

SITUATING GENDER IN EUROPEAN ARCHAEOLOGIES

Edited by

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Front Cover Illustration

Gold foil from Rogaland in western Norway showing a man and a woman,
often interpreted as the Nordic Vanir god Freyr and his wife Gerd
from the family of Giants. 7th–8th century AD.

(Photo: Svein Skare. © Bergen Museum, University of Bergen, Norway.)

Back Cover Illustration

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Thoroughly Modern Minoans: Women and Goddesses between Europe and the Orient

CHRISTINE MORRIS

The island of Crete has been poised in dialogue between East and West throughout its history. In early archaeological writings, the Bronze Age Cretans were often presented in terms of the opposition between European and Oriental identity. This is, therefore, an important ingredient in how gender issues relating both to the mortal and divine worlds were framed and discussed in scholarly works and then developed in the popular, public imagination. This paper explores how ideas about Minoan female deities and about gender relations were situated within contemporary (that is, 19th–early 20th century) ways of viewing the world, focusing specifically on this East-West theme of Orientalism and how this is expressed in the context of the ideology of the “separate spheres” and the idea of the “thoroughly modern” Minoan. The paper also addresses the apparent paradox that the Minoans could be represented *both* as European and Oriental, depending on time and context. Study of how these modes of thought influenced the presentation and interpretation of the Minoans, both in academic scholarship and in popular culture, is significant for the study of the history of Minoan scholarship, an area of burgeoning interest (DARCQUE *et al.* 2006; HAMILAKIS – MOMIGLIANO 2006; PAPADOPOULOS 2005). Importantly, too, this reflexive approach also offers us insights into how our own continuing engagements with gender in the Cretan Bronze Age have been shaped.

The Cretan or Minoan Bronze Age (c. 3000–1050 BC) was rediscovered through archaeological exploration. The Minoans became well known through Arthur Evans’ high-profile excavations at the palatial site of Knossos, which began in 1900 although initial digging at Knossos dates back to the 1878–1879 explorations of Minos Kalokairinos. It was soon apparent from Evans’ finds that Crete had interacted with the older, neighboring Near Eastern and Egyptian civilizations, but the island also quickly came to be described in terms of its Western identity as belonging to the heritage of Europe. As recent research on the history of Minoan scholarship has vividly shown, contemporary political currents had a significant part to play in the scholarly responses to this newly discovered island society (HAMILAKIS – MOMIGLIANO 2006). On the broader political stage this involved questions of European identity and the emergence of modern nation-states, including Greece. On Crete itself, the political landscape was dominated

by episodes of rebellion and insurrection since, unlike Greece, the island had remained under Ottoman Turkish rule. Conflict between East and West, between Christian and Muslim, continued to be keenly felt, and the island was not freed from Ottoman rule until 1898; even then, it remained under the control of the European Great Powers and politically separate from the modern state of Greece until 1913.

During the 1890s a scholarly discussion developed in which it was vigorously argued that Eastern influence on the West had been over-rated. A key contribution to this debate was Salomon Reinach's influential paper "La Mirage Orientale" (DUCHÊNE 2006; REINACH 1893), and a similar argument was espoused by Evans in a lecture entitled "The 'Eastern Question' in Anthropology" (EVANS 1896; FOTIADIS 2006). It is important to note that Mycenaean Bronze Age material was drawn upon in this debate but that Reinach's and Evans' re-evaluation of the degree of Eastern influence on European cultures *preceded* the large-scale excavations at Knossos and at other Cretan sites. Minoan civilization was uncovered, then, at a pivotal moment when Crete had recently been freed from Ottoman rule and when scholarly debate about European identity was a focus of scholarly discourse.

Taken within this context it is unsurprising to find the Minoans enthusiastically presented as taking the origins of Europe back beyond the glories of ancient Greece, thus emphasizing the superiority of European culture, past and present, across a range of spheres from the arts to technological innovation. The wonders of the Knossian drainage system and its apparently flushing toilet were widely reported in the press, with Evans himself commenting that there was "nothing more remarkable" in the whole palace structure (EVANS 1902, 81; for a different view of the "toilette" see DRIESSEN – MACDONALD 1988). The Knossian system must have seemed both technically impressive and decidedly modern if we consider it from the viewpoint of the rapid developments in toilet technology and sanitation in the Victorian period from the highly popular use of public toilets at the 1851 Great Exhibition at The Crystal Palace, where visitors paid a penny to use the facilities, to the installation of the first ceramic toilet for Queen Victoria in 1859.

