

The Palaikastro Kouros: A richly carved Late Minoan ivory statuette

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This paper looks in turn at the excavation, construction, and reconstruction of the Palaikastro Kouros, architectural context, and then explores what can understand about wider social and cultural contexts.

Excavating the Kouros

The shattered and burnt fragments of the Palaikastro Kouros were uncovered between 1987 and 1990 at Roussolakkos in Eastern Crete. The remains were deposited in levels suggestive of considerable violence and destruction of property during the early 15th century BC, the Late Minoan IB period. The torso fragments and leg fragments were found in two separate areas, suggesting the figurine had been broken in two prior to being shattered, and the scatter patterns of the fragments indicate both parts of the Kouros had been violently smashed against the sides of building 5, which exited directly to a plateia. Burn patterns show the figurine was smashed prior to the subsequent burning and destruction of the settlement. The gold adornments on the figurine were left in place, not looted, possibly indicating the adornment was seen as an indivisible part of the figurine and destroyed (desecrated?) accordingly.

Making and reconstructing the Kouros

Reconstruction by Moak (MacGillivray *et al.* 2000, pgs: 65-83) reveals an intricately carved ivory figurine standing a metre and a half high. The torso, legs, arms and head are carved from four or five separate hippopotamus tusks/canines. Serpentine forms the upper part of the cranium, the intricately carved ridged hairstyle of the Kouros (fig: 4), and is inset into the ivory of the face, the weight securing the rock crystal eyes within the ivory.

The figurine was jointed with by 47 separate wooden dowels, double or even triple drilled to attain a perfect alignment between the separate ivory sections. Moak believes the waist of the kouros (MacGillivray *et al.* 2000. pg: 71) was carved from wood for the practicality of shaping, jointing and aligning the separate ivory sections, and no ivory fragments resembling a waist have been found. Around a hundred fragments of gold foil were recovered, and have been partly reconstructed as sandles, a belt/kilt and bracelets. There are also deposits of gold specked blue faience which may have decorated the base of the figurine stood.

It is an open question whether the separate parts of the figurine were made by the same artist, allocated within a workshop, or even made in the same location. Given the intricate alignments necessary between the ivory, which needs to be carefully secured to prevent warping, and jointing materials possessing different properties and levels of moisture - serpentine and wood - it is likely that at the very least the kouros was completed within the same workshop to allow continuous alignment checks through the work.

Mark Moak considers the original work as “a marvel of craftsmanship” (MacGillivray *et al.* 2000, pg: 73).

The Appearance of the Kouros

The ivory of the figurine originally had a highly polished surface, which despite burning and abrasion damage is still visible in places. Fine anatomical detailing is also visible, particularly the tendons and blood vessels on the feet and arms. The curvature of ivory tusks perfectly fits the stylised narrow waist and curved back characteristic of male portraiture often shown in Minoan art. Gold accoutrements, the belt, kilt, sandals, and bracelets, added further visual splendour to the figurine. Sinclair (2014, pg: 12) observes that these valuable materials enhanced the aesthetic appeal with their glowing and shimmering lustre, and maintains such materials were the obvious choice for cult objects/statues, “as visible evidence of divine presence and divine sanction” (Sinclair, 2014, pg: 12). Smith and Feldman (quoted in Hitchcock, 2012. Pg: 663), have proposed that the circulation and use of Late Bronze Age art objects, preferentially made from such high-status materials as ivory and blue faience, was symbolic of a cross-cultural “super-elite identity”. In Crete ivory would have been an expensive, rare material from Egypt or Syria, recognised as exotic and out of the ordinary. As would the Egyptian blue faience of the statuette base, inlaid with gold specks and stars. Significant social and cultural messages were being communicated both by the materials used and the highly stylised portraiture.

Zainab Bharani (amongst others) notes how the tendency of western anthropology to search for cultural and social meanings in art potentially reduces art objects “to mere illustrations of that system” (Bahrani, 2014, pgs: 150-153). Bahrani asks for art to not be reduced just to a search for social or cultural meaning, but to be judged in much wider terms including the production of art, the view of the recipient, visibility and perception. These all include a degree of aesthetic appreciation, both to us and to ancient society, and need not detract from our theoretical analysis of that art. The very existence of the kouros in its final form can be argued as a validation of its visual appeal, and to the aesthetic judgements made in its creation. In this way, the Kouros is also a textbook example of the technological sophistication, the “enchantment of technology” proposed by Alfred Gell (1992, pg: 54). The artist is visualising a specific design to fit within established social and cultural genres, using rare and expensive high-status materials with unparalleled virtuosity, to create an image of visual splendour and aesthetic excellence.

