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Looking for Minoan and Mycenaean Women: Paths of Feminist Scholarship Towards the Aegean Bronze Age

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Three distinct but interrelated cultures developed around the Aegean Sea during the Bronze Age, which spanned the third and second millennia BCE: Minoan, centered on the island of Crete; Mycenaean, centered on mainland Greece; and Cycladic, centered on the islands of the Cyclades (Cullen 2001). The geographical landscapes and cultural trajectories of the region were highly diverse, and different ethnic groups interacted and/or coexisted, as indeed was the case all across the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East at the time (see contributions in Laffineur and Greco 2005; Aruz et al. 2008). Settlement patterns and social developments differed over space and time, encompassing rural communities bonded through kinship; chiefdoms; stratified palatial states; towns evolving prior to, alongside, and long after the collapse of palatial systems; and sites with specialized functions (such as ports, sanctuaries, rural farms, dams, fortifications, and industrial installations). The spectrum of cultural accomplishments included prosperous farming economies; thriving trade and seafaring; politics and diplomacy; military skill and warfare; literacy and bureaucratic administration; advanced technologies and crafts; sophisticated art; and elaborate religion and ritual. Long-term occupation of important sites across the region, including the palatial centers themselves, attests to the special power of these places (cf. Haggis 1993; Day and Wilson 2002), as does the use of their cemeteries over many generations. The links of people to their territory would have been felt on economic, social, ritual, and emotional levels alike. In this variegated world a range of roles and related symbolisms—evident in the imagery, paleoenvironment, and material culture of the period—can be inferred for Aegean women (see contributions in Kopaka 2009b).

Starting with the pioneering article of Lucia Nixon (1983), archaeologists working on the Aegean Bronze Age have increasingly developed feminist and gender-sensitive approaches. Scholarly publications and academic courses devoted to the topic (see reviews and collected references in Alexandri 1994, 2009; Kopaka 2009b: xvii–xxviii; Nikolaidou and Kokkinidou 2007: 44) have proliferated, as have museum exhibits and

outreach programs. These advances have gone a long way to correct problems of theory and method that had dominated many decades of scholarship: a focus on iconography at the expense of archaeological context, along with simplistic equations of imagery with social reality; anachronistic projections from later periods in Greek antiquity, with exaggerated emphasis on the female roles in religion, myth, and ritual; and outdated notions of matriarchy and matrocentrism, which developed in binary opposition to patriarchal paradigms of the past. Equally important are the scientific and experimental analyses that have shed light on important and hitherto unknown aspects of material and social existence (see especially contributions in Foster and Laffineur 2003, as well as Laffineur and Betancourt 1997).

This essay reviews “gendered” archaeologies of Minoan and Mycenaean women, to demonstrate that a rigorous and theoretically informed focus on women helps us reweave the fabric of ancient societies at large (cf. Barber 1994; Adovasio et al. 2007). Feminist study in Aegean archaeology has been evolving as a three-fold endeavor (discussion and references in Kokkinidou and Nikolaïdou 2009). The first goal is to “resurrect” Aegean women from oblivion and to correct misconceptions caused by a long tradition of androcentric paradigms. The next significant step is to appreciate the varied manifestations of ancient gender, beyond modern stereotypes of “femininity” and “masculinity,” age, or ethnicity. Women cannot be studied as a separate segment of society or an afterthought in scholarship. The ultimate aim is to “people” the Aegean Bronze Age societies—to understand them as communities with human faces (cf. Tringham 1991; Nikolaïdou 2002), with individuality and many layers of identity including, but not restricted to, gendered perceptions and behaviors.

In what follows, I will flesh out some of the many roles of women in the prehistoric Aegean. The richness and complexity of the topic far exceed the scope of this essay, however, so my discussion merely touches upon some important areas of analysis, including architecture and spatial organization; subsistence and craft; burial practices; fertility and health; costume and appearance; artistic representation of religious symbolism and of ritual behavior.

It is useful at the outset to place our understanding of women within the wider epistemological context of Aegean scholarship (reviewed in Nikolaïdou and Kokkinidou 1998). Over the course of almost 150 years the discipline has proceeded from an “epic” view of the Bronze Age as the archaeological verification of Homer (and, by extent, as a prelude to Greek antiquity) to a strong interest in historical “objectivity” (to be gained through “scientific” testing of material data instead of reliance on literary testimony) and then to critical reflections that challenge the paradigms of objectivity and of a single archaeological “truth.” In the earliest, “heroic,” models, women were cast in roles familiar from Greek epic and mythology, along the lines of cross-cultural syncretism: goddesses, queens, mothers of heroes, slaves—with male political supremacy taken for granted.

