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AEGAEUM 39
Annales liégeoises et PASpiennes d'archéologie égéenne

METAPHYSIS

RITUAL, MYTH AND SYMBOLISM IN THE AEGEAN BRONZE AGE

**Proceedings of the 15th International Aegean Conference, Vienna,
Institute for Oriental and European Archaeology,
Aegean and Anatolia Department, Austrian Academy of Sciences
and Institute of Classical Archaeology, University of Vienna,
22-25 April 2014**

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Robert LAFFINEUR and Jörg WEILHARTNER

PEETERS
LEUVEN - LIEGE
2016

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TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION IN MINOAN AND MYCENAEAN GREECE*

The editors of this volume and organizers of the conference “METAPHYSIS: Ritual, Myth and Symbolism in the Aegean Bronze Age” have entrusted me with the honourable but also daunting task of composing the Endnote to this unusually dense collection of papers. It is precisely because I did hear each and every lecture at the conference on which the present volume is based that I am humble enough not even to try to summarize the material presented. What follows instead are some highly subjective thoughts inspired by the ideas raised at METAPHYSIS. To these I will add several case examples from my own areas of expertise and will thus attempt to expand on some of the topics discussed in the papers.

The evidence for Minoan and Mycenaean religion “...has come down to us as a picture-book without text”. This famous characterization by Martin Nilsson¹ epitomizes a stance that regards the study of religion in Minoan and Mycenaean contexts as deficient in comparison to a text-based one directed at literate societies in Egypt and the Near East. Having listened to the rich program of papers delivered at METAPHYSIS, I believe that the participants would agree that we have come a long way since Nilsson made his remark, and it is certainly worth highlighting some crucial developments since that time. The most important change occurred with the decipherment of Linear B, which led to the fact that we now do have texts. Admittedly, these are not religious texts *sensu strictu*; we would still love to lay our hands on ritual calendars, prayers, religious hymns, and magical or mythical texts such as those available to scholars of the Near East and Egypt. Yet thanks to the tremendous interpretative efforts of our colleagues dealing with Linear B, we have learned to gain insights into the realm of religion through these seemingly humble administrative texts for the simple reason that deities, sanctuaries as well as religious banquets and festivals had to be provided for and supplied by the palaces. As economic issues they were thus of immediate interest for the palatial administration.

Even if the Linear B texts do not equal the textual sources of Egypt and the Near East, the claim that our understanding of religion in the Minoan and Mycenaean contexts is deficient because it is less textually based is, at most, only partly correct. I would argue, in fact, that it is precisely because of the availability of rich textual evidence that scholars dealing with the religions of the ancient Near East and especially of Egypt have been seduced into thinking that all that is relevant to the subject can be inferred from texts² and have thus – unlike scholars of the Bronze Age Aegean – failed to exploit the full potential of archaeological sources. If one bases the study of religion chiefly on written sources one may easily overlook the fact that entire sectors of this realm are not elucidated by texts either because they were regarded as too self-evident or secret to be set down in writing or because the texts that referred to them have not survived. Furthermore, even in the case of the most detailed ritual calendars or descriptions of magical practices, it is helpful to include material remains in order to gain additional perspectives on how rituals were actually carried out. Indeed, METAPHYSIS has impressively demonstrated how such material sources can be used creatively to enhance our understanding of various aspects of religion.

* I am indebted to Dipl.-Arch. Maria Kostoula (Heidelberg) for preparing the two illustrations of this article. The manuscript has profited from the careful language-editing by Dr. Irina Oryshkevich (New York), to whom I am very grateful. Research for the article was carried out within the Heidelberg Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context”.

¹ M.P. NILSSON, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and Its Survival in Greek Religion* (1950) 7.

² For a critique of the focus on texts as the sole evidence for religions see T. MEIER and P. TILLESSEN, “Archaeological Imaginations of Religion: An Introduction from an Anglo-German Perspective,” in T. MEIER and P. TILLESSEN (eds), *Archaeological Imaginations of Religion* (2014) 43; see also P. BYRNE, “Religion and the Religions,” in P. CLARKE and S. SUTHERLAND (eds), *The Study of Religion, Traditional and New Religions* (1988) 44.

In the introductory text of the first circular about METAPHYSIS, the term “religion” was mentioned only in passing even though ritual, myth and symbolism are obviously intimately bound to what is usually designated as religion. The organizers most likely made this decision because they wanted to shift attention away from sweeping discussions about religion and direct it towards those basic ideological and practical components that underlie and enable it. Ultimately, the category “religion” is a construct of research, which, of course does not mean that it does not refer to something that is anchored in what people perceive as their reality.³ A clear danger of reductionism exists in any attempt to come up with a so-called substantialist definition that seeks common denominators, such as “sacredness”, “transcendence” or “belief in deities” that link all religions. Indeed, the more closely scholars of religious studies have looked at their subject, the more they have realized the futility of a search for a universally applicable substantialist definition of religion.⁴ I am thus in complete agreement with Thomas Meier and Petra Tillessen’s position that rather than base our judgment on *a priori* criteria of what should be called “religious”, we should use the term “religion” as a heuristic device for exploring the ways in which this realm expresses itself in its full complexity in a specific cultural context.⁵ So as to embrace the complexity and heterogeneity of the realms of religion and religiosity it is preferable to speak of “religions” in the plural even when dealing with one specific cultural and chronological context.⁶ It is important that research on the Minoan and Mycenaean periods challenges the notion that ritual, myth and symbols are characterized by long-term stability and replaces this belief with a dynamic view of religion. Furthermore, it is crucial to analyse such dynamic processes not only from a diachronic but also from a synchronic perspective since, depending on the nature of the social and political structure of any given society, widely divergent attitudes towards religious ideas and practice may co-exist among sub-groups at one and the same time.⁷ We must also leave behind the remnants of the framework of earlier religious studies that assumed fixed relations among symbols, images and meanings and accepted as given that the appearance of a certain motif in a distant region was accompanied by the transmission of the particular ideas associated with it. It seems auspicious that those papers at METAPHYSIS that dealt with these sorts of intercultural issues clearly considered a change of meaning through re-contextualization in the course of the transmission of images or symbols from one region to another.

