story than study—with an odd religious custom purportedly practiced during ancient Roman times—one which Frazer did not accurately report, but rather cobbled together out of unconnected writings by Strabo and Servius (Smith 1973: 343–45, 350). In a grove of trees sacred to the goddess Diana, located by the lake of Nemi near Rome, it is said that one tree was particularly sacred. It was guarded day and night by a priest who held the title 'King of the Wood'. This priest remained armed at all times, for any contender who wished could come and kill him and thereby become the new 'King of the Wood' until someone in turn took his life and replaced

him. Frazer thrills readers with this 'dark crime' surviving from 'a barbarous age', through which 'the human mind has elaborated its first crude philosophy of life' and then announces his intention to use *The Golden Bough* 'to offer a fairly probable explanation of the priesthood of Nemi' (Frazer 1994: 9–13). Of course, the thousands of pages of *The Golden Bough* wander very far afield from the lake at Nemi, but Frazer mostly insists that it is this odd ancient rite that is the impetus for his entire mission. Frazer returns to Nemi at the close of the second edition of *The Golden Bough*, saying 'our long voyage of discovery is over and our bark has drooped her weary sails in port at last. Once more we take the road to Nemi'. There Frazer fancies himself hearing through the church bells of the local Catholic church these phrases: '*Le roi est mort, vive le roi! Ave Maria!*' (Frazer 1994: 808).

This nugget—the Mother Goddess and her rising and dying Son—provided the essence of religion for Frazer. That religion should begin with a female deity, when in his own time God was generally conceived of as male, Frazer puts down to the 'simple and sufficient' explanation that early humans worshipped their ancestors and practiced matrilineal kinship. In such circumstances, the only ancestors of any real account were female. Once worshipped, they became deified, became goddesses (Frazer 1994: 390, 395). But Frazer offers additional explanations as well. The Goddess is not only the quintessential female ancestor, she is also a representation of fertility, especially of vegetation, which brings forth its own kind just as woman does through pregnancy and childbirth. She is 'the personification of all the reproductive energies of nature' (Frazer 1994: 314). Though she has many names, she is essentially the same deity wherever she is found. Reproduction requires male participation, and so the Goddess must be paired with a God. Like the crops, this God grows quickly, bursts into flower, spills seeds, and then seemingly perishes for the winter months. Frazer (312, 314) perceives in this

agricultural metaphor a recurring myth that he finds most fully formed in western Asia and the Mediterranean, with Attis, Adonis, Osiris (and Jesus) and their mothers. (Frazer had been preceded in this argument by the work of German scholar M. Kulischer, whose *Das Leben Jesu* was published in 1876 [Smith 1994: 93, n. 15].)

Coming to *The Palace of Minos* already familiar with Frazer's *Golden Bough*, there can be no doubt that by the time Evans began writing his tome, he was quite determinedly making Minoan religion an exemplum of Frazer's theory about the Mother Goddess and the rising and dying God, her son. Not only does Evans declare that the Goddess is Minoan Crete's foremost deity, but her son is demoted from his early days as 'Cretan Zeus' and becomes instead Minos the King. Citing other Mediterranean gods and governments, Evans declares that 'Minos' is not the name of a single man, but a dynastic title like the Egyptian 'pharaoh'. Minos, suggests Evans (1921: 3-6), was viewed as the Goddess's son, the 'priest-king' born to reign, die and eventually be replaced by a younger, more vital version of himself. All this is textbook Frazer. Indeed the only significant change Evans makes to Frazer's mythos in *The Palace of Minos* is his refusal to consider a sexual relationship between the Mother Goddess and her Divine Child for the case of Minoan Crete. Evans deemed this mythic incestuous relationship 'Oriental', and claims it played no part in Minoan religion, which was the apotheosis of a 'beautiful and natural' relationship of Divine Child to Mother Goddess (1930: 456; see also Gere 2009: 123-24).

The fact that Frazer is cited rarely in Evans's writings, and never on the topic of the Great Mother Goddess and her son, raises no difficulties. Evans's audience would have found his use of Frazer's thesis completely transparent, requiring no citation or explanation. Evans was referring to things people *knew*, to scientific matters Frazer had proven, not to theories Frazer had *proposed*. Nowadays when archaeologists talk about stratig-

raphy, they do not feel obliged to make reference to those who first gave a rationale for it. They know that lower deposits are older, higher ones more recent; nobody needs to cite Nicolas Steno to assure their readers of that. Likewise, Evans had no need or obligation to cite Frazer when he noted that the Minoans worshipped a Great Mother Goddess and her Divine Child.