In its turn, the positivist spirit of New Archaeology and Marxism, from the 1950s onward, opted for “infrastructural” questions of subsistence and productive relations at the expense of “epiphenomena,” such as gender, that have social and symbolic ramifications. Again, men were assumed to be the prime motivating forces and agents of cultural process—whether in politics or production—while women were relegated to the sphere of religion, an area of minor research importance at the time. Thus, a polarizing association of women with nature/religion and men with culture/society was uncritically adopted across different schools of thought, and persisted well after feminism had entered other

related fields of the humanities, mainly anthropology and classics. It was only with the advance of “postprocessual” archaeologies after the 1980s that archaeologists started to refocus attention on hitherto “invisible” and ignored people and processes (cf. Moore and Scott 1997), including women and gender. The selective, symbolically filtered imagery of the female body, both in its biological and cultural qualities, encodes key concepts about Bronze Age women. And on this embodiment of identities and ideas the following discussion will focus.

1 Ladies, Queens, Leaders: “Gendering Authority”

The early decades of Aegean archaeology were stamped with the larger-than-life personalities of Heinrich Schliemann and Arthur Evans, and the “mythographies” of their groundbreaking discoveries at Troy and Mycenae and at Knossos (for critical re-evaluations, see contributions in Hamilakis 2002, Darcque et al. 2006, and Morris and Laffineur 2007). Schliemann breathed epic life into his findings, among which was the famous “Priam’s Treasure,” a hoard of gold jewelry that was showcased by the young and beautiful Mrs. Schliemann in the fashion of the splendidly adorned goddesses and queens described by Homer. In reality these artifacts date to the early Bronze Age (third millennium), about a thousand years earlier than the city that has been identified as Homeric Troy (Korfmann 2006).

For his part, Arthur Evans envisioned an idealized life at Bronze Age Knossos, inhabited by peaceful, art-loving, and reverent people under the leadership of King Minos, the legendary lawgiver and priest-king, under the auspices of the Great Goddess. The voluminous publication of the *Palace of Minos* (Evans 1964), together with extensive concrete restorations at Knossos, crystallized Evans’ “ecstatic vision” (Zois 1996) into scholarly dogma as a perfect outlet for the escapist and romantic yearnings of his own European world (Bintliff 1984; MacGillivray 2000; Hamilakis and Momigliano 2006). Evans’ Minoan universe was permeated by femininity, elegance, and sophistication, and visualized in the daring reconstructions and evocative labeling of frescoes depicting females (Hitchcock and Koudounaris 2002; Papadopoulos 2005b): “Ladies in Blue,” “La Parisienne,” and “Court ladies and their beaux” acquired a life as creations of the archaeologist’s imagination in the twentieth century (cf. Nikolaïdou and Kokkinidou 2007). Prominently demonstrated in the galleries of the Herakleion Museum, and abundantly reproduced in scholarly publications, mainstream literature, and a thriving industry of tourist paraphernalia and even forgeries, “Minoan ladies” have become “cult” symbols in both the prehistoric past and the present (cf. Lapatin 2002; Simandiraki 2005; Morris 2009).

The perceptive reader today will see through an unsettling discrepancy in this narrative about Aegean femininity: while purporting to acknowledge female authority and celebrate a liberal life of women in the prehistoric past, the narrative subjected women to upper-class European conventions of decorum and social order. For example, Evans postulated a spouse for the King of Knossos and installed her in the “Queen’s Megaron” (Evans 1964: III, 354–90), a set of rooms in the East Wing of the palace, identical in plan but less grandiose and more secluded than the complex he recognized as the king’s suite (Evans 1964: III, 318–48; see critical discussion in Zois 1996). Evans’ identification was based largely on two frescoes from the area. One is a fresco of dolphins, a subject that he deemed elegant and appropriate for the chamber of a lady; this fresco actually belonged to a floor



Figure 3.1 “Dancer” fresco from the “Queen’s Megaron,” Knossos palace. Late Minoan II—Mycenean, fifteenth century BCE. Crete, Herakleion Archaeological Museum. Photo: Nimatallah/Art Resource, NY.

decoration from the upper storey, unrelated to the “Megaron” itself (Niemeier 1987). The other fresco is the fragmentary head and torso of a woman in vivid movement, which Evans interpreted as a “dancer” (Figure 3.1). This image has been persuasively reinterpreted as instead taking the “position of command,” a characteristic posture of imposing figures standing or hovering with one hand outstretched. It is an iconographic formula for representing figures in authority, female and male, in a variety of contexts that involve persons of different age and appearance, groups and isolated figures, or transcendental and “real-life” settings (Davis 1995).

Variations in the imagery built around this formula (i.e., the “position of command”) indicate that leadership and authority in Aegean societies took complex and nuanced expressions rather than conforming to an explicit and standardized ruler iconography, such as is known from contemporary Egypt and the Near East (Davis 1995). It seems that there existed parallel, complementary authorities worthy of respect and visual celebration (cf. Marinatos 1993; Koehl 1995), not only in Crete but also among the Mycenaeans. The Linear B texts found in Mycenaean palatial archives (fifteenth to the thirteenth centuries BCE) record both a hierarchy of male officials headed by the *wanax* (king), and high-profile women whose role is more difficult to define. It is especially difficult to define the role of the mysterious *Potnia*, a term designating a female personage or personages in high power, who could have been deities, queens, priestesses, or a combination thereof (see especially Kopaka 2001). A recent volume of collected papers devoted to the topic (Laffineur and Hägg 2001) illuminates meaningful ambiguities surrounding the title and the personae

associated with it, pointing especially to a confluence between political and spiritual authority—quite different from the Western concept of separation between “church” and “state.”