Rituals and the materiality of immateriality

Brought up on a modern Western perspective that claims to separate religion from secular life, we are used to perceiving religion as a system of belief that can be shared or shed.⁸ For those who practice it, however, religion is always far more than an abstract system of ideas. It is an aspect of their life that they associate with emotions, corporeality, memories and sensory impressions⁹ and about

³ K. HOCK, *Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft* (2011⁴) 20-21.

⁴ BYRNE (*supra* n. 2) 5-20; B. GLADIGOW, “Gegenstände und wissenschaftlicher Kontext von Religionswissenschaft,” in H. CANKIK, B. GLADIGOW and M. LAUBSCHER (eds), *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* 1 (1988) 26-28; B. GLADIGOW, “Mögliche Gegenstände und notwendige Quellen einer Religionsgeschichte,” in H. BECK, D. ELLMERS and K. SCHIER (eds), *Germanische Religionsgeschichte – Quellen und Quellenprobleme* (1992) 4-11; HOCK (*supra* n. 3) 11-21.

⁵ MEIER and TILLESSEN (*supra* n. 2) 43; see also BYRNE (*supra* n. 2) 5-10.

⁶ MEIER and TILLESSEN (*supra* n. 2) 39-45.

⁷ GLADIGOW (*supra* n. 4, 1992) 21; W. KEANE, “The Evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religion,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, Issue Supplement s1 (2008) 111.

⁸ For a critique of this approach see KEANE (*supra* n. 7) 110-127; A.A.D. PEATFIELD and C. MORRIS, “Dynamic Spirituality on Minoan Peak Sanctuaries,” in K. ROUNDTREE, C. MORRIS and A.A.D. PEATFIELD (eds), *Archaeology of Spiritualities* (2012) 228. See also MEIER and TILLESSEN (*supra* n. 2) 21.

⁹ C. MORRIS and A.A.D. PEATFIELD, “Experiencing Ritual: Shamanic Elements in Minoan Religion,” in M. WEDDE (ed), *Celebrations: Sanctuaries and the Vestiges of Cult Activity. Selected Papers and Discussions from the Tenth Anniversary Symposium of the Norwegian Institute at Athens, 12-16 May 1999* (2004) 35-39; KEANE (*supra* n. 7) 113-124; PEATFIELD and MORRIS (*supra* n. 8) 229-235.

which they do not need to reflect, since it simply demands that they draw on knowledge that they have absorbed since childhood and can thus apply with great expertise to ritual practice in the presence of others. It is on the level of a “system of practice” that religion becomes to some degree accessible to archaeology¹⁰ and the reason why a focus on rituals is so important to the discipline.¹¹ It is precisely because rituals are cultural practices, I would argue, that we need to approach them in an anthropological way.¹² However, this must be a kind of anthropology that does not pit the material remains of archaeology against the allegedly far more important immaterial features such as religious ideas or political structures, but rather one that emphasizes that the levels of the material and the immaterial are inextricably bound in patterns of practice and are thus mutually dependent.¹³ This is so because religious ideas need to be recreated again and again in practice so that they become palpable, visible and thus able to generate emotional experiences. Herein lies the significance of rituals.¹⁴ To achieve a “materiality of immateriality”, ritual performances need to link natural and man-made settings to texts, paraphernalia, animals, sights, sounds, scents, the elements and, above all, the bodies of those who define space through their presence and movement.¹⁵

In the past few years the investigation of rituals has become an important topic within the field of cultural studies. At the heart of research on rituals lies a seeming paradox: while their success depends on the conviction of their participants that they are simply repeating what has been done in exactly the same manner since time immemorial, rituals do not remain the same but change more or less quickly and can sometimes be suddenly invented, though even then they are usually regarded as being decidedly traditional and of venerable age.¹⁶

The Heidelberg Collaborative Research Centre “Dynamics of Ritual” has been dealing with such issues for eleven years¹⁷ with the aim of clarifying the characteristics of rituals. Although there is no general, clear-cut definition of the phenomenon, it is possible to list features that all rituals have in common: they are marked off from the routine of everyday life; they are carried out at specific places and/or times; they channel emotions and are multi-medial; formally speaking, they are more stylized,

¹⁰ MEIER and TILLESSEN (*supra* n. 2) 45.

¹¹ GLADIGOW (*supra* n. 4, 1988) 36-37; GLADIGOW (*supra* n. 4, 1992) 19-20; MORRIS and PEATFIELD (*supra* n. 9) 35-36; PEATFIELD and MORRIS (*supra* n. 8) 227-229; KEANE (*supra* n. 7) 115-117; MEIER and TILLESSEN (*supra* n. 2) 111-120.

¹² S.J. TAMBIAH, “A Performative Approach to Ritual,” in S.J. TAMBIAH (ed), *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective* (1985) 123-166; KEANE (*supra* n. 7) 115-124.

¹³ D. MILLER, “Materiality: An Introduction,” in D. MILLER (ed), *Materiality* (2005) 20-29; KEANE (*supra* n. 7) 123-124; J. MARAN and P.W. STOCKHAMMER, “Introduction,” in J. MARAN and P.W. STOCKHAMMER (eds), *Materiality and Social Practice: Transformative Capacities of Intercultural Encounters* (2012) 2; J. MARAN, “Urgeschichte – Frühgeschichte: Geschichte? Das Beispiel des mykenischen Griechenland,” in O. DALLY, T. HÖLSCHER, S. MUTH and R.M. SCHNEIDER (eds), *Medien der Geschichte – Antikes Griechenland und Rom* (2014) 171-172.