As with his contemporaries, Evans's attraction to and use of Frazer's theories developed over time, along with *The Golden Bough* itself in its several editions. This can help us understand how Evans's disinterest in the Cretan Goddess in the 1890s became his adulation of her in his later lectures and writings. Already in the 1890s there was some intellectual kinship between Evans and Frazer. They were very close in age, and both did extensive studies in the classics. Both men were members of the British School at Athens, and were quite likely active in the Folklore Society in London in the 1890s (Goodison and Morris 1998: 208, n. 1). Judging from their shared early interest in tree worship, not to mention Frazer's obsession with rising and dying vegetation deities, both were probably familiar with the work of German historian of religion Wilhelm Mannhardt, author of such tomes as *Der Baumkultus der Germanen* (Tree-Worship Among the Teutons) and *Antike Wald- und Feldkulte* (Ancient Forest and Field Worship), published in 1875 and 1877 respectively (Sharpe 1986: 93; Smith 1994: 91). Alan Peatfield has speculated that the title of Evans's 1901 work, *Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult*, could be 'a deliberate evocation of *The Golden Bough*' (2000: 140), but it seems to me that their similarity is more likely due to Evans's and Frazer's mutual acquaintance with the work of Mannhardt, since little else about *The Golden Bough* enters Evans's 1901 study. Though Evans (1901: 128) makes passing reference to Frazer's *Golden Bough*, there is no evidence that Evans was thoroughly versed in Frazer's work at this time. Rather, the two men seemed to be running on somewhat parallel paths.

### The Role of Jane Ellen Harrison

If we are to hold Frazer at least partially responsible for Evans's gradual openness to the goddess thesis between 1902 and 1905, we need to discover some mechanism through which Evans might have become more responsive to Frazer's theories about the Mother Goddess and her son/consort than he was in 1901 when he wrote *Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult*. One possible candidate is Jane Ellen Harrison. Evans and Harrison were contemporaries, acquainted with one another through the British School at Athens. Harrison, like Evans at the time of the excavations at Knossos, was enjoying an intellectual renaissance in middle age, having finally secured a post at Cambridge University in 1898. Harrison began her career examining ancient Greek art, but had gradually moved into the study of ancient Greek religion (Peacock 1989: 173). There she sought survivals of archaic Greece. Behind the 'bright splendours' of classical Greece, Harrison avowed that she could 'see moving darker and older shapes' of preclassical religion (Africa 1989: 22), such as the Dionysian cult discussed by Johann Jakob Bachofen and later by Friedrich Nietzsche.

Harrison (1962: 548) was inspired in her research by the work of Frazer, describing her debt to him as 'immeasurable'. Frazer and Harrison knew each other personally, even studying Hebrew together for a time (Fraser 1994: xlviii). Harrison and her colleagues, Gilbert Murray and Francis Cornford, excited scandal by describing the ancient Greeks in terms usually reserved for 'primitives', 'savages' and 'barbarians'; but they had been preceded in this by Frazer, who described even *fin-de-siècle* England as rife with elements of an earlier strata of human religion, one not only barbaric, but often downright bloodthirsty (Frazer 1894: vii-ix). Frazer, however, was diplomatic and restrained; the less savvy reader could miss his devastating argument altogether. Harrison was more outspoken, saying of ancient Greece that

its religion was dominated by orgiastic dancing and divine possession, and indeed that the entire basis of its society, so adulated by the Enlightenment intellectuals of Europe, was actually more emotional than rational (Ackerman 1989: 4).

In the midst of this intellectual fervor, Harrison travelled to Crete in 1901, spending three days with Arthur Evans at Knossos (Gere 2009: 89). Evans was still diligently searching out evidence of the aniconic worship of trees and pillars in Minoan artifacts when Harrison arrived. But Harrison unhesitatingly interpreted Evans's finds as bursting with the worship of a Mother Goddess. Later in life she recalled that it was 'somewhere about the turn of the century' that 'there had come to light in the palace of Cnossos a clay sealing which was a veritable little manual of primitive Cretan faith and ritual. I shall never forget the moment when Mr. Arthur Evans first showed it to me', she said. 'It seemed too good to be true. It represented the Great Mother sitting on her own mountain with her attendant lions, and before her a worshipper in ecstasy' (quoted in Schlesier 1991: 214-15; the image she is referring to is Figure 2, above).