2 Women, Religion, Power: Ritual Experts and Cultural Facilitators

Authority and rank in Aegean societies have too often been uncritically equated with vertical hierarchy and political complexity (Renfrew 1972; Cherry 1984; contributions in Hägg and Marinatos 1987; but see alternative scenarios in Laffineur and Niemeier 1995; Rehak 1995; and Galaty and Parkinson 2007). It is important, however, to keep in mind that power involves not only hierarchical authority—“power over”—but also esoteric power, or “power to” (Miller and Tilley 1984: 5), which is linked to knowledge, values, ritual expertise, and symbolic representation. Cultural aspects of masculinity, femininity, childhood, or “otherness” are integral elements in the web of power relations (e.g., Moore 1988; Conkey 1991; di Leonardo 1991; Kopaka 2009a), which finds complex expressions in religion and symbolism. Far from passively reflecting social reality, spiritual and ritual behaviors can shape cultural attitudes, support or subvert an established order, and interfere with strategies of domination and resistance (cf. Turner 1974; Bell 1992; see contributions in Kyriakidis 2007). This is especially the case in traditional and ancient societies organized around cyclical concepts of life, where rituals punctuate the periodicity of material and social reproduction and the leadership of spiritual “facilitators” is deemed crucial to the welfare of the community (Eliade 1959; Rowlands 1993). It is within this framework that we can best understand the well-documented prominence of Aegean women in the area of religion and ritual.

The worship of a goddess or goddesses with multiple qualities constituted a major aspect of religion throughout the Aegean Bronze Age, variously manifested in elite, urban, domestic, and rural cults/ceremonies of public and private character alike (Goodison and Morris 1998a; Laffineur and Hägg 2001). In these contexts women figure as deities, adorants, officiating priestesses, and ritual performers, in a variety of media (Marinatos 1984, 1993; Verlinden 1984; Goodison 1989; Pilali-Papasteriou 1989; German 2005; Alexandri 2009). Connotations of prestige and authority abound, for example in the scenes of divine females in the “position of command” or seated and receiving adoration.

Linear B documents from the Mycenaean palatial archives indicate that priestesses enjoyed economic and administrative privileges, and performed an important range of civic and spiritual functions (Kopaka 1997). The prestigious, even royal, status of sacerdotal women is most strikingly documented in the lavish female burial from Tholos A in Archanes, where the occupant—splendidly dressed and furnished with luxury items, including several gold signet rings—received an extravagant (and symbolically powerful) sacrifice of horses and bulls. Women performing funerary sacrifices are depicted on the contemporary limestone sarcophagus from Ayia Triada in Crete (Long 1974), while richly attired women involved in ritual acts are depicted on frescoes from the palaces of Mycenae, Tiryns, and Thebes (Kritsali-Providi 1982; Demakopoulou 1988). Notwithstanding the significant evidence on the religious roles of males as well (Marinatos 1984, 1993; Warren 1988; Koehl 1995), the ritual exaltation of women constitutes a long-standing tradition with important cultural implications.



Figure 3.2 “Lady of Phylakopi,” terracotta figurine from Melos. Mycenaean, fourteenth century BCE. Melos, Archaeological Museum of Plaka. Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

The so-called Lady of Phylakopi (Figure 3.2) was produced in the context of household and town cults that are best attested archaeologically from the fourteenth century BCE onward (Gesell 1985). This is a large clay idol from the Mycenaean communal sanctuary at Phylakopi in Melos. The “lady” once stood in a niche, a focal point for ritual, in a double shrine that she shared with a male deity (?) represented by a large ithyphallic figure (Renfrew 1985). Her hands, now missing, would have been raised in the characteristic gesture of the “goddess with upraised arms,” a widespread iconographic convention for representing female figures of the later Bronze Age that signifies blessing, reverence, or benign authority (Alexiou 1958; Gesell 1985).

Other well-known examples in this tradition include figures from late Minoan shrines at the palace of Knossos and the settlements at Gazi and Karphi, and the long series of the Mycenaean Psi figurines, including the important assemblage from the Lower Akropolis in Tiryns (illustrations in Demakopoulou 1988). The key stylistic features shared, albeit in regional variations, by all these figures are beautifully showcased in the “lady.” First, there is differential treatment between the lower and upper part of the body, the former

wheel-thrown and schematically rendered as a vessel and the latter plastically modeled with a lesser or greater degree of realism to indicate the female breasts or bust. Second, emphasis is given to the face, sometimes disproportionately large in relation to the body, with vivid and engaging facial expression achieved through large eyes, “smiling” mouth, or face painting. Third, special attention is paid to the rendition of garment, headgear, and ornaments, which are liberally placed on the body, neck, and head of the figure, and which have parallels in both the rich jewelry apparatus (Younger 1992; Nosch and Laffineur 2010) and the representation of textiles on frescoes (Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1971; Tzachili 1986; Barber 1991). Finally, the figures often bear, or are contextually associated with, elements from the natural world, including birds, snakes, or flowers of special sacral significance such as the papyrus and the poppy (Alexiou 1958; Warren 1985; Marinatos 1993).