¹⁴ See the groundbreaking studies of C. RENFREW, *The Archaeology of Cult: The Sanctuary at Phylakopi* (1985) and P. WARREN, *Minoan Religion as Ritual Action* (1988).

¹⁵ WARREN (*supra* n. 14) 11-29; PEATFIELD and MORRIS (*supra* n. 8) 228-242; MORRIS and PEATFIELD (*supra* n. 9) 36-54.

¹⁶ E. HOBBSAWM and T. RANGER (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (1983); D. HARTH and G.J. SCHENK (eds), *Ritualdynamik – Kulturübergreifende Studien zur Theorie und Geschichte rituellen Handelns* (2004); J. KREINATH, C. HARTUNG and A. DESCHNER (eds), *The Dynamics of Religious Rituals within Their Social and Cultural Context* (2004); E. STAVRIANOPOULOU (ed), *Ritual and Communication in the Graeco-Roman World* (2006).

¹⁷ For a comprehensive overview of the research conducted in this center see the five volumes of the series “Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual”: A. MICHAELS, A. MISHRA, L. DOLCE *et al.* (eds), *Grammars and Morphologies of Ritual Practice in Asia* (2010); A. CHANIOTIS, S. LEOPOLD, H. SCHULZE *et al.* (eds), *Body, Performance, Agency, and Experience* (2010); M. KITTS, B. SCHNEIDMÜLLER, G. SCHWEDLER *et al.* (eds), *State, Power, and Violence* (2010); U. SIMON, C. BROSIUS, K. POLIT *et al.* (eds), *Reflexivity, Media, and Visuality* (2010); G. DHARAMPAL-FRICK, R. LANGER and N.H. PETERSEN (eds), *Transfer and Spaces* (2010).

structured and standardized than most common actions; and they are based on a cognitive script and are meaningful to participants who see themselves as engaging in out of the ordinary practices.¹⁸ Rituals are not necessarily religious, but because they are always intimately connected to a group's basic values and convictions, which they help to visualize and perpetuate, any attempt to delineate sharp borders between the realms of religion, economics, politics and the social is futile – especially in the case of those societies in which we are interested. Quite the contrary, for it seems to me that religious connotations permeated all fields of Minoan and Mycenaean societies, making any strict separation between “sacred” and “profane” irrelevant.

Possessed of no written sources offering detailed information on the contents of religious ideas, archaeology has to rely on traces of the physical performances that arose from those ideas. The decisive question, of course, is how, on the basis of material remains, we can make inferences about the nature of those practices of which these remains originally formed part. As Colin Renfrew has underscored,¹⁹ we can only attempt to do so by recognizing patterns of relationships among certain features in their context. METAPHYSIS reminded us that the anthropology of religion, which focuses on practices, could be approached through a variety of contexts and with an assortment of methodological tools. The contexts that help us gain insights into religion as a system of practice exist on various scales. At one end of the spectrum lies the micro-context that consists of features such as shape and/or the use of individual objects. Next come micro-contexts that can be designated as associations and that can be further subdivided into associations of objects in circumscribed spatial settings or associations of symbols, objects and/or figures in images executed in various media. At the other end, lie the macro-contexts of wider performative spaces²⁰ created through ritual movement within the built and/or natural environment. Each of these levels of context opens up certain opportunities to interpretation, but at the same time, is associated with specific problems of interpretation.

Inferring Patterns of Ritual Practice: Micro-Contexts of Objects and Images

The smallest unit of a feature represented by the morphology and/or use of an individual object, can in rare cases provide important clues as to how it may have been employed in ritual practice. We have heard about figurines that were intentionally broken or had parts that could be added or removed, and listened to the exciting results of scientific tests that allow us to make inferences about the contents of vessels or the use of implements through the detection of residual substances on their surfaces. All the same, I would argue that far greater attention should be paid to the various types of manipulation imposed on individual objects as well as to the investigation of morphological features that enabled specific “interactive” relations between an object and the person engaging with it.²¹ As illustration of this, some recent examples from Mycenaean Greece may be cited:

- Studying the use wear of wheel-made terracotta figures dating to Late Helladic (LH) IIIC from the Lower Citadel of Tiryns, Melissa Vetters has postulated that some of these figures were held by cult participants, who may have carried them around during processions.²²

¹⁸ TAMBIAH (*supra* n. 12) 128; J.A.M. SNOEK, “Defining ‘Rituals’,” in J. KREINATH, J. SNOEK and M. STAUSBERG (eds), *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts* (2006) 11-13; C. BROSIUS, A. MICHAELS and P. SCHRODE, “Ritualforschung heute – ein Überblick,” in C. BROSIUS, A. MICHAELS and P. SCHRODE (eds), *Ritual und Ritualdynamik* (2013) 13-15.

¹⁹ RENFREW (*supra* n. 14) 14-16.

²⁰ For the definition of the concept of a “performative space” see E. FISCHER-LICHTE, *Ästhetik des Performativen* (2004) 187-200; for the application to case examples of the Aegean Bronze Age see J. MARAN, “Mycenaean Citadels as Performative Space”, in J. MARAN, C. JUWIG, H. SCHWENGEL and U. THALER (eds), *Constructing Power: Architecture, Ideology and Social Practice* (2006) 75-91.

²¹ For the archaeological application of the concept of “affordances” see K. KNAPPETT, *Thinking through Material Culture: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (2005) 45-57.

²² M. VETTERS, “Private and Communal Ritual in Postpalatial Tiryns,” in S. BOCHER and P.