Harrison's excitement yielded her most influential book, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, published in 1903, which characterized pre-classical Greek religion as matriarchal and goddess-worshipping (Harrison 1955: 261-62; Gere 2009: 89). It seems likely that Harrison's enthusiasm was infectious, prompting Evans to rethink his interpretation of the objects he was uncovering in his excavations at Knossos. Though he was not prepared to adopt her interpretations unthinkingly, perhaps the knowledge that Harrison would greet his new finds with awe at the presence of the Great Goddess encouraged Evans to consider the possibility that he was looking at a Mother Goddess with her male satellite, where before he had seen a variety of priestesses, votaries, gods, goddesses and aniconic symbols of the divine. Evans's interest in ritual at Knossos, and his evocation of Ariadne and her

‘choros’ in his 1903 excavation report, hints that he may have been directly inspired by Harrison’s work at the time. Certainly this bears the mark of Harrison’s propensity to see ancient Greek ritual in its material culture (Beard 2000: 106).

This is all conjecture, but it does give one possible explanation for Evans’s gradual conversion to the goddess thesis for Minoan religion during his early excavations at Knossos. Whether Harrison brought Evans to a deeper understanding of Frazer’s work or influenced Evans directly through her own work is unclear. Certainly by the time Evans wrote *The Palace of Minos*, however, the Harrison-like inflections in his interpretation of Minoan finds seems to have dissipated, to be replaced by an all-out embrace of the Frazerian trope of the Mother Goddess and her rising and dying son.

Whatever Evans’s acquaintance was with Frazer’s work prior to 1905, it is inconceivable that he would not have been familiar with *The Golden Bough* when he was writing *The Palace of Minos*. By the 1910s, individuals could not be expected to count for anything in British society if they were not able to talk intelligently about Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, even if they had never actually cracked the spine of the book (Fraser 1994: ix; Vickery 1973: 69). The popularity of *The Golden Bough* rose precipitously with the publication of the third edition, which was released in twelve serial volumes between 1906 and 1915, just as Evans sat down to systematize the findings of his excavations at Knossos. Not only that, Frazer published another book in 1905, *Adonis, Attis, Osiris: Studies in the History of Oriental Religion*. Later included in the third edition of *The Golden Bough*, the *Adonis, Attis, Osiris* monograph addressed itself directly to the Mediterranean myths with which Evans was most familiar. One of Frazer’s clearest articulations of the Mother Goddess/Divine Son trope, it may have been this book in particular that fully converted Evans to a Frazerian interpretation of his Minoan finds.

## Other Factors in Evans’s Adoption of the Goddess Thesis

As noted earlier, Evans’s biographers have suggested that his infatuation with the Minoan Mother Goddess was related to the death of his own mother when he was a young child. This may have disposed him to respond more favorably to Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, but many people of Evans’s generation, with and without living mothers, responded favorably to Frazer’s book. Whatever psychology inspired Evans’s embrace of the goddess thesis, it was collective as much as individual (Morris 2006). The best explanation seems the simplest: Frazer was enormously popular. Without too much jiggering, Evans could make his evidence fit Frazer’s theory, and so he did. The result was *The Palace of Minos*. Of course, the hundreds of pages of *The Palace of Minos* dealt with far more than Minoan religion. But when Evans turned to the topic, he was essentially doing what Frazer did in *The Golden Bough*, except that he substituted pictures of material finds for Frazer’s endless recounting of cross-cultural myths. No wonder Evans was well received. It seems doubtful that he undertook the Goddess interpretation of Minoan remains cynically, with a cold eye to fame and accolades. But with the British intellectual world swaying *en masse* to the winds blowing through Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, it quite likely would have seemed the sensible choice to an archaeologist who had always enjoyed telling a good story and writing for a general audience (Papadopoulos 2005: 103; Gere 2009: 67).

One further factor demands consideration here, and that is the effect of the significant number of forgeries of Minoan art that circulated in the early decades of the 20th century. Lapatin (2001) suggests that at least 14 ‘Minoan goddesses’ were purchased by museums or private collectors in the early decades of the 20th century. The prominence of the ‘snake goddess’, for example, was greatly exaggerated by beautiful

and convincing forgeries that surfaced on the underground antiquities market. Evans believed that several of these figures must have come from Knossos, even though he and his team had not dug them up there.