In the artistic sphere, commentators enthused over the style and content of the art. The flavour of the responses to Cretan art is well expressed by the excavators' description of the fresco fragment of the Knossos Rhyton Bearer, made soon after its discovery, in *The Times* on October 31, 1900: "beautiful life-size painting of a youth, with an European and almost classically Greek profile, gives us the first real knowledge of the race who produced this mysterious early civilization."

Similar responses to Minoan art, linking it to later classical art and *distancing* it from Near Eastern art are commonplace in early 20th-century writings. Ludwig Curtius, for example, describes Cretan art as “The first revelation of a new European spirit, which ... differs, with its passionate mobility, in the sharpest possible manner from Oriental art” (CURTIUS 1913, 56).

This sense of *distancing* the Minoans from the East is also discernible in Evans’ analysis of Minoan religion. He does present the Minoan goddess as linked to Eastern models (so he writes of “Egyptian sister goddesses” or of the wider Mediterranean model of a great goddess and her son/lover, as popularized by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*). At the same time, Evans also expresses the view that the Minoan goddess was a maternal mother goddess and that the Minoans were essentially monotheistic:

We do not encounter any such multiplicity of divinities as in the Classical world, and in fact are constantly brought back to the same Great Mother with her Child or Consort whose worship under various names and titles extended over a large part of Asia Minor and the Syrian regions beyond... . As Mother Goddess we see her with her hands on her matronly breasts... . We still feel ourselves in the presence of essentially the same divinity rather than with separate mythological entities, like those of later Greece. (EVANS 1928, 277)

Evans goes on to draw parallels with the Virgin Mary, attributing a moral dimension to Minoan religion through which he skillfully distinguishes it both from the Eastern religions and leap-frogs it through time over the classical polytheistic past to claim a greater moral affinity to Christianity.

The term “Mother Goddess” can be used in a wide range of ways: to refer to a creatrix of the world and to a mother of other gods and of humans; to an actual mother or a goddess associated with nurturing (including reproduction and birth); or as a title of respect for a deity who is not in fact closely linked to biological functions. It is clear, however, from Evans’ language that although his deity was multi-faceted, he explicitly thought of her as closely associated with motherhood, writing of “matronly breasts” and of the “organs of maternity”. Since explicit depictions of sexual activity, pregnancy or birthing, or of mother with child are famously absent from Minoan imagery, it is reasonable to ask why Evans (and his contemporaries) were so drawn to a maternal Mother Goddess. I have argued in detail elsewhere that his insistence on the maternal aspects of the Minoan deity was influenced by contemporary social values of the world in which Evans (born

in 1851) grew up – in particular an ideology of motherhood, which placed both a physical and moral onus on women to reproduce (MORRIS 2006). Motherhood was a focus of public debate in modern Europe over the 18th and 19th centuries. In the 18th century there was a debate about the ills of wet-nursing (widely practiced by wealthy women); in France, Rousseau emphasised the importance of the mother breastfeeding her baby. By the 19th century motherhood was idealised and there was a public preoccupation with it being crucial to the well-being of the state and the imperial nation. The Victorian period was characterised (at least as a middle class ideal) by the sharp demarcation of male public and female private space – this was the famous “separate spheres” ideology, in which female devotion to the domestic ideal was seen as the “sweet vocation” but was at the same time considered a weighty moral responsibility, both for the individual household and for the nation. Motherhood was extolled: a government publication of 1911 records that “the service that the State most requires from the generality of women is motherhood, and the maintenance of the family in purity and happiness” (SUMMERFIELD 1995, 313). The need for women as “creatures of their biology” to conserve their energies for childbearing and rearing was pressed on women at every turn – all of this contributed to and reinforced social ideology, fuelled by public concern about the health and purity of the nation in the context of wars and colonial expansion (MORRIS 2006).