The environment of Bronze Age Palaikastro and Eastern Crete

Beyond aesthetic appeal, a work of art and the purpose it serves is dependent on the circumstances of when and where it is seen (Welch, 1997, pg: 167).

The remains of the Kouros were discovered inside and outside of Building 5 in the Roussolakkos site, and excavation has shown that in the late Minoan period access to this building had been reconfigured via an open square, then inside via a stepped entrance leading to a finely decorated and floored vestibule. Jan Driessen (MacGillivray *et al.* 2000, pgs: 89-90) notes that similar axially orientated buildings have been found in (widely accepted) Late Minoan cult shrines. Driessen echoes Colin Renfrew’s observations on ritual, particularly the idea of a processional route requiring “a range of attention focussing devices”, and the idea of exclusive mysteries being revealed within “a special building set aside for sacred functions” (MacGillivray *et al.* 2000, pgs: 89-90). Further evidence of cult ritual includes a polished metabasite boulder, possibly representing a sacred stone, a Baetyl, and a libation pit / lustral basin. Additionally, Cunningham and Sackett (2009, pg: 88) observe room 13, a storeroom, “held plenty of food and drink for local cult celebrations”.

The archaeological evidence (MacGillivray *et al.* 2000. pgs: 21-47) shows building 5 was fronted with finely cut ashlar masonry. Hitchcock (2012. Pgs: 663-671) proposes that the use of such visually

impressive ashlar masonry follows the Bronze Age “International Style” outlined above. In the cross-cultural connections of the Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean the use of such ashlar masonry represented a symbolic display of status, a visible social communication of wealth and power.

The ritual connotations of building 5 suggest the Kouros was housed within a cult centre, the “Town Shrine” as described by Hood (quoted in MacGillivray *et al.* 2000, pg: 89). A public shrine as opposed to a private shrine, because alongside the axial layout, impressive masonry the open entrance to the shrine, Cunningham and Sackett (2009, pgs: 88-89) note evidence of cult throughout whole building 5, not just the cult rooms (1, 2 and 13), and suggest residents of the building were managing the shrine. Also, somewhat obliquely, a paper by Hallager (2009, pg: 15) concludes that a lack of evidence across Late Minoan Crete for recognisable household shrines is linked to the ubiquity of local cult sanctuaries and public shrines. So, whilst possible religious/political/cultural restrictions or explanations are possible, it may simply be that private shrines were not needed.

Related to the settlement of Palaikastro is the late Minoan Mount Petsophas peak sanctuary, about two hours walk, exposed and without a surrounding settlement. Petsophas is identified as a cult centre with a diverse range of votive representations found, many with connections to childbirth (see Zimmermann, 2021) and Minoan small votive male figurines stylistically resembling the Palaikastro Kouros (fig: 5). Links between Minoan Peak Sanctuaries and nearby settlements are commonly accepted, but unlike in Egypt or Mesopotamia these shrines do not house one specific deity.

Classical Greek sources (Strabo, Pausanias, Diodorus Siculus...) have clear written references connecting both Palaikastro and Petsophas with the cult of Zeus, with the Petsophas being regarded as Dikte, the birthplace of Zeus (one of many...). Dikte has been linked to a Linear B text recovered on Petsophas, although not entirely conclusively. Classical period evidence from Palaikastro includes the Toplou inscription, found in Itanos, an inscribed hymn to a young Zeus. However, Minoan extra-urban sanctuaries appeared to support several cults/deities, and even though cults can evolve though time this cautions against an assumption that this was a shrine of a single specific deity. Stuart Thorne has observed “the conflation of different birth traditions about Cretan Zeus is a hazardous procedure” (MacGillivray *et al.* 2000. pgs: 21-47).

How could the Kouros have been perceived in the Minoan world?

The evidence tentatively suggests the Kouros the representation of a deity, housed in a prestigious shrine. If so, how did the kouros interact with individuals in the Bronze Age Minoan world? All art objects / representations can possess a degree of agency as part of the living fabric of a society, affecting the culture and actions of the individuals. If the Kouros was a youthful Bronze Age representation of Zeus it could have held enormous prestige, and as a focus for cult and ritual might have brought economic benefit and status to Palaikastro, its home. Cunningham and Sackett note the extent of Bronze Age cult activity across the site could have made this the “holy city” of Classical Greek sources (Cunningham and Sackett, 2009, pgs: 81-97). However, the lack of persuasive evidence for continued cult activities between the late Bronze Age to the classical period (Cunningham and Sackett, 2009, pg: 97), a timespan of 200 to 500 years, and the absence of a corpus of literature from Bronze Age Crete hampers attempts to definitively link the Bronze Age settlement and its rituals to Classical literature. And when discussing iconographic and mythological continuity, the understandable tendency for historians to look backwards (no matter how valiantly resisted, particularly Stuart Thorne) to the Bronze Age for origins of Classical Greek culture seems to be an issue.