It is a well-founded suspicion that many of the forgeries were made with Sir Arthur in mind as a potential purchaser—or at least as one who would be asked to certify their authenticity—and so the forgers tailored their creations to fit Evans's favorite theories about Minoan culture and religion (Lapatin 2006: 94; 2002). Two of those most suspect as forgers of Minoan antiquities—the Gilliérons, a father and son team—worked for Evans at Knossos, and hence were well acquainted with the materials, construction and style of the excavated pieces, and also with their boss's predilections regarding Minoan artifacts (Lapatin 2002: 131, 133–34, 136, 157–58; Papadopoulos 2005: 99). In fact, Evans insisted that some pieces he examined could not be forgeries precisely because they resembled excavated

materials that had not yet been published. But if the forgers were employed by Evans and working at Knossos, they would have been familiar with artifacts that had not yet been released to the general public (Georg Karo, cited in Lapatin 2002: 171).

By the time *The Palace of Minos* was published, Evans was presenting probable forgeries right alongside those he unearthed in order to support his interpretations of Minoan religion. Evans reserved his greatest excitement for two figures: an ivory 'boy god' which was said to come from Knossos and an ivory-and-gold image of a 'snake goddess'. These two figurines were sold separately on the antiquities market. The 'boy god' was sold directly to Evans (Lapatin 2006: 99), while the 'snake goddess' was purchased by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. But Evans insisted on grouping them together when he wrote about them in *The Palace of Minos* and elsewhere (Figure 6). Indeed, Evans was certain that they were constructed as a pair and that

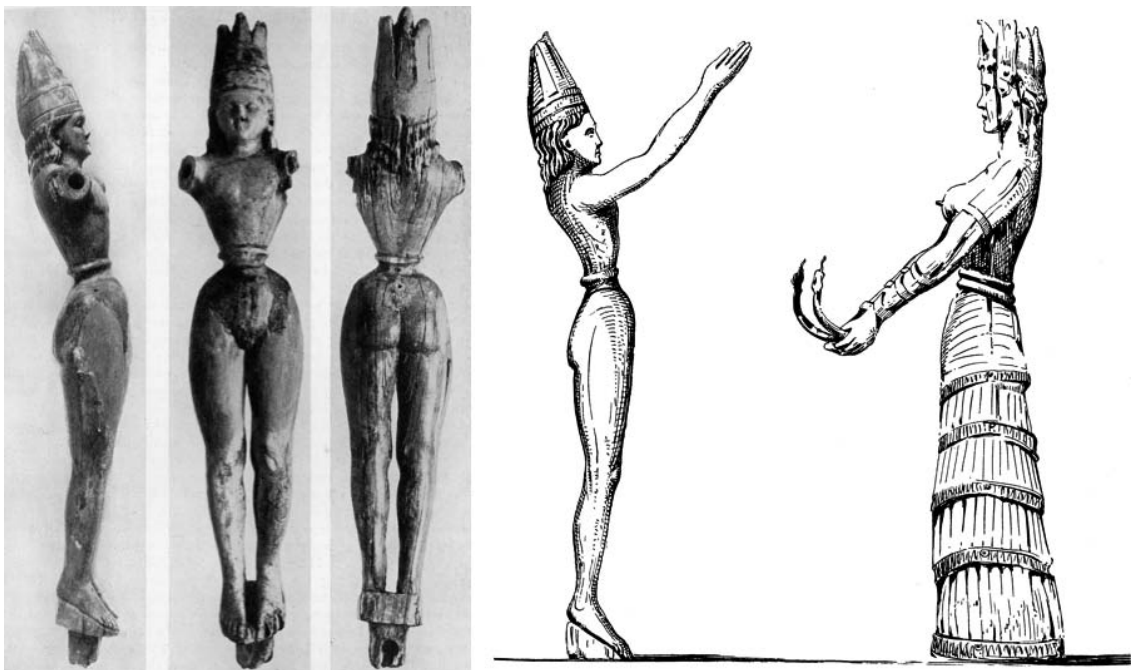


**Figure 6.** The so-called 'boy god' alone (left; Evans 1930: 451, fig. 314) and (right) as juxtaposed with the 'Boston goddess' in a scene designed by Arthur Evans (1930: 456, fig. 318).

