



THE HIDDEN RULER: ART AND POLITICS IN MINOAN CRETE

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ABSTRACT

Although there are numerous images that can be associated with the expression of the values and ideals of the ruling elites, the absence of overt ruler propaganda in Minoan official art is striking and has often been commented on. This paper argues that with regard to the expression of political power Minoan culture favoured the allusive and the polysemic. In particular, there was an overlap between religious and political imagery and depictions relating to the divine sphere would have been understood as also referring to the power of the palatial elites.

Much of Nanno Marinatos' research on the Aegean Bronze Age has been concerned with religion and art.¹ This paper in her honour, which explores the religious aspects of political power in Bronze Age Crete and its representation in official art and architecture, owes much to her insights into Minoan culture.

Minoan Crete has left us with a wide array of imagery that can be associated with the expression of the values and ideals of the ruling elites. Frescoes, seals in semi-precious stones, gold rings and sealings made from similar rings that have not survived, sculpture, stone vessels with relief decoration, and fine ceramics all testify to the splendor of palatial culture in Minoan Crete and demonstrate that the ruling elites used material culture in a very conscious way to express their view of the world around them and to shape the perceptions of others. Although what we have is but a fraction of a fraction of what once existed, images that unambiguously convey political power are conspicuous by their near absence. The fact that we are unable to recognise and define a distinct and recognisable ruler iconography has been much discussed and sometimes regarded as a serious problem to our understanding of Minoan society.

In 1994 the "missing ruler iconography" of Minoan Crete was discussed by several participants in a session on the *Role of the Ruler in the Prehistoric Aegean* at the annual meeting of the American Institute of Archaeology, later published as a volume in the *Aegaeum* series.² In the introductory chapter Ellen Davis maintained that Minoan art can be seen as anomalous in the context of the eastern Mediterranean during the Bronze Age in that it does not seem to have a propaganda value and serve the interests of the ruling elites. Rather it celebrates religious beliefs and rituals.³ In her contribution to the volume, Nanno also focused on the religious aspects of Minoan art but in contrast to Ellen Davis she did not deny its propagandistic aspects.⁴ She

argued that Minoan kings and queens were representatives on earth of the gods and were themselves of divine origin; as a consequence Minoan iconography would not have been interested in distinguishing between rulers and deities — the Minoan ruler is not missing but he is not readily identified. Whether a particular representation should be identified as a god or a ruler must be evaluated individually in each case by taking the entire iconographical context into account. The idea of the iconographical interchangeability of gods and rulers is elaborated on in Nanno's most recent book, *Minoan Kingship and the Solar Goddess. A Near Eastern Koine*, in which she also counters the view that the religious and political culture of Minoan Crete was unique; rulers can be identified by their attributes as is the case with Egyptian and Near Eastern art.⁵

The focus in previous research on the absence of a distinctive ruler iconography can in one sense be seen as a consequence of our own preconceptions about how political power in a hierarchical system in the ancient world ought to be expressed; we find the lack of unambiguous images of rulers and of events that reflect their power surprising and problematical because we expect to find them — perhaps this is a fallacious assumption. However, Crete had close connections with and was in many ways materially influenced by the Near East and Egypt from the beginning of the Bronze Age. With the development of palatial culture at the beginning of the second millennium BC the expectation that the emerging elites might have imitated the modes of self-presentation of their neighbours in order to consolidate their power is not unreasonable. Images that represent political power in what can be considered a fairly direct way are, in fact, not entirely absent from Minoan Crete. The perhaps most striking image is the sealing known as the *Master Impression*, which was found in a dump in Khania. The sealing had been impressed from a ring onto a folded

document of some kind and probably dates to before the end of the Late Minoan IB period.⁶ It shows a male figure holding a staff standing on what is either a large edifice or a conglomeration of buildings on top of a mountain. There is some uncertainty about whether the male figure should be identified as a god or a mortal ruler and whether he is standing on a palace, a sanctuary, or a city on a hill. These questions were discussed in some detail by Erik Hallager in his publication of the sealing. His own view was that it is impossible to say whether the male figure is a god or a man as comparative evidence can be found to support both interpretations, but he considers it more reasonable to interpret the building as a “town or a palace-like structure” rather than as a sanctuary.⁷ In her recent book, Nanno interprets the image in religious terms and sees it as a depiction of a god proclaiming his ownership of a sacred city.⁸

With regard to meaning and symbolism, the *Master Impression* has often been compared to the so-called *Mother of the Mountain* sealing from the West Wing of the Palace of Knossos. Like the *Master Impression*, it had been impressed from a ring. On the sealing we see a female figure standing on a mountaintop, on both sides of which lions are heraldically positioned. Behind her is some kind of building, which resembles the building on the *Master Impression* and below her on the flat ground stands a man holding his left hand to his head in what is usually in Minoan archaeology considered a gesture of respect or adoration. It has been suggested that the scene represents the investment of a male ruler by a goddess, an interpretation, which, as Nanno argues in her recent book, is supported by Near Eastern imagery and texts.⁹ Both sealings were exhaustively analysed by Kathleen Krattenmaker in her contribution to *The Role of the Ruler in the Prehistoric Aegean*, in which she compares the imagery on the *Master Impression* and the *Mother of the Mountain* sealings.¹⁰ She argues that the buildings are more likely to be representations of palaces than of cities or sanctuaries and that the figures holding a staff are more likely to represent a deity than a human.