The Minoan deity – as mother goddess, as a unitary, monotheistic figure, and imbued with a Christian flavour by Evans – was a goddess admirably suited to the sensibilities of modern Europe. These characteristics distanced her from Near Eastern goddesses who were typically presented in terms of an Orientalist discourse whereby the East was seen as slavish, feminine, alluring, and erotic in the eyes of the West (SAID 1979). This way of seeing the East impacted interpretation of its archaeological material – every female image was dubbed a “fertility figurine” or “fertility goddess” – and this in turn fed back into 19th-century visual arts and writings (BAHRANI 2001). Thus when Evans writes of the “typically sensuous character of the Semitic forms”, this Orientalist discourse is at work. A brief look at the faience figures known as the “Snake Goddesses” from Knossos further illustrates the point. Evans interpreted their exposed breasts as referring to motherhood and nurturing (for a full discussion, see MORRIS 2006; 2009). The modern American response to the “Snake Goddess” at the opening ceremony of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens is a sharp reminder of other possible responses to this striking image. Complaints were made about the overtly sexual imagery and in some public television broadcasts the exposed breasts (actually

body paint) were pixellated out. One late Victorian archaeologist's mother goddess becomes a 21st-century erotic image unsuitable for prime-time television and American sensibilities! With regard to the exposed breasts seen both on the "Snake Goddesses" and elsewhere in Minoan art, I suggest that the opposition of Europe and the Orient is being played out in Evans' interpretation. Western dualistic thought has separated the virtuous mother from the sexual temptress, the madonna from the whore. This thinking also translated into the good nurturing breast and the bad erotic breast, predisposing Evans and his contemporaries to interpret the material as either maternal (the good breast, the Mother Goddess) or as sensual and erotic. Since the erotic belonged with the sensuous world of the Orient and the Minoans had been appropriated as European, it was the maternal reading which was mapped onto the Minoan female body (MORRIS 2009).

But if the Minoan goddess was suitably European, what of mortal women? Here again, we can see that scholars and the public alike readily found resonances of modern Western life in Minoan imagery, in particular in the dress and deportment of the female figures in Minoan art. Minoan women and their fashions were greeted as being "thoroughly modern". We can illustrate this point briefly by reference to an image considered so European and *à la mode* that, to this day, she retains the nickname "La Parisienne". Soon after her discovery in 1901, the French scholar Edmond Pottier wrote effusively of her:

Her disheveled hair, the provocative kiss curl on her forehead, her enormous eye and sensual mouth, stained a violent red in the original ... this mixture of naïve archaism and spicy modernism, this quick sketch traced by a paintbrush on a wall at Knossos more than three thousand years ago to give us the impression of a Daumier or a Degas, this Pasiphae who looks like a *habitué* of Parisian bars ... there is something about the discovery of this unheard-of art that we find stunning, even scandalous. (cited by FARNoux 1996, 105)

The miniature frescoes from Knossos also generated much enthusiasm regarding their modern style, particularly in relation to the prominence and the elaborate dress of the female participants, whom Evans termed "truly Parisian". Public interest in the ancient world was also satisfied by numerous general books, and here too we find that the Minoans were remarked upon as astonishingly modern. A prolific writer of such general surveys, the Reverend James Baikie, may serve to illustrate these trends. He writes that "the attire of the ladies was staggeringly modern... Evening dress, extremely low cut, puffed sleeves, skirts

elaborately flounced from hem to waist, hair wonderfully frizzed and curled” (BAIKIE 1923, 381), and he shares too in the fascination with Minoan drainage arrangements, stating grandly that “it took the European world more than three thousand years to regain the sanitary knowledge which was lost when the Minoan Empire collapsed” (BAIKIE 1923, 392). His earlier book, *The Sea-Kings of Crete* leaves us in no doubt as to where the Minoans are to be situated in the larger historical picture, since this, we are told, is the story of “the extraordinary resurrection of the first European civilization” (BAIKIE 1913, preface).