he had the privilege of bringing them together again: 'In the beautiful chryselephantine figure that seems to have been associated with the 'Boston Goddess' he appears as a young boy, whose divinity is expressed by his tiara, in the act of adoration before his Lady Mother' (Evans 1931: 42; see also 1921: 507; 1930: 456; 1936: 8-9; Gere 2009: 127). The ivory 'boy god' was a favorite of Evans. While he eventually donated many of his Minoan artifacts (and presumed forgeries) to the Ashmolean Museum, he kept this figure until his death (Lapatin 2006: 99).

These forgeries gave Evans more material to work with as he set out to substantiate his theory that the Minoans worshipped a Great Mother Goddess and her son. But Evans's vision was so expansive at this point that it seems likely he could have constructed his goddess monotheistic Minoan religion without access to anything other than the well-provenienced Minoan artifacts. A full century later, the interpretations Sir Arthur Evans made of Minoan artifacts are alive and well. Writing in a 1996 guide to Knossos, Alexandre Farnoux acknowledges that 'Minoan religion remains a hotly contested subject', but goes on to say, in the passive voice, that 'it is believed that the Minoan pantheon was composed of the remnants of a former aniconic cult (the cult of the pillar) together with a central female divinity (the mother goddess), whose attributes were snakes or beasts. The Minoan king may have been the presiding priest of the cult' (Farnoux 1996: 136-37). Evans's interpretations may be widely questioned by archaeologists, but most lay people still rely on them, and the 'Snake Goddess' (the one Evans called a 'Snake Priestess') graces many an altar today.

## Conclusion

No one can deny that the Minoans produced abundant female imagery and objects that suggest religious use, claims that Evans made judiciously prior to 1905. Postulating significant goddess worship in Minoan religion is not

a difficult claim to sustain. Most religions—ancient, indigenous and otherwise; both close to Minoan Crete in time and space, and very far away—worship goddesses. This is the norm, not the exception (although the presence of several very large non-goddess-worshipping religions in our world today can blind us to this fact). So it is highly probable that the Minoans worshipped goddesses, and probably gods too, and told stories that related them to one another along familial and erotic lines. Whether or not the female imagery from Bronze Age Crete was intended by its users to depict goddesses (Gesell 2004: 143-44; Herva 2006: 590), it is still reasonable to assume that the Minoans worshipped goddesses. But this particular goddess, the Great Minoan Mother Goddess, was invented by two knights—Sir Arthur and James—perhaps with the assistance of the renowned but never decorated classicist, Jane Harrison.

Contemporaries of Evans, Frazer and Harrison were profoundly attracted to the Great Mother Goddess and her Divine Child, so much so that they were happy to accept rather dubious evidence for them. Perhaps the Goddess stood in for the Virgin Mary, a parallel that both Frazer and Evans drew explicitly. Or perhaps it was the knights' charisma in telling the stories of the Goddess and her son that carried the day. As MacGillivray comments of Evans, he 'never felt that he was doing anything other than writing history where there had been none' (2000: 271). Evans told a broad and beautiful story of one perfect culture that happened—not accidentally—to be 'ours' because it was 'European'. He knew the Minoan goddess religion was appealing because people had already been responding so positively to the Frazerian trope before Evans set it down explicitly in print as *the* religion of Knossos, and therefore Europe. Then Evans lived long enough and argued vehemently enough to uphold his narrative against those who challenged him.

A different explanation seems required for why so many today still want to believe in an ancient island paradise under the rule of a Great Mother

Goddess. But perhaps the reasons are not so different after all. Minoan Crete is both distant enough to be made over into almost anything we wish, and yet close enough to be an inspiration to us. In spite of subsequent decades of careful archaeological work and historical reinterpretation, today, as in Evans's own time, Minoan Crete remains for most lay observers a vision of what we once were, and could possibly be again: peaceful, prosperous and sexually egalitarian.

### About the Author

Cynthia Eller is Professor of Religious Studies and Women's Studies at Montclair State University in New Jersey. Her most recent books are *Gentlemen and Amazons: The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory 1861–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); *Am I a Woman? A Skeptic's Guide to Gender* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); and *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000). She is currently researching the travel narratives of western European visitors to the Ottoman Empire.

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