The various analyses by different scholars of the iconographical elements on the *Master Impression* and the *Mother of the Mountain* sealings underscore the perception that there was an apparent overlap between religious and political imagery. Rather than attempting to argue for either a religious or a non-religious interpretation of a certain image we should perhaps also consider the possibility that Minoan art worked on several levels and that both interpretations may be valid — images of gods may also be images of rulers. For example, even if the central male figure on the *Master Impression* represents a god, the scene as a whole could have been intended as a statement of political supremacy or even more specifically as a commemoration of the conquest of enemy territory by a particular ruler.¹¹ Our inability to determine the exact meaning of the imagery found on the *Master Impression* and the *Mother of the Mountain* sealings may not only be a token of our ignorance but also point to a central feature of Minoan culture, namely a mindset that favoured the allusive and the polysemic. In Minoan Crete there may have been a cultural

preference for expressing the realities of power, power relations, and even political events metaphorically through a ritual idiom. The ruler is not so much missing as hidden behind veils of meaning.¹²

Evidence from other times and places demonstrates that political power can be expressed in a subtle and indirect way by creating an ideal world around the person of the ruler and his court. The power of the ruler is legitimised through references to religious myths and the world of the gods and its effects are equated with cosmic order. Religious rituals are also political events and official art and architecture serve to embody the political ideals of the ruling elite. John M. Fritz has suggested that in the medieval southern Indian kingdom known after its capital city of Vijayanagara “...kings were empowered by the symbolic context in which royal behavior was embedded”. This perspective, which implies that the natural and built environments were exploited and fashioned in order to reflect and enhance the position of the ruler, may be useful to our understanding of the ways in which political power was projected and displayed in Minoan Crete.

The architectural layout of the Minoan palaces, which is characterised by the presence of large courts and open areas with steps for sitting that could accommodate many people, would seem to a large extent to have been determined by the need to provide a setting for public performance. This suggests that ritual played a pivotal role in enacting and reinforcing connections between the wellbeing of the state and its inhabitants and the power of the ruling elites.¹³ At Knossos the importance of spectacle to the presentation of power is also materialised in palatial art. The so-called *Grandstand Fresco* depicts a large number of people who are apparently waiting for a ceremony of some kind to start.¹⁴ In the upper level of the fresco they are seated or standing on steps in an open-fronted roofed area with supporting columns, in the centre of which is a tripartite shrine with horns of consecration. A second group of people are depicted below in a rectangular area. The setting can therefore be identified as the palace itself and more specifically as the West Wing and the Central Court.¹⁵ The so-called *Sacred Grove and Dance Fresco* shows crowds of people sitting in an outdoor area as indicated by the presence of trees.¹⁶ In front of the sitting area a procession of women is moving across a paved court. The raised walkways indicate that the ceremony is taking place in the West Court of the palace.¹⁷ The fragments of the *Grandstand Fresco* and the *Sacred Grove and Dance Fresco* were found in a basement room near the Central Court, so their original placement on the walls within the palace is uncertain. The *Procession Fresco* depicts male and female figures walking in procession carrying offerings. It is probable that the fresco, which is only very partially preserved, decorated the walls along the route of actual processions that may have moved from the West Court to the Central Court.¹⁸ Fragments from another procession fresco have been restored as ascending the Grand Staircase in the East Wing of the palace.¹⁹ The depiction of ritual events on the walls of the palace dissolves the distinction

between the ephemeral and the timeless, underscoring the permanence of the prevailing political system and thereby assimilating it with divine order.

Minoan art reveals a fascination with the natural world. A number of frescoes from Knossos and elsewhere depict landscapes with rocks and flowering vegetation, in which people and animals are sometimes present and engaged in various activities. At Knossos the *Saffron Gatherer Fresco* shows a blue monkey in a landscape of rocks with crocuses growing on them. Crocuses are also depicted as growing in pots. Other less well-preserved fragments indicate the presence of other monkeys. The *Monkeys and Blue Bird Frieze* from the House of the Frescoes to the west of the palace at Knossos shows birds and monkeys in a landscape of rocks and waterfalls with plants and colourful flowers. Fragments from another room of the house depict wild goats among crocuses and olive trees. Fresco fragments with grass, flowers, birds, and mice have been found in the Southeast House and the South House south of the palace. At Ayia Triada one of the rooms of the villa was decorated with frescoes showing a landscape with rocks and flower in which we see cats, birds, and deer as well as a woman gathering flowers. Another woman is shown standing near a building, usually identified as a sanctuary.

