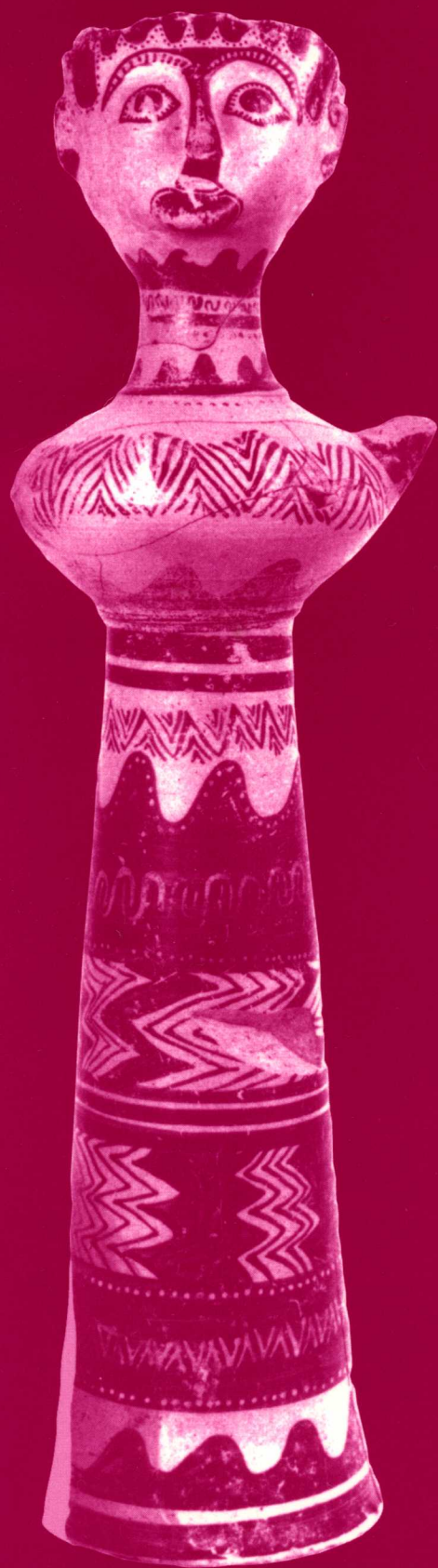




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Material engagements: studies in honour of Colin Renfrew

Edited by Neil Brodie & Catherine Hills

'Art makes visible': an archaeology of the senses in Minoan élite art

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Art does not reproduce the visible, it makes visible. (Paul Klee)

In his recent book *Figuring It Out*, Colin Renfrew invites us to think outside traditional boundaries by bringing archaeology and modern art together in ways that inform and enrich our understanding and appreciation of both. One of the many themes to emerge from this unusual juxtaposition of disciplines is an acknowledgment of the importance of making use of the full range of senses in both art and archaeology. It is this insight which I take as my starting point for a discussion of 'ecstatic' imagery on gold rings and seal-stones produced on the island of Crete in the Late Bronze Age. By bringing to the foreground a more explicitly sensory or experiential approach to the material past, I argue that the Minoan artists intended to communicate not only the *external* physicality of such ecstatic behaviours, but also some of the physiological sensations and culturally shaped experiences from the perspective of the participants, offering a glimpse into a non-mundane world felt and experienced by real Minoan individuals.

Doing archaeology and interpreting evidence is more than a cerebral activity. The archaeologist — perhaps like the artist — regularly inhabits a very physical world, one of both highly personal and of shared experience: the textures and colours of soils, the sensations of enclosure and darkness crouching in a tomb, or the cold smooth touch of a marble figurine held in the hand. As Renfrew notes, archaeologists tend (at least in their publications) to play down this experiential side of their work. We emphasize instead the rational and logical processes, which lend professional authority to our work: the neatly numbered layers of a trench, the sorted and labelled fragments of pottery, or, as seen through the eyes of a colleague's young son, the endless list making! If we have been hesitant about expressing pleasure in our encounters with the material past or have tended to relegate the information gathered by our senses to a dark corner of the interpretative process, then it is unsurprising that scholarship has been equally slow to attribute importance to the physical sensations of being-in-the-world as experienced by past peoples.