- Based on the appearance of a small head of sheet-gold in a LH IIIC-context at the sanctuary of Phylakopi, I have argued that it may be erroneous to regard the practice of covering Near Eastern bronze figures with gold foil as a profane act linked solely to the production process. Instead, such embellishments may have been added and removed during rituals in which the figures were ceremonially “dressed”.²³
- David Wengrow²⁴ has recently suggested that faience rhyta bearing the shape of a head of either a monkey or the Near Eastern demon Humbaba and discovered not long ago in a context dating to the very end of LH IIIB2 in the Lower Citadel of Tiryns²⁵ may have been held like a mask before the face of a cult participant, who then engaged in a dramatic act by letting fluid pour out of the rhyton’s gaping mouth.
- When dealing with the appropriation of amber objects in Early Mycenaean Greece, I have argued that the components of imported crescent-shaped amber necklaces that originated in the Wessex culture of Southern England were taken apart and reassembled to form magical protective devices for the use of Mycenaean warriors.²⁶

During METAPHYSIS we heard a good deal more about micro-contexts represented by the association of objects in circumscribed spatial settings. In many of the cases presented, these associations involved portable finds with fixed or semi-fixed installations in funerary, settlement, or sanctuary contexts. As was demonstrated, careful analyses of such associations enable conclusions to be drawn about segments of ritual practices, to which I may add two further examples from Tiryns:

- The discovery of a single bronze scale from a corselet of a Near Eastern type beneath a clay hearth dating to LH IIIC in an excavation in the Northeastern Lower Town has prompted me to infer a type of foundation ritual otherwise attested only on Cyprus and in the Near East.²⁷
- A reassessment of the Tiryns treasure, which dates to LH IIIC, suggests that it is composed predominantly of ceremonial feasting equipment which seems to have been sacrificed after a ritual in which some of the objects were manipulated to prevent further use.²⁸

Nonetheless it is important to bear in mind that a positivist stance that assumes a straightforward relationship between context and meaning is unwarranted as neither evidence of the use of individual objects nor the associations of objects are so unequivocal that they can “speak for themselves” and suggest only one interpretation. On the contrary, within the range of possible alternative meanings, the plausibility of any specific interpretation needs to be carefully corroborated through a comparison of observed patterns and associations with additional sources. For instance, the aforementioned interpretation of the traces of use wear on wheel-made figures is supported by

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- PAKKANEN (eds). *Cult Material: Ritual and Cult in the Archaeological Study of Early Greek Religion* (forthcoming).
- ²³ J. MARAN, “Evidence for Levantine Religious Practice in the Late Bronze Age Sanctuary of Phylakopi on Melos?,” *ErIsr* 30 (2011) 65*-73*.
- ²⁴ D. WENGROW, *The Origins of Monsters: Image and Cognition in the First Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (2014) 78-80.
- ²⁵ M. KOSTOULA and J. MARAN, “A Group of Animal-Headed Faience Vessels from Tiryns,” in M. GRUBER, S. AHITUV, G. LEHMANN and Z. TALSHIR (eds), *All the Wisdom of the East: Studies in Near Eastern Archaeology and History in Honor of Eliezer D. Oren* (2012) 193-234.
- ²⁶ J. MARAN, “Bright as the Sun: The Appropriation of Amber Objects in Mycenaean Greece,” in H.-P. HAHN and H. WEISS (eds), *Mobility, Meaning and the Transformations of Things* (2013) 147-169.
- ²⁷ J. MARAN, “The Spreading of Objects and Ideas in the Late Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean: Two Case Examples from the Argolid of the 13th and 12th Centuries B.C.,” *BASOR* 336 (2004) 18-26.
- ²⁸ J. MARAN, “Ceremonial Feasting Equipment, Social Space and Interculturality in Post-Palatial Tiryns,” in J. MARAN and P. STOCKHAMMER, *Materiality and Social Practice: Transformative Capacities of Intercultural Encounters* (2012) 121-130.

contemporary wall paintings in which figures seem to be carried around in processions, while the assumption that the single bronze armour scale found beneath a hearth involved a ritual gains much of its persuasive power because other such scales have been found in similar contexts in Cyprus and the Levant.

The micro-context of associations of figures, symbols and objects in images confronts us with even more acute problems of interpretation. Images create systems of reference that link the reality of the observer with another reality in which beings act or interact with objects, the environment and/or other beings. It is this capacity that makes images our main source for gaining insight into the performance of ritual practices and the various facets of religious ideas.²⁹ Just how creatively this can be done was demonstrated by Nanno Marinatos in her keynote lecture as well as by the other contributors at the conference who based their interpretations on images depicted on seals, walls, pottery and other media. When inferring meaning from images we move into a particularly contested terrain as they can be interpreted in quite different ways. Nevertheless, it is only by grappling with the content of scenes such as those depicted on signet rings or the walls of Xeste 3 in Akrotiri that we can come up with bold syntheses that can compete with alternative interpretations and help us move forward. Moreover, it seems to me that the co-existence of more or less divergent readings should not be regarded as a sign of weakness but rather as a necessary consequence of the nature of our sources. Different readings of images make it possible to “triangulate” a range of possible interpretations that has then to be reassessed in light of new evidence.

There is another reason, however, why, when dealing with images, we should be open to a variety of interpretations. For a long time, iconographical analysis was implicitly guided by the assumption that images bore one particular meaning that immediately revealed itself to the past observer and was carefully transmitted from generation to generation. According to this view, archaeology’s task was to identify this specific meaning. Although most images were probably produced with particular meanings in mind, these meanings may have changed over time as the images came to be understood in different ways. We need to take this into consideration especially when we are dealing with images on portable objects, such as signet rings, that have often been in circulation for a long time and may thus have had multiple owners. Yet similar changes in meaning may also be applicable to wall paintings, especially if they have remained *in situ* for many decades or even centuries. It is, above all, the capacity to create complex semantic interrelations among objects, places, narratives and practices that predisposes images to become the subject of frequent renegotiation of meaning.