Breasts and nature associations, gesture, and cultural paraphernalia, including garments and adornment, are focal elements of female imagery across space and time. They can thus be read as materializations of fundamental cultural principles underlying Bronze Age societies. I suggest that women were ritually celebrated in their capacity as nourishers, spiritual experts, keepers of collective memory and tradition, and specialists in important technologies including pottery, weaving, cooking and food management, and possibly also pharmacology and medicine (Kopaka 1997; Nikolaïdou 2002). These technologies played crucial roles in Bronze Age societies, on the levels of household, community, and palace, as sources of sustenance and comfort, as substantial sources of income and wealth, for display in feasts and ceremonies, as ritual votives or equipment, as wedding goods, as diplomatic gifts, and as coveted trade items. Ceramic and textile manufacture, food preparation, plant gathering, and medicinal processing are the key “maintenance” activities that are still primarily (albeit not exclusively) associated with women worldwide (e.g., Murdock and Provost 1973; Barber 1994; Picazo 1997; González Marcén et al. 2008). Beyond “remedial” task attribution, however, we may best evaluate Minoan crafts in terms of complementary skills (Kopaka 1997; cf. Brumfiel 1991; Bevan 1997), pertaining to gender, age, class, and individual charisma.

3 Crafters, Nourishers, and Providers

Not only workers and consumers but also raw materials, time, knowledge, and products participate in an “engendered universe of activities” (Kopaka 1997: 527–9), where technical expertise condenses and transmits important cultural knowledge and values (Nikolaïdou 2007). Technology also requires the cognitive and social skills for planning, procuring resources, organizing production, learning, applying, and teaching the technical steps, as well as for properly sharing and consuming the finished products (Lemonnier 1992; Pfaffenberger 1992). Technology participates in a universe of concepts and behaviors, including communication, cooperation, tradition, experimentation, display, hospitality, and performance (cf. Helms 1993; Elster 1997). The Aegean evidence suggests that women’s birthing and nourishing capacities were symbolically fused with functions of providing, crafting, and producing.

These associations were visualized very early in a series of anthropomorphic vessels in the shape of a woman holding pots or her breasts and wearing elaborate dress and/or headdress (Fowden 1990; Tenwolde 1992; Goodison 2009). These figures date to the early Middle Minoan period (late third millennium to early second millennium BCE), come



Figure 3.3 Anthropomorphic terracotta vase (“Goddess rhyton”) from Mochlos. Early Minoan III, late third millennium BCE. Crete, Herakleion Archaeological Museum. Photo: Nimatallah/Art Resource, NY.

from cemeteries or settlements, and are interpreted as receptacles for libations (rhyta) or even as the first “Goddess” images. An eloquent example is the rhyton from the cemetery of Mochlos in East Crete (Figure 3.3). What immediately attracts attention is the emphasis on the nurturing elements of the female anatomy: the figure is holding her perforated breasts and possesses a full body (denoting pregnancy and/or abundance?). On closer inspection, we also note the rendition of headgear and the rich garment, indicated by painted designs.

References to female physique and technological skill recur, with variations, across the corpus (Goodison 2009): a very similar figure from Mallia bears even richer designs on her body along with a brimmed hat, also seen in votive figurines from contemporary peak sanctuaries (Pilali-Papasteriou 1989). The “Goddess of Myrtos” features a large pubic triangle and phallic-shaped neck, but also has a large jug, a shape characteristic of early Minoan pottery (Betancourt 1985) and an attribute of other rhyta, too; an example from the cemetery at Archanes wears a conical hat and holds a large jar. The occurrence of female-shaped vessels in different parts of Crete, each with distinct and specialized pottery traditions, points to the significance of this imagery as a visual and symbolic thread connecting populations within and across regions. It is important to remember here the strong communal ethos permeating the find-spots of these vessels: the cemeteries, with their collective burials and related rituals (Branigan 1991), or settlements such as Myrtos, with evidence for sharing between households visible in their layout and the organization of activities (Whitelaw 1983; Tenwolde 1992).

What the anthropomorphic rhyta evoke is a range of crafts and skills that thrived through innovative developments during the early Bronze Age and were apparently invested with conceptual and social value. The potters of the third millennium specialized in demanding and sophisticated forms (e.g., Betancourt 1985), many of which (jugs, cups, spouted jars) were intended for the key liquid commodities of the period: oil, wine, and milk, which were the products of new subsistence practices (Renfrew 1972; Sherratt 1981). Above all, water, critical for sustaining crops and life, would have been treasured in the often-arid landscapes of the southern Aegean. The pouring attributes of the “Goddess” vessels—the shape of the figure itself and the pots that she holds—would thus be meaningful references to these profound experiences of production. Such references were further ritualized through the ceremonial consumption of liquids, already a widespread practice during the early Bronze Age (Hitchcock et al. 2008).