We can establish what the kouros was made from, how it was made, and (probably) where and by whom it was made. Also, as Karen Sonik says, we can visualise how in the proximity of the Kouros, a masterpiece of art representing a deity, a viewer's emotions and senses might be potentially affected (Sonik, 2009, pg: 545). However, we cannot say why it was made, or for whom, the social and cultural context of the Kouros. We lack translations of the Linear A script, and Linear B texts are primarily administrative notes, so unlike art of Ancient Mesopotamia or Egypt we have no extensive literature to examine the rituals surrounding the deity, the cultural and religious milieu. We do not know what rituals were attached to the Kouros, if it functioned as an intermediary, and what agency the Minoans ascribed to it. We have no dedicatory inscription for us to interpret naming the Kouros, and when the Kouros and surrounding settlement were destroyed, we have no record of by whom and why, just destruction levels in the archaeological record. Possibly we can speculate on whether this may have been a resisted elite or imported cult, or an iconoclastic clash of cultures, but we cannot examine this or the ritual and social context of Minoan Crete in the same way that Zainab Bahrani has examined Ancient Mesopotamian art via their literature. We can only interpret the archaeological record as best we can.

Illustrations:

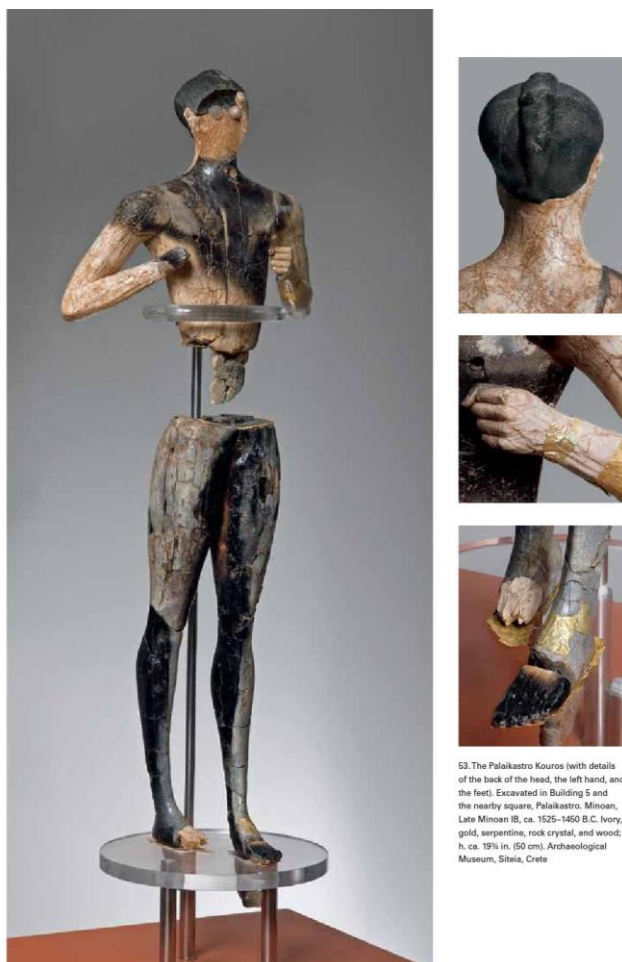


Fig: 1. The reconstructed Kouros as displayed in Sitia (Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, Spring 2012 volume LXIX, Number 4. Accessed online on 6 March 2012).

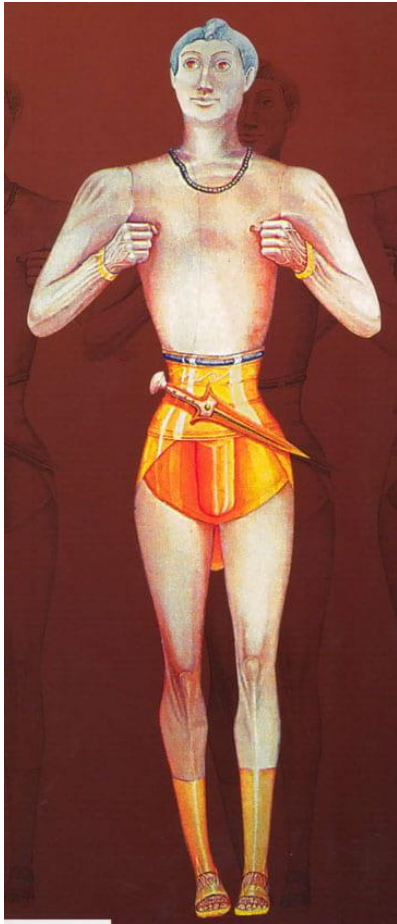


Fig: 2. Moak's impression of the appearance of the Kouros (MacGillivray *et al.* 2000, plate K).