That this should not be regarded as a merely theoretical abstract possibility, and that people of the Late Bronze Age Aegean were indeed actively involved in granting meaning to images is suggested by signs of an “interactive” relationship between the contents of images and the lifeworld of their observers. As suggested by several papers, images can refer to places that were known to the ancient observer. For instance, it was persuasively argued that in the case of the Ayia Triada sarcophagus or the depictions of Baetyls in images, references were being made to particular places in the built environment or landscape. This “interactive” relationship between images and particular features of the lifeworld may also have extended to portable objects. One could cite the “Holy Lance”, the “Holy Grail” and the “horn of the unicorn” in the imperial treasury of the Hofburg Palace in Vienna³⁰ as much later examples of this sort of mutually reinforcing interrelationship between objects frequently depicted in images and mentioned in texts and actual objects that formed part of the tangible world. Although today we know that the Holy Lance is an Early Medieval weapon, the Holy Grail a late Roman agate bowl and the horn of the unicorn a narwhale’s tooth, the very fact that such objects and creatures were firmly embedded in iconography and legends must have ensured a willingness to accept the authenticity of items that were claimed to be the actual remains of legends. These, in turn,

²⁹ WARREN (*supra* n. 14) 11-29.

³⁰ R. DISTELBERGER, *Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien: Weltliche und geistliche Schatzkammer* (1998) 7, 23, 35-36; F. KIRCHWEGGER, *Die Heilige Lanze in Wien: Insignie – Reliquie – ‘Schicksalspeer’* (2005).

provided proof for the truth of such legends. That similar mutually reinforcing “interactive” relations may also have existed among images, narratives, practices and particular objects in Minoan and Mycenaean imagery is suggested by images and objects from the Tiryns treasure and the Vapheio tholos tomb. In the case of the image on the large golden signet ring from the Tiryns treasure, the chalice held by the goddess and the wheel-shaped astral symbol in the sky intriguingly resemble a bronze chalice and two wheels of woven and wound gold wire with attached amber beads that were part of the same treasure (Pl. CLVIIIa-c).³¹ On the amygdaloid seal from Vapheio, the Near Eastern semi-circular axe held by the robed figure displays the distinctive morphological feature of socket loops protruding conspicuously from the haft that reappears in the actual Near Eastern semi-circular axe – unique in the Aegean – found in the same tomb (Pl. CLIXa-c).³² These intriguing similarities between details of images and actual objects may imply that such figural compositions were carefully studied by people of the Late Bronze Age who retold the meaning of the scenes and identified depicted items with specific objects.

Inferring Patterns of Practice: Macro-Contexts of Performative Spaces

Although images are micro-contexts they can simultaneously enable linkages that allow observers to be transported to different times and places. Religious imagery reminds us that ritual practices were not only taking place at specific locations but had the potential to connect various points during ritual movement. Several papers here addressed the important issue of how archaeology can perceive landscapes, sites and monuments as interrelated parts unified in the macro-context of performative spaces. They argued that it would be wrong to regard the built and natural environment as merely passive settings for rituals because such spaces were imbued with cues whose significance was recalled at ceremonial events and that for this reason they directly affected the performance of the rituals. Sam Crooks, Louise Hitchcock and Caroline Tully rightly emphasized the need to recognize the agency of architecture and landscapes in such ceremonies. Some of the talks enabled us to grasp certain aspects of the potential for ritual movement built into architecture. What is more, by studying changes in the patterns of movement in successive phases of the built environment, we can draw certain conclusions about shifts in the performance of ritual practices and about the underlying ideological motives for such shifts. Here I focus particularly on the linkage binding architecture, ideology and social practice since it was under-represented in the METAPHYSIS program.

Various methodological approaches enable us to show that not only Minoan palaces, but also the ones built in the thirteenth century BCE in Pylos and Tiryns were designed down to the smallest detail for the staging of centripetal processions. Their architectural layout led visitors to move in a certain direction, exposed them to various sensory impressions and drew them deeper and deeper into the palace, until those allowed to reach the final destination of the procession – the complex of the megaron and its court – performed those rituals central to the state ideology at the round altar in the court and the round ceremonial hearth inside the throne room.³³

³¹ MARAN (*supra* n. 28) 123-124.

³² J. MARAN, “Near Eastern Semicircular Axes in the Late Bronze Age Aegean as Entangled Objects,” in I. KAISER, O. KOUKA and D. PANAGIOTOPOULOS (eds), *Ein Minoer im Exil. Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier* (2015) 243-270; see also C. BOULOTIS, “From Mythical Minos to the Search for Cretan Kingship,” in M. ANDREADAKI-VLAZAKI, G. RETHEMIOTAKIS and N. DIMOPOULOU-RETHEMIOTAKI (eds), *From the Land of the Labyrinth: Minoan Crete, 3000-1100 B.C. Essays* (2008) 51.

³³ J.C. WRIGHT, “The Spatial Configuration of Belief: The Archaeology of Mycenaean Religion,” in S.E. ALCOCK and R. OSBORNE (eds), *Placing the Gods: Sanctuaries and Sacred Space in Ancient Greece* (1994) 51-60; J.C. WRIGHT, “The Social Production of Space and the Architectural Reproduction of Society in the Bronze Age Aegean during the 2nd Millennium B.C.E.,” in J. MARAN, C. JUWIG, H. SCHWENGEL and U. THALER (eds), *Constructing Power: Architecture, Ideology and Social Practice* (2006) 49-74.; MARAN (*supra* n. 20) 78-85; J. MARAN, “Architektonischer Raum und soziale Kommunikation auf

Although the prominence of processions in Mycenaean ritual practice suggests significant communal participation, what was going on inside the palaces was undoubtedly embedded in a strategy of concealment, exclusivity and seclusion by the ruling class – a tendency that seems to have increased in the course of the palatial period until reaching its peak in the final fifty years of the palaces' existence. At Mycenae, the final decades of this period saw the construction of a new West Cyclopean Wall, by means of which the cult centre and Grave Circle A, previously situated outside the citadel wall, were integrated into patterns of circulation inside the citadel.³⁴ This allowed processions to create links between the seat of the ruler, the seat of the gods in the Cult Centre and the seat of the ideologically elevated ancestors in Grave Circle A. In this way, the control over access to crucial religious monuments became an exclusive right of the palatial elite.³⁵ Such a wish for exclusivity is also manifest in Tiryns, where the space a person entered when using the passageway between the Main Gate and the Great Megaron at first became noticeably wider, but then, after the Inner Forecourt, ever more restricted and designed to accommodate a gradually diminishing group as the procession neared its destination. What I call liminal points³⁶ may have served as a means of separating those entitled to proceed from those forced to stay behind. This staging of exclusivity reached its climax in the Throne Room, which was dominated by the ceremonial hearth and offered very limited space to participants.³⁷