The ample archaeological evidence for feasting at both cemeteries and sanctuaries points to contemporary developments (or changes) in diet and culinary skills; these developments involved a broader repertoire of ingredients and social know-how, which may have been connected to expanding trade networks (Wiener 1987). Wool and leather likewise became increasingly important in the diversified subsistence strategies of the times, and there is evidence for technical and formal refinement in clothing and costume, probably accomplished chiefly by women (Colburn 2008). Female votive figurines from the communal sanctuaries of the period are depicted with special emphasis on elaborate dress and hats, while males sometimes wear shoes (Pilali-Papasteriou 1989).

Craft specialization beyond the household, evident in prosperous early Minoan communities (Day et al. 1997; Day and Wilson 2002), evolved along with expanding regional and palatial hierarchies (e.g., Andreadaki-Vlasaki 1997; Knappett 1997) early in the second millennium BCE. Differential access to resources, knowledge, and products (inferable from the archaeological record) imparted a special social position and/or ritual eminence to expert practitioners (discussion in Nikolaïdou 2002). Such a status can be glimpsed in a variety of material categories; for example in the so-called “potter’s” schematic representation of humans engaged with pots on a series of protopalatial seals (Goodison 1989: 44–6; Younger 1995: 168–9, pl. LXa–d). Some of these seals may have belonged to enterprising potters, who would have chosen the theme as a mark of professional identification in bureaucratic transactions and/or as a signal of pride and prestige.

Other seals, engraved with motifs recognizable as loom weights and textile patterns and/or with figures involved in weaving (Burke 1997) may have belonged to textile manufacturers or associated entrepreneurs—persons of high status in many ancient societies (cf. Brumfiel 1991; Nordquist 1997). Loom weights and whorls are impressed by seals, and the image of the loom was used as a hieroglyphic ideogram (Barber 1991, 1994, 1997). Good archaeological contexts for textile-related activities have been excavated at important settlements across the island—including the complex industrial-administrative quarter Quartier MU at Mallia (Poursat 1983, 1997), Khamalevri in the west (Andreadaki-Vlasaki 1997), and Pseira in the east—and large concentrations of loom weights have come from the palaces of Knossos and Phaistos.

We may further consider that elaborately dressed female figurines from early-Middle Minoan peak sanctuaries may depict producers of fine cloth, skilled women who contributed to establishing particular styles in appearance and other material symbolism, by both producing *and* using their works. These figurines are significantly shown in a highly standardized attire of dress and hats, contrary to the more individualized depiction of male votives (Pilali-Papasteriou 1989). Women’s highly visible and standardized costume

perhaps materialized a strong collective identity of “womanhood” that could have been constructed on many levels: kinship, residence and ethnic/cultural affiliation, age, social maturity, and technical expertise. Whether these shared fashions reflect traditional ties of family and homeland independent of the palaces or whether they present a visual canon of femaleness promoted by the palatial authorities as part of their integrative strategies, this widespread imagery highlights women’s agency in shaping and preserving identities across a spectrum of social possibilities. Peak sanctuaries and other open-air places of worship were the principal loci of communal worship in the early second millennium (Peatfield 1992) and were therefore prime fields for social display, construction of ideals, and negotiations of power (cf. Conkey 1991).

As the domains where the transformation of nature into culture was achieved through organized and collective effort, productive activities would have promoted cultural identity and a sense of “solidarity” (cf. Bevan 1997), shrouded in the symbolisms of an archetypical “female” order (Goodison 1989; Yiannouli 1992; Kokkinidou and Nikolaïdou 1993). The location of weaving and storage facilities deep in the interior of Minoan and Helladic houses indicates the relative inaccessibility of these activities—a spatial formulation of their material, social, and conceptual importance (Yiannouli 1992). Primary access to the resources and acts that ensured the everyday bread and fabric of the family would have been a means of control for those in charge. It is tempting to see women (perhaps the elders of the family) in this role, as suggested by ethnographic examples worldwide (Murdock and Provost 1973; Moore 1986).

4 Bodies and Personae: Archaeologies of Corporeality and Identity

An area of increasing interest in archaeological research considers ancient perceptions of the human body and the multisensory embodiments of these ideas (Hamilakis et al. 2002). The female body, in particular, found various interpretations in Aegean art, ranging from allusive, metaphorical, or synecdochical reference to abstract and summarized rendering, explicit and naturalistic representation, and selective emphasis on anatomy or cultural traits. These symbolic formulations can thus be fruitfully explored to illuminate underlying concepts and ways of life: that is, how women understood their bodies and how the community perceived them; how the body was nourished and cared for; how it became socialized, ritualized, and celebrated; and how it was incorporated into larger schemata and dynamics of power.

In a broad view of Aegean art, there are two major idioms of expression about the body, each employing a rich and diverse pictorial vocabulary. The first idiom encompasses images of motherhood, fertility, and reproduction, with emphasis on their tangible biological components. The other idiom is woven around cultural aspects and focuses on aesthetics, socialization and social standing, and ritual performance. Far from being mutually exclusive, elements from both expressive styles are often fused in one multivalent image (e.g., as in Figure 3.2 and Figure 3.3). That being said, we may distinguish generally between Minoan and Cycladic body imagery on the one hand and Mycenaean or Mycenaean-influenced body imagery on the other. The former matured mainly along social-cultural connotations, while notions of (physical) mothering and nurturing are more abundant and explicit in the latter (cf. Rutter 2003; Olsen 2009).