The large and sophisticated bibliography dealing with the 'body' might seem to bring us closer to an archaeology which is alert to the senses. Yet this important field of study conceptualizes the body as a cultural category on and through which meaning is inscribed and encoded, and it accords primacy to a single sense, that of seeing; hence the interest in visual strategies of power and display, in the image and the gaze, and in 'viewing' the past (Porteous 1990; Tuan 1979). Indeed the tyranny of the visual mode extends into the very way we communicate. We tend to use visual language (for example, 'I see what you mean') to express sensory, cognitive and affective data, a fact I became acutely aware of when trying to avoid such vocabulary in writing this paper.

Placed under the scholarly lens the body becomes a site to be viewed and 'read' as text-metaphor. But Renfrew's encounters in the parallel world of modern art offer a salient reminder that seeing is but one mode of engagement with an artwork, only a part of a richer experience which may include such sensations as space, smell, movement and sound. This approach resonates with that of embodiment as developed within philosophy and anthropology (Johnson 1987; Rorty 1979; Csordas 1990), which lays emphasis on 'the full complement of senses and feelings' (Strathern 1999, 2), and creates space for feeling and sensual bodies (Asad 1997; Seremetakis 1994; Stoller 1989; 1997). Importantly too, the approach recognizes the complex interplay of our different bodies actively situated within the matrix of culturally specific contexts: the individual experiencing body, the socially constructed, symbolic body, and the collective body politic.

The call to 'repeople' the past with embodied individuals reasserts a view almost as old as the discipline of archaeology itself: that the central focus of our study is not digging up things but people. The questions though are reshaped to engage with aspects of embodiment and personhood such as the clothed and perfumed sensual body or hybridity, themes which fascinate and concern us now at the dawn of the twenty-first century (e.g. Meskell & Joyce 2003).

In his study of the Phylakopi shrine on the Cycladic island of Melos, Renfrew (1985) briefly drew attention to 'experience-inducing devices' such as music, lighting effects, and perhaps drink as key elements of ritual, though such embodied actions were for him only implied through the presence of artefacts appropriate to such activities — musical instruments, lamps, and drinking vessels. More recently a concentrated focus on the 'archaeology of the senses' has led to exploration of previously neglected topics from acoustics and colour (Jones & McGregor 2002), the importance of bodily sensations of heat and light (Goodison 2001), to the key role that the senses of taste and smell play in evoking social and ritual memory (Hamilakis 2002).

Second-millennium BC Crete was home to the palatial society conventionally termed Minoan, and in common with many complex societies elite art and architecture served to express and reinforce the identity and

power of the ruling group. The creation of both portable art in a range of materials (e.g. precious metals, textiles, faience, semi-precious stones, ivory) and wall paintings is indicative of élite access to and control over precious materials, exotic knowledge and skilled craftsmen. From his comparative study of seven such early societies (which did not include the Aegean), Trigger offers the insight that élite art 'provided symbols for structuring identity, promoted psychological stability, and gave meaning to life' (Trigger 2003, 658). We might also add that such art was made active through élite consumption: the adornment of the body in elaborate textiles, jewellery and perfumes, or the use of highly decorated or specialized artefacts in ritualized activities such as feasting and sacrifice.

On Crete a distinctive feature of the Second Palace period (c. 1700–1450 BC) is an increase in complex, and especially figured, imagery and it has been observed that much of this art depicts élite Minoans engaged in ritual activity. Elegantly clad Minoans step out in processions, engage in presentation of offerings and robing ceremonies, pour libations (liquids) and perform animal sacrifices. It is widely believed also that enacted performances — where, for example, a human individual 'plays' or takes on the role of a deity — are shown in Minoan art. Such formalized activities would have been highly visible, although access to specific rituals, or indeed parts of them, might have been differential: some perhaps being restricted to a narrower more privileged group, others performed before a larger audience.

There are, however, quite different scenes which are referred to as ecstatic, where the real action, the *experience* of contact with the supernatural world, takes place 'off stage' and would have been visible only to the participants. It is surely significant that such scenes seem to be depicted only on rings and sealstones, that is, on small yet precious objects made to be worn on the body and therefore intimately associated with the individual. Before moving on to a discussion which tries to locate this Minoan imagery in a more experiential and sensory world, we should first consider two issues. The first is a problem, the vocabulary modern scholarship uses to discuss 'ecstatic' behaviour or experience. The second is a short discussion of the neurophysiological dimension, the changes in bodily perceptions and sensations which are a decisive factor in shaping such experiences; this will help us to place the Minoan material within a wider context which recognizes a complex interplay between physiological commonalities and the processing of such experiences in a way that makes sense within a specific cultural context.

Terminology first. Discussions of Minoan