According to this line of thinking, the Minoans are European, civilised, and thoroughly modern, the “fountainhead of our own civilisation” as Evans puts it. But on closer examination the picture is more complicated and ambiguous than this, for the Minoans could be represented as simultaneously modern, yet also primitive and orientalist. The prominence of women in the art led Evans to suggest that they may have taken the front rank in society, yet he presents this as indicative of the “remnants of primitive matriarchy” in line with social evolutionary theory which saw patriarchy as the peak of the evolutionary ladder. It was left to later writers to offer a more “modern” interpretation for the prominence of women in Minoan art, coupled with their revealing dress, as evidence for female power and sexual freedom (HAWKES 1968).

It is hard also to square the idea of modern Minoans with repeated references to the “harem” from the earliest reports. The fresco images are described as depicting the harem, though they clearly show a large public gathering (EVANS 1901, 110). This is not out of keeping with Evans’ later designation of separate “women’s quarters” in the East wing of the palace, as immortalised in the charming image of it which he commissioned. Other writers hotly contested the idea that the Minoans had harems or female seclusion, indicating the importance attached to the perception of the Minoans as Western rather than Eastern. The examples cited below are simply illustrative of the longevity of this debate:

“The Minoan princes seem to have kept no harem, and their women were not secluded.” (TREVER 1936, 131)

“There is no such obvious harem quarter in a Minoan as in an Egyptian or Akkadian palace.” (BARKER 1954, 123)

“In the Minoan palaces the ‘women’s’ quarter seems better adapted for a single queen than for a harem.” (CHILDE 1963, 132)

In other writings the negative value attached to the “harem” and its unsuitability for the European Minoans is even more explicit. Will Durant, who views Minoan

society as “almost matriarchal”, informs us that the “Minoan woman does not put up with any Oriental seclusion, any *purdah* or harem” (DURANT 1939, 15).

The sense of secluded female space recurs in more recent writings, indicating that such thinking about women and gender relations has had a strong and lingering influence on Minoan studies:

I imagine there may have been a small garden in the East light well, to solace the Queen (or the High Priestess) and her ladies. The room has been restored to look feminine and attractive with its benches and windows, and the Dancing Girl and the Dolphin frescoes which sometimes adorned it: a Minoan boudoir. (CADOGAN 1991, 79)

While the space is designated a boudoir rather than a harem, the author also playfully presents it as a “proper place for palace intrigues”, leaving us with a lingering sense of the Oriental harem, as constructed in Western thought. The term “harem” has more recently been revisited in a Minoan context by Nanno Marinatos who uses the term in the title of her paper (MARINATOS 1989). While she argues that a “harem” did exist at Knossos, she redefines it simply as referring to the “collective woman-folk of the palace” and rejects the usual connotations of odalisques, sultans and seclusion. This is an intriguing revival of the term in the context of Minoan scholarship.

The Minoans then have been presented over the years as thoroughly modern and European, and as ambiguously located between East and West. Outside archaeological writing there is also evidence that the Minoans could be represented as belonging to the exotic and to the Orient in its widest sense – examples of this can be found in literature, art, and modern dance. It is the latter which I take as a brief, closing example here. The Denishawn dance company, formed by Americans Ruth St. Dennis and Ted Shawn, were highly influential in the development of modern dance (DREIER 1933; TERRY 1976). They took their inspiration from a wide range of sources, from ancient Greece to India. Their dancing was intense, highly theatrical and often drew on ancient and non-Western rituals. A solo dance choreographed and danced by Ted Shawn (first performed publicly in 1916) is named *Gnossienne* or sometimes *A Priest of Knossos*. In it, Shawn, known for carefully researching historical detail, exaggerated the dress of one of the early iconic images from Knossos, the Rhyton Bearer. His priest dances for the Snake Goddess, who remains a powerful but unseen presence off-stage. Beyond the fact that Minoan civilisation has filtered here into modern culture, what is of special interest is that the piece was performed as part of a set,

all of which, as contemporary reviewers put it, “dealt in Orientalia” or showed “the langorous and mystic charm of the Orient”. In conclusion, I suggest that the weight of the history of ideas about the Minoans in the context of a discourse about Europe and the Orient lies, rather like Shawn’s Goddess, often unseen and off-stage, continuing to influence many of the assumptions and interpretations made concerning Minoan women, mortal and divine.

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