As a consequence of this seclusion and exclusivity, the central tenets of the royal ideology and its core rituals, at which deity and ruler met, would have been known to only a tiny inner circle of dignitaries.³⁸ Still, it must have been crucial for the cohesion of Mycenaean polities that the wider population participate in religious practices so as to make manifest the ruler's relations to the gods and to build emotional bonds with the religious ideology, without which it would have been much more difficult to mobilize the population to work on gigantic building projects. The Pylos texts document festivals and banquets organized by the palaces for possibly as many as several thousand people.³⁹ Indeed, as mentioned in some of the papers in METAPHYSIS, there are archaeological indications of banquets occurring in close proximity to the megaron, which hosted groups of people who had participated in processions, sacrifices or other rituals.⁴⁰ However, those who were permitted to enter the inner part of the palace were selected carefully and thus represented only a small segment of the overall population, for which there would simply not have been enough space in the palace. I therefore

der Oberburg von Tiryns – Der Wandel von der mykenischen Palastzeit zur Nachpalastzeit,” in F. ARNOLD, A. BUSCH, R. HAENSCH and U. WULF-RHEIDT (eds), *Orte der Herrschaft. Charakteristika von antiken Machtzentren* (2012) 150-158; U. THALER, *Architektur der Macht – Macht der Architektur. Mykenische Paläste als Dokument und Gestaltungsrahmen frühgeschichtlicher Sozialordnung*, Ph.D. dissertation University of Heidelberg (2009); U. THALER, “Going Round in Circles: Anmerkungen zur Bewegungsrichtung in mykenischen Palastmegara,” in O. DALLY, S. MORAW and H. ZIEMSEN (eds), *Bild – Raum – Handlung. Perspektiven der Archäologie* (2012) 191-198.

³⁴ K.A. WARDLE, “The ‘Cult Centre’ at Mycenae and Other Sanctuaries in the Argo-Saronic Gulf and the NE Peloponnese: Location and Status,” in E. KONSOLAKI-YIANNOPOULOU (ed), *ΑΡΧΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΚΟΣ. Πρακτικά του Διεθνούς Συνεδρίου Ιστορίας και Αρχαιολογίας του Αργολοσαρωνικού, Πόρος, 26-29 Ιουνίου 1998* (2003) 320-325.

³⁵ WARDLE (*supra* n. 34) 323-324.

³⁶ MARAN (*supra* n. 20) 82.

³⁷ THALER (*supra* n. 33, 2012) 197-199.

³⁸ J. MARAN, “Contested Pasts – The Society of the 12th c. B.C.E. Argolid and the Memory of the Mycenaean Palatial Period,” in W. GAUSS, M. LINDBLOM, R.A.K. SMITH and J.C. WRIGHT, *Our Cups Are Full. Papers Presented to Jeremy B. Rutter on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (2011) 173.

³⁹ D. NAKASSIS, “Prestige and Interest: Feasting and the King at Mycenaean Pylos,” *Hesperia* 81 (2012) 1-30.

⁴⁰ L.M. BENDALL, “Fit for a King? Hierarchy, Exclusion, Aspiration, and Desire in the Social Structure of Mycenaean Banqueting,” in P. HALSTEAD and J.C. BARRETT (eds), *Food, Cuisine, and Society in Prehistoric Greece* (2004) 105-135; B. LIS, The Role of Cooking Pottery and Cooked Food in the Palace of Nestor at Pylos,” *ArcheologiaWar* 57 (2006) 19-24.

suspect that other steps were taken to include wider segments of the population by allowing it to assemble and be hosted in the environs of the centres during festivals. As regards Mycenae, I have advanced the hypothesis that the site served as a kind of “open-air theatre” in which crowds of people assembled on the slopes of the hills surrounding the citadel were able to follow some of the cult practices taking place inside the palace, especially the passage of processions downhill or uphill between the megaron and the cult centre.⁴¹

But in my opinion the most important way of reaching the wider population living beyond the centres was to engage it to watch and participate in processions. Painted representations of processions offer an idea of a stirring performance of people advancing with dignified movements, possibly to the sound of melodious chants, dressed in impressive and colourful robes, while bearing luxurious objects and religious paraphernalia. The depiction of large umbrellas in a newly discovered processional fresco from Tiryns⁴² provides indirect evidence that processions were taking place in the open and under bright sunlight. That some processions covered long distances is documented by the portrayal of palanquins in wall paintings and a terracotta model.⁴³

We do not know the course that processions took between different points in a polity, but we can specify some of their destinations, among which the palatial centres were the most important. Each of these centres was furnished with a topography of monuments that probably served as stations at which processions stopped to perform sacrifices and other rituals, as is particularly obvious in the case of Mycenae.⁴⁴ Similar stations must have existed further along the processional route. It is remarkable that at Tiryns only centripetal movement appears to have been architecturally preconfigured, while in Mycenae the integration of the megaron into systems of passageways can be read as much in a centripetal as in a centrifugal direction.⁴⁵ These differences between the two Argive palaces can be viewed as a sign that, unlike the one in Mycenae, the megaron in Tiryns served solely as the terminus and not as the starting point of processions.⁴⁶ The king and/or the queen may have travelled to Tiryns on occasion to perform certain rituals, to reside there, or to receive distinguished guests from overseas.