5 Growing to Be a Woman: Coming of Age, Fertility, Motherhood

A wide range of images can be considered in the general context of female sexuality, fertility, and reproduction. Some are suggestive references: for example, a series of triangular decorated clay plaques from early Minoan Crete may depict female pubic areas (Goodison 1989). The early Cycladic “frying pans”—shallow circular vessels standing on two feet—have also been interpreted as schematic renditions of the female (pregnant?) body, an idea supported by the explicit depiction of the pubic area on many such vessels. We must note, though, that the most plausible function of these enigmatic vessels is as salt-collecting containers, in which case we may be dealing with “female” connotations of production and technology similar to those embodied in the Minoan anthropomorphic rhyta (Figure 3.3). Both artifact types exemplify the recurrent association of pots with “female-gendered” bodies, as seen also in the “nippled” jugs of the Middle Cycladic period (high-spouted vessels featuring plastic “nipples” accentuated with painted motifs—possibly jewelry—at the base of their necks; see Tzachili 1986, 1997). What these different ceramic shapes particularly evoke are pregnant bodies, representations of which are seen in some marble Cycladic figurines (third millennium BCE) with arms resting over a slightly swollen abdomen (see Rutter 2003, with references).

A few other Cycladic sculptures are groups of adults (female?) and children, early forerunners of the *kourotrophos* imagery that is better known from the late Bronze Age. A few more figurines and ceramic depictions of pregnant and birthing women are known from Early and Middle Minoan Crete, as are also votive effigies of babies in some peak sanctuaries. Human, and especially female, reproduction is important not only on the natural but also on social, demographic, economic, ideological, and ethical levels (cf. Bentley 1996). The wish for large thriving families is especially strong in farming and pastoral societies, where wives are chosen for good health, “productivity,” and capacity for parenting and household management. The perforated, pouring breasts and vulvas of Aegean anthropomorphic vessels would have been eloquent visual references not only to the anatomy of birthing and nursing but also to midwifery and nursing skills, crucial areas of female expertise and power.

It was in the Mycenaean period, in particular, that the theme of nurturing woman/mother gained popularity in the well-known type of *kourotrophos* figurines (clay idols of females cradling, carrying, or nursing babies and small children; see Rutter 2003; Shepherd, this volume, Chapter 16). These charming images celebrate childcare, affection, and bonding. Benevolent symbolisms surrounding the tasks of mothering are indicated by the deposition of many such figurines as grave goods (in children’s graves?). The Linear B records of the period provide us with valuable information on family structure in Mycenaean society, in particular the classes of commoner or slave (?) women who, together with their children, were occupied in the palatial textile industries (Olsen 1998, 2009). Such evidence of the everyday existence of “real-life” people provides welcome balance to the generic, idealized imagery of parenthood, childhood, and youth in the artistic repertoire (Rutter 2003). Burials and cemetery sites, many of which have been systematically excavated all over the Aegean from different periods of the Bronze Age, are another potentially rich mine of information on familial ties and the symbolic expressions thereof. Unfortunately, this potential is hampered by the repeated use of many cemeteries for centuries or millennia; the deposition of multiple burials in the same graves, obscuring

the reliable identification of individuals; the scarcity of paleoanthropological and paleogenetic analyses (but see Triantaphyllou 2003; McGeorge 2009); and the biased attributions of sex and age based on “female,” “male,” and “child” grave goods (see also Liston, this volume, Chapter 9; Shepherd, this volume, Chapter 16, and Allason-Jones, this volume, Chapter 34).

Motherhood has been aptly described as the essential “maintenance” activity that ensures physical and emotional welfare for the individual and the community alike (Olsen 1998; Beausang 2005; Kopaka 2009a). Motherhood weaves together the biological capacities for birth, nursing, and caring and the social skills for rearing, educating, and helping the child towards physical and social growth. These two basic aspects of motherhood do not always coincide in one and the same person; indeed, there are many societies where physical mothers play only a part in the “social” mothering of their children—a complex educational process collectively undertaken by experienced adults, be they senior family members, community mentors, or ritual specialists (Pomadère 2009; Younger 2009).

An ivory trio of two women and a girl from Mycenae (Figure 3.4) can be read as a celebration of exactly this type of “social mothering.” A splendid piece of late Minoan craftwork, the group was found in Mycenae and is a luxurious, “exotic” treasure that belonged to a member of the local aristocracy. Traditionally interpreted as a divine triad of two goddesses and a child god (despite the lack of secure contextual information), the group has been fruitfully re-examined with closer attention paid to the gendered and social messages encoded in its rich imagery. The arrangement of the figures conveys an atmosphere of intimacy: the two adult women embrace each other and share a common



Figure 3.4 Ivory female triad from Mycenae. Minoan craftsmanship; Late Minoan I, sixteenth century BCE. Athens, National Archaeological Museum. Photo: Vanni/Art Resource, NY.

cloak, and they gaze attentively at the child, who is placed right in front of them as if under their protective care.