What all these examples have in common is that they suggest a worldview that emphasises the beauty, harmony, and fertility of the natural world. They also present a tamed version of nature, from which any sense of danger has been removed.²⁰ In the *Saffron Gatherer* we see crocuses growing on rocks as they do in nature but also in pots as we might see flowers in a garden. Red circles around the preserved arm and waist of the monkey suggest that he is wearing ribbons or jewellery, indicating that he is a favoured pet rather than a representative of the wild. Commentators have also sometimes remarked on various fantastical or unreal aspects of Minoan landscape depictions, which could suggest that they were meant to evoke the timeless world of the gods. Sara Immerwahr has suggested that the nature frescoes were an expression of a mystic communion with the Minoan Goddess of Nature.²¹ More generally, Mark Cameron has argued that all the frescoes from the palace of Knossos were thematically unified and centred on the regeneration of the Great Goddess of Crete.²² Although I am sceptical about the idea that Minoan religion was centred on a single great goddess of nature, I agree that the depictions of landscape in palatial art had a religious significance. I would also argue that they had a clear ideological import in that they illustrate that the natural world could be controlled and ordered. The

underlying message is that the ruling elites were, like the gods, guarantors of cosmic order and the effects of their rule are such that they cause nature to flourish, resulting in abundance, prosperity, and peace.

The legitimacy of rulers is almost always bound up with their ability to defend their territories and protect their people and sometimes also with their willingness to conquer new land. Traditionally, the Minoans have been seen as peaceful flower-lovers who had no interest in conquest or any need for defence. However, it is now increasingly being recognised that Minoan civilisation was not without its warlike aspects. Although scenes of interpersonal violence that can be taken to reflect warfare are not common, they do occur.²³ Depictions of fully armed warriors are found on seals as are images the purpose of which would seem to be to glorify martial violence.²⁴ All the same, in comparison with neighbouring areas there would seem to be a cultural aversion to imagery in which military force and the conquest of other peoples play a significant role. The military capabilities of the rulers were, it would seem, either suppressed or expressed in more indirect ways. One of the fragments from the *Sacred Grove and Dance Fresco* in which we see a group of young men holding javelins, indicates that the display of weapons and force may have taken place in a ritual context. Nanno has pointed out that Minoan iconography clearly shows that the ideal Minoan man is an athlete.²⁵ A cultural emphasis on athleticism may be tied to military aspirations and it is noteworthy that scenes of competitive sports and bull leaping, which glorify imperviousness to danger, physical strength, and agility, were very popular in official art.²⁶ Besides reflecting the importance of athletic display in Minoan palatial culture, they may reflect the training undergone by warriors and their popularity may have been intended to convey a message about the military might that could be mustered by the palatial elites when needed.

Since the first excavations took place at Knossos at the beginning of the twentieth century, archaeologists and the general public have been fascinated by the alluring vision of a peaceful prehistoric culture characterised by a love of art and beauty. But this is a vision that was deliberately created by those in power for ideological reasons. The few images that portray military violence hint at a grimmer reality. In Nanno's words "...the spirit of relaxation and joyfulness that Minoan art imparts to us tells only part of the story. A certain stiffness or perhaps even insecurity about identity lurks in the background".²⁷

NOTES

¹ I first met Nanno in Athens in 1981 when I was an undergraduate in Classics. I have always found her work inspirational and I share with her the belief that religion must be taken into account in our discussions of the social and political systems of Bronze Age societies in the eastern Mediterranean. I am delighted to have been asked to contribute to this *Festschrift* in her honour.

² Rehak 1995.

³ Davis 1995.

⁴ Marinatos 1995.

⁵ Marinatos 2010.

⁶ Hallager 1985, 12.

⁷ Hallager 1985, 19-20; 32-33.

⁸ Marinatos 2010, 75-76.

- ⁹ Marinatos 2010, 84-85.
- ¹⁰ Krattenmaker 1995.
- ¹¹ Cf. von Stietenron 1985-1986 on the use of religious art to express political events.
- ¹² I agree with Nanno that the supposition that Minoan Crete was a form of monarchy and that the palaces were the seats of rulers is a reasonable one.
- ¹³ Hägg 1987; Marinatos 1987. See Soar 2014 for an analysis of the importance of performance to the representation of power in Minoan Crete.
- ¹⁴ Immerwahr 1990, Pl. 22; Kontorli-Papadopoulou 1996, Pl. I.
- ¹⁵ Davis 1987, 160.
- ¹⁶ Immerwahr 1990, Pl. 23; Kontorli-Papadopoulou 1996, Pl. V. Cf. Soar 2014, 8.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Marinatos 1987, 141; Soar 2014, 8. Both the *Grandstand Fresco* and the *Sacred Grove and Dance Fresco* are fragmentary and their reconstruction is to some extent conjectural.
- ¹⁸ Immerwahr 1990; Kontorli-Papadopoulou, Pl. 21; Boulotis 1987.
- ¹⁹ Cameron 1978, 588, Plate 4.
- ²⁰ Cf. Younger 2015.
- ²¹ Immerwahr 1990, 46.
- ²² Cameron 1987.
- ²³ Cf. Molloy 2012; Marinatos 1995, 581.
- ²⁴ See, for example, CMS II.3.32, II.6.15, II.8.276, II.3.16.
- ²⁵ Marinatos 1995, 579.
- ²⁶ Cf. Fritz 1986, 47.
- ²⁷ Marinatos 1995, 584.

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