As Barbro Santillo-Frizell⁴⁷ rightly emphasized, a special type of procession may have been devoted to the transport of the giant stone monoliths that were used in palaces and tholos tombs.⁴⁸ As she pointed out, in Mycenae, stone quarries were connected to the citadel by a “via triumphalis”, which transformed the transport of the conglomerate monoliths into a public spectacle.⁴⁹ Such a “working procession” starting at a quarry close to Mycenae would have dragged conglomerate blocks – probably around 10 in number – over a distance of about 18 km to Tiryns and thus traversed the entire Argive plain.

⁴¹ MARAN (*supra* n. 20) 80-81.

⁴² J. MARAN, A. PAPADIMITRIOU and U. THALER, “Tiryns, Restaurierung und Studium von Wandmalereien,” in *Deutsches Archäologisches Institut – Jahresbericht 2011, AA 2012/1 Beiheft* (2012) 102-103, fig. 27; U. THALER, A. PAPADIMITRIOU and J. MARAN, “Bearing the Pomegranate Bearer. A New Wall-Painting Scene from Tiryns,” in H. BRECOULAKI, J.L. DAVIS and S. STOCKER (eds), *Mycenaean Wall Painting in Context. New Discoveries and Old Finds Reconsidered* (2015) 173-211.

⁴³ K. DEMAPOPOULOU, “Πήλινο ομοίωμα φορείου της μυκηναϊκής εποχής από την Τίρυνθα”, in *ΦΛΙΑ ΕΠΗ εις Γ.Ε. Μυλωνά*, Vol. 3 (1989) 25-33; E. FRENCH, *Mycenae – Agamemnon’s Capital: The Site in Its Setting* (2002) 66, color pl. 10.

⁴⁴ WRIGHT (*supra* n. 33, 2006) 56-61.

⁴⁵ MARAN (*supra* n. 20) 83-84.

⁴⁶ MARAN (*supra* n. 20) 84.

⁴⁷ B. SANTILLO-FRIZELL, “Monumental Building at Mycenae: Its Function and Audience,” *OpAth* 22-23 (1997-1998) 103-116; B. SANTILLO-FRIZELL, “Giants or Geniuses? Monumental Building at Mycenae,” *Current Swedish Archaeology* 6 (1998) 167-183.

⁴⁸ WRIGHT (*supra* n. 33, 2006) 58-61, pl. 10:2; MARAN (*supra* n. 20) 82, pl. 12.

⁴⁹ SANTILLO-FRIZELL (*supra* n. 47, 1997-1998) 114; SANTILLO-FRIZELL (*supra* n. 47, 1998) 179-183.

According to Linear B-texts,⁵⁰ one of the destinations of processions starting at palaces were cult sites in other parts of the polity. Some of these may have been integrated into settlements, while others were situated out in the open. Of paramount importance to the religious life of the polity of Pylos was the cult centre *Pa-ki-ja-ne*, which belonged to the goddess Potnia. Since *Pa-ki-ja-ne* has not yet been archaeologically identified, we cannot specify its character and the distance that a procession had to travel from the palace in order to reach it. The recently discovered Mycenaean sanctuary near the summit of the Arachnaion mountain range in the Argolid, which was presented at METAPHYSIS, reveals that peak sanctuaries, typical of Minoan Crete, were also known in the Mycenaean heartlands. This also suggests that processions commencing at palatial centres may have led to sacred sites situated high in the mountains.

Conclusion

I attribute the extraordinary importance of ritual movement in Minoan and Mycenaean palatial polities to two closely interrelated factors: the first derives from the need to perpetuate religions that had no written sacred texts and thus relied exclusively on memory. This memory had to be reinforced in repetitive face-to-face communication through the oral transmission of religious texts and knowledge, through participation in rituals, and by learning how to act and which texts to chant during different stages of the rituals. Rituals such as processions performed as part of a cultic calendar made it possible to convey the contents of politico-religious ideology repetitively in word, image and practice, and to visualize and renegotiate the roles of various social groups within the polity. This second factor followed from the fact that for a political system, whose innermost ritual core was hermetically sealed from the outside, processions and ceremonial commensality served as the ideal media for letting the population participate emotionally in the ideology propagated by the palace. In addition, ritual movement allowed the religious significance of certain points in the landscape to be recalled, and thus affirmed and semantically charged the territory of the polity. Finally, the ritualization of compulsory labour through “working processions” made it possible to visualize the divine forces operating through the ruler and, at the same time, to emphasize that the tremendous work effort served the gods rather than human beings.

By focusing on ritual as a central category of social communication, METAPHYSIS has pointed to the need for an explicitly anthropological approach to religion and emphasized the importance of shifting away from a view of religion that sees it exclusively as a system of belief to one that regards it as a system of practice. Society creates religion and at the same time is created through religion. Ritual practice is what lies at the heart of this recursive relationship and ensures that the material and the immaterial are inextricably bound and mutually dependent. We need to learn to regard religion not as fixed and circumscribed but as fluid, dynamic and heterogeneous, and not only from a diachronic but also from a synchronic perspective. Archaeology has the potential to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of ritual practice through the study and analysis of contexts on various levels – from individual objects to processional movements at places or in regions. In order for archaeology to accomplish this we must accept the fact that the study of religion cannot be detached from that of culture, politics, economics, and the social space of a given society.⁵¹ Such an anthropology of religion is bound to serve as an important corrective to an exclusive reliance on texts for information on religion, a method closely bound to the equation of religion with belief.