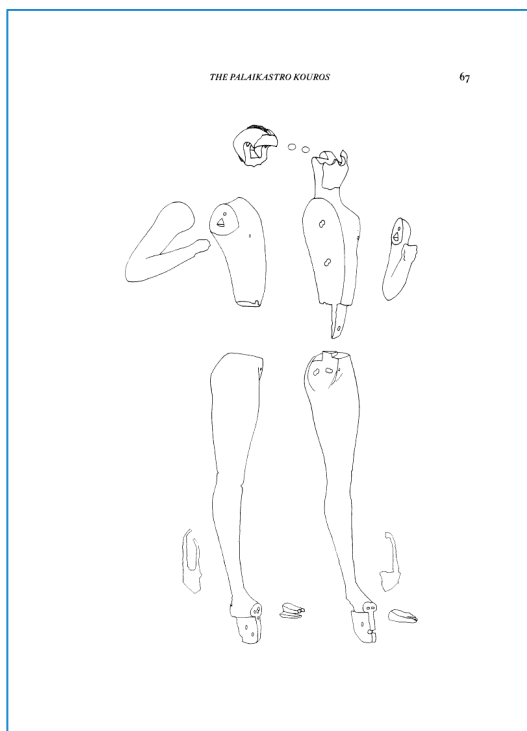


Fig: 3: Constituent ivory parts of the Kouros (MacGillivray *et al.* 2000, pg: 67).

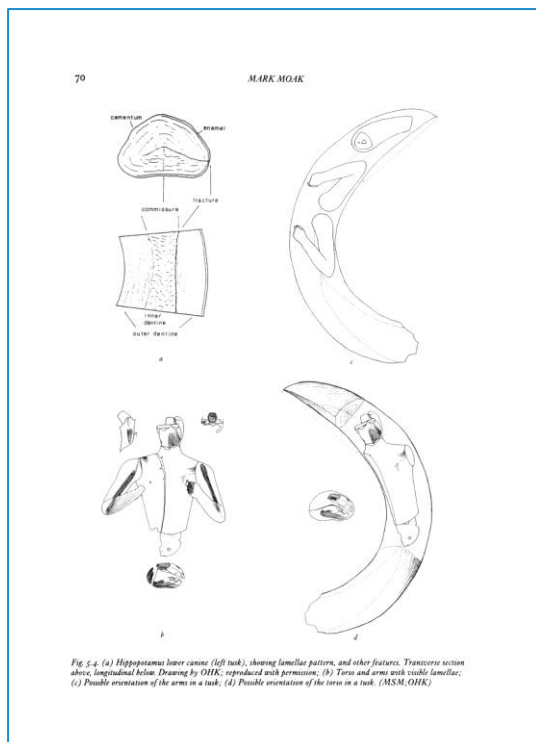


Fig: 4. Probable usage of Ivory in carving (MacGillivray *et al.* 2000, pg: 70).

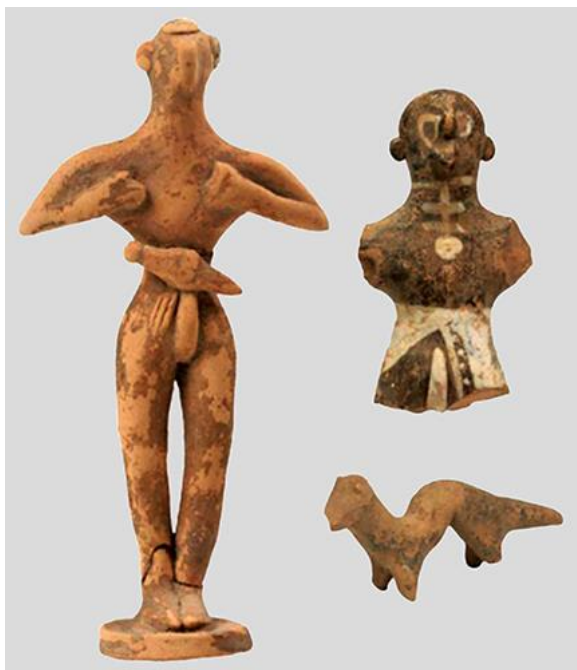


Fig: 5. Votive representations from Petsophas, including Male figurine (Dimopoulos-Rethemiotaki, 2005, in Murphy, C. "Solid Items made to Break: or breakable items made to last?" Accessed online on 6 March 2022).

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