The identification of the small figure as a girl places this composition in the wider context of women-and-girls scenes, an important theme in Aegean iconography and one executed in a variety of precious media, including gold rings and frescoes. Key elements of this imagery, including physique, dress, and activity, encourage interpretation along the lines of female social and ritual education involving mature, skilled mentors and young initiates. The participants are shown in rich attire, consisting of the standardized “Minoan” dress with open bodice and flounced skirt, which identifies the figures as deities or ritual personages. Their bodies are graceful, with slender waists and full breasts that are *not* associated with nursing but rather seem to represent an aesthetic and/or ritualized ideal of feminine physique. The figures engage with each other (as in the Mycenae trio) or act as a group, with the mature females often assuming a guiding or protective role.

On some seals (Rutter 2003: Figures 16 and 17), a mature female figure in ceremonial posture (“goddess”?) is flanked by two young girls in the same stance: are they imitating her? On a gold ring from Mycenae a procession of women and a small girl holding flowers advances respectfully towards a seated goddess, as if the older figures are presenting the child to the divinity, while two other small figures hover in the background (Rutter 2003: Figure 19). A ritual ethos is evident both in the acts represented—offerings, reverence, ceremonial enactment—and in the context and setting of the scenes, notably the frescoes from areas of cultic character, such as Xeste 3 (discussed below). It is not clear whether the women-and-girl iconography represents the actual ceremonies of education and initiation or idealized/divinized perceptions thereof—but perhaps this ambiguity was intentional and all the more powerful. Ritual connotations coupled with the luxurious media of execution (gold, ivory, precious stone frescoes) bespeak the social importance of women’s mentoring and educational skills—and the prestige of the personages actually performing such roles in the community. Artifacts such as the gold ring or the ivory triad are likely to have belonged to women of such elevated status, as is documented by the aforementioned burial of the princess-priestess of Tholos A at Archanes, whose burial gifts included several gold rings decorated with ritual scenes and luxurious pieces of furniture with rich ivory decorations (Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1991, 1997).

The richest and most impressive example of this iconography includes the wall decorations of Xeste 3 at Akrotiri, Thera, a Middle Cycladic (seventeenth century BCE) building of luxurious architecture that had a (partly) ritual function focused on the *adyton*, a secluded sunken area perhaps for ablutions (Marinatos 1984; Younger 2009). The elaborate pictorial narrative depicts complex rituals of initiation and offering, involving youths and adults (female and male) of varying age, maturity, and rank culminating in the divine status of a centrally seated female. The most unusual scenes dramatically enact the female coming of age, with references to menstruation, fertility, and even healing and obstetrics, probably echoing rites that took place in the building itself. These dramas are visualized through differential body development of the figures, hairstyles denoting different stages of youth, and a constellation of symbols including rich costume, jewelry, and flowers with “female” connotations, notably the crocus, used in antiquity as a remedy for menstrual pains but also as an abortive medium (Rehak 1999, 2002; Younger 2009).

Diverse interpretations have been proposed for the Xeste 3 paintings (reviewed in Younger 2009), but I would like to point out the two key strands that, in my view, link together the different episodes and actors: first, the ritualized vestment of a person’s

progress to maturity (biological and social), and, second, the offering of gifts as an integral component of the maturity process and one's social persona—the most valuable offering of all being one's body and self, in splendid ceremonial array and adornment (cf. Nikolaïdou 2007; Colburn 2008). Prepubescent and adolescent girls, male youths, and mature women and men are all shown carrying offerings of flowers and crafted goods, presenting themselves in front of altars and the divinity.

6 The Construction of Identities: Ritualization and Performance

A young priestess from the West House at Akrotiri (Figure 3.5) beautifully embodies the same key symbolisms of initiation, maturity, and offering. Her priestly function is most visible in her special garment, a hairy or leathery cloak that envelops her body and is a

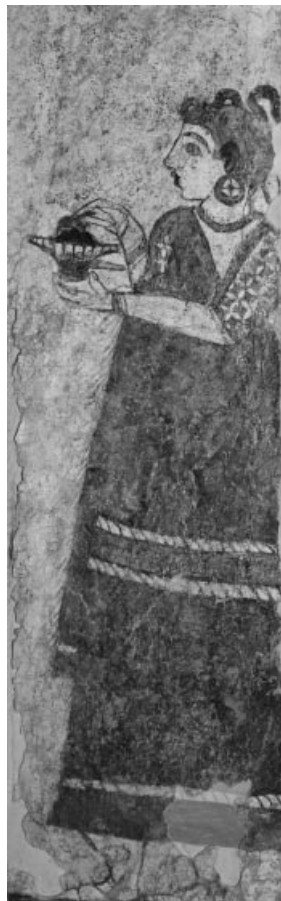


Figure 3.5 Young girl (priestess?) with ritual vessel. Wall painting from the West House at Akrotiri, Thera, Late Cycladic I, seventeenth century BCE. Athens, National Archaeological Museum. Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

well-known attribute of Aegean priestly figures (Marinatos 1993). But other meaningful signifiers surround the figure as well. What one notes first about her are the partially shaved head and the bright red lips and ears. Heads partially shaved and with locks in different stages of growth are a principal iconographic formula for denoting childhood and youth in Aegean art, and apply to both girls and boys; the age of the Thera priestess can accordingly be estimated at prepubescence or early pubescence (Rutter 2003). The color red, well known for its fertility and ritual symbolisms in many ancient cultures (overview in Papaefthymiou-Papantimou 1979, 1997), signifies the ritual status of the figure and implies her coming of age.