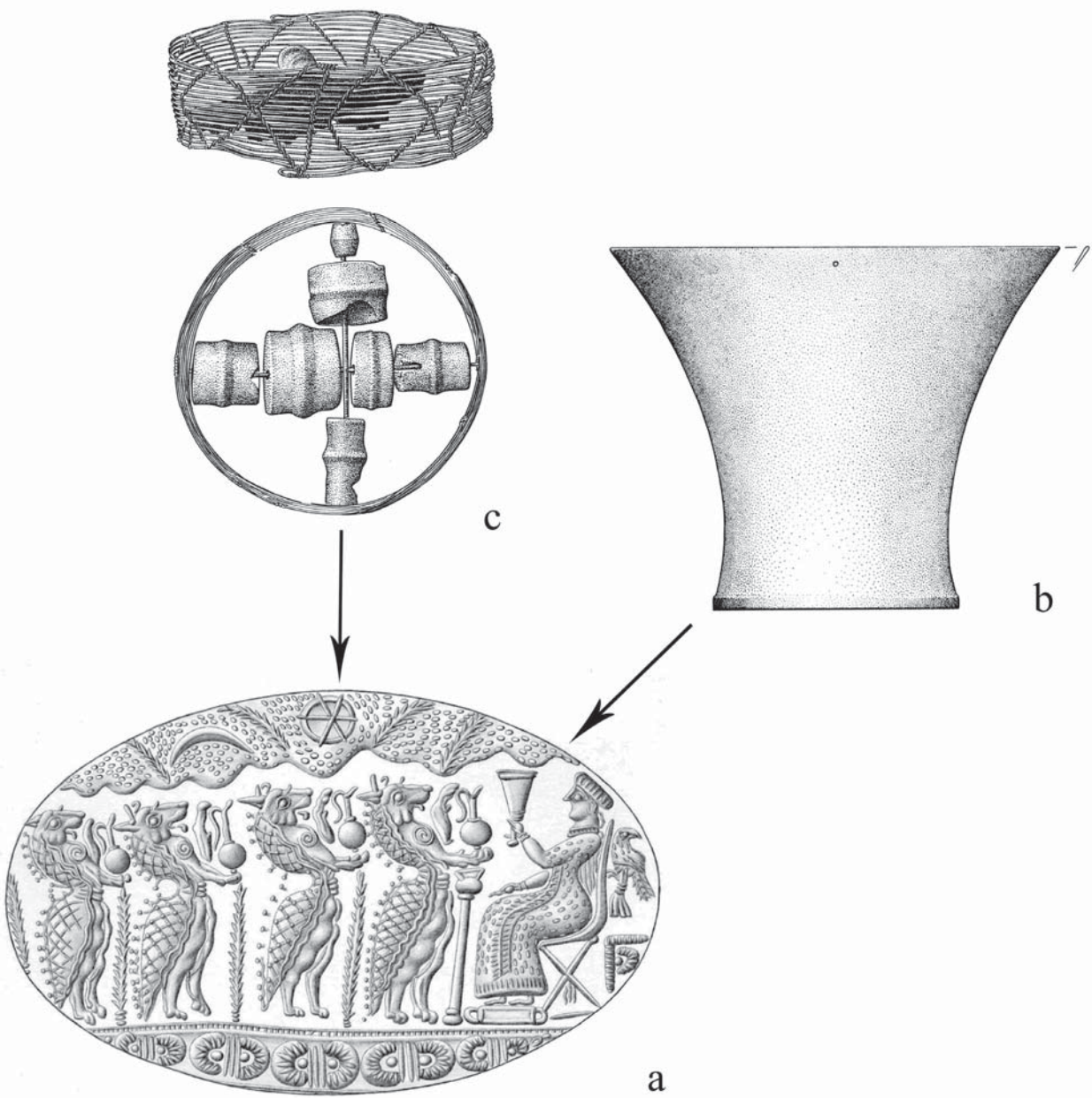
Joseph MARAN

⁵⁰ J. WEILHARTNER, “Textual Evidence for Aegean Late Bronze Age Ritual Processions,” *Opuscula* 6 (2013) 151-173; J. WEILHARTNER, “Die Teilnehmer griechischer Kultprozessionen und die mykenischen Tätigkeitsbezeichnungen auf -PO-RO/φόρος,” in A. BERNABÉ and E.J. LUJÁN (eds), *Donum Mycenologicum: Mycenaean Studies in Honour of F.A. Jorro* (2014) 201-219.

⁵¹ BYRNE (*supra* n. 2) 24-25.

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 - b. Bronze chalice: H. MATTHÄUS, *Die Bronzegefäße der kretisch-mykenischen Kultur* (1980) pl. 4:364.
 - c. Wheels of gold wire with attached amber beads: H. MÜLLER-KARPE, *Handbuch der Vorgeschichte IV:3. Bronzezeit. Tafeln* (1980) pl. 245:12-13.
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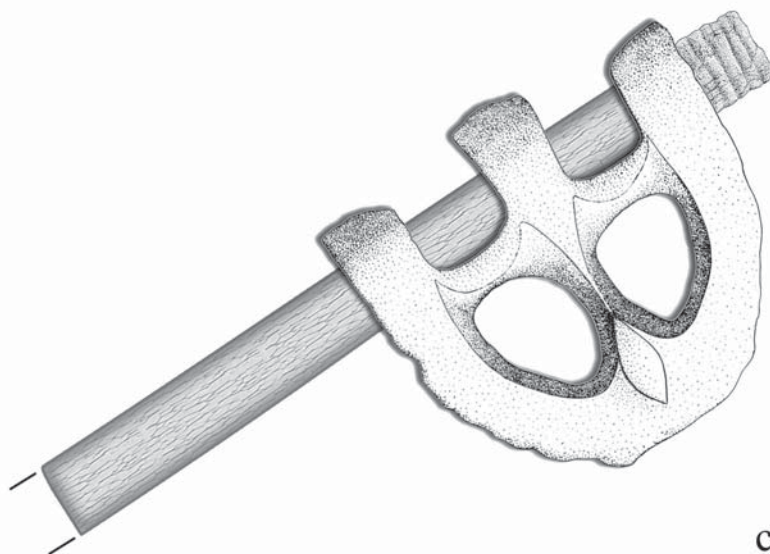




a



b



c