Further references to the girl's femininity and imminent puberty may be found in the items she holds: she carries a peculiar vessel, probably an incense burner, on which she sprinkles strands of a substance that has been interpreted as crocus, the multivalent plant that figures prominently in the Xeste frescoes as well as in the votive faience robes from the Temple Repositories at the Palace of Knossos. The gesture and posture of the figure together with her placement on the jamb of a doorway, leading to a big room where an elaborate offering table was ensconced in a niche, indicates that she was conceived as performing an act of offering herself. Significant contextual support is lent by the depiction, in that very room, of two large male youths each holding sizeable bunches of fish and walking towards the niche with the offering table (reconstruction in Marinatos 1984). In addition, the large earring of the young girl further affirms her position in the fascinating repertoire of idealized, and ritualized, images of youth in Aegean art (see Marinatos 1984; Davis 1986; Dumas 1992; Rutter 2003).

The archaeological and iconographic record of Aegean Bronze Age jewelry is extremely rich in its quantities, repertoire of materials, techniques and typology, modes of application, and contextual and pictorial associations. Similarly prolific, and often sumptuous, was the production and consumption of toiletry articles and cosmetics (Papaefthymiou-Papantimou 1979, 1997), as well as of ornate textiles (Barber 1992). Together, ornaments, cosmetic treatments, and elaborate dresses illustrate how powerful a symbol the ornate body was in the Bronze Age, on the many levels of its corporeal, social, and ritual existence.

Ornaments and toiletry articles also figure prominently among the burial goods of women, men, and children, as loving gifts to celebrate the memory and persona of the dead (Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1997: 254–5). We find quantities of such personal artifacts dedicated in sanctuaries as expressions of piety and thanksgiving, as symbols of status and aspiration, as cult paraphernalia, or as instruments in rites of passage that marked the transition to new stages of maturity, profession, or ritual involvement (Watrous 1996). Figurines of adorants, women and men, from these same cult places are modeled wearing different types of jewelry (Verlinden 1984; Pilali-Papasteriou 1989) as are the persons depicted in a wide range of ceremonial acts: dance, ecstatic worship, offering, sacrifice, funeral rites, lament, initiation, and athletic performance, such as bull-leaping and boxing (Immerwahr 1990; German 2005).

In the “liminal” zone of ritual, where such activities took place, boundaries were permeable, as is indicated, for example, by the use of the same types of jewelry for men and women (e.g., Papaefthymiou-Papantimou 1997), the deposition of “female” artifacts (jewelry, loom weights) in male tombs and vice versa, the appearance of male figures in “female” dress (for hieratic “androgyny” see Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1971), and the ambiguous depiction of the “acrobats” in the famous Toreador Fresco at Knossos with male attire but with emphasized breasts and light skin color (Alberti 2002). The Aegean

evidence invites more complex readings that do not rely on the customary male-versus-female dichotomy. Gender categories can be fluid, and were variously perceived as functions of age, social affiliation, profession, individual talent, and ritual involvement, as well as in the context of myth and religious belief. Thus the quest for Minoan and Mycenaean women, an endeavor once thought as futile as that for Penelope's warp, becomes Ariadne's guiding thread through the complex realities of prehistoric life.

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

The pioneering volume of Krzyszkowska and Nixon (1983) is a major reference point for theory and method in "peopling" the past. The contribution of the Linear B texts is illustrated in Shelmerdine and Palaima (1984). On religious sites, a good reference work is Rutkowski (1986). In the area of burial, the publication of Papadopoulos (2005a) brings analyses of artifacts, spatial organization, and paleoanthropological and paleoenvironmental examination together with a theoretically informed discussion of identity, gender, and status as expressed in funerary rituals. Branigan (1993) offers an engaging narrative based on rigorous fieldwork. A modern female visitor's perspective is found in Hoe (2005). The wall paintings of Akrotiri have been beautifully published in Doumas 1992. Textiles are the focus of some of the most interesting gender-informed work, for example in Anderson and Nosch 2003.

There has also been welcome interest in the historiography of pioneer women archaeologists and contemporary women professionals, in an effort to assess their scholarly and social presence in the wider epistemological context of the discipline (Alsebrook 1992; Bolger 1994; Nikolaïdou and Kokkinidou 1998; Picazo 1998; Cullen 2005; Allen 2009; D'Agata 2009; Kokkinidou and Nikolaïdou 2009; Tsipopoulou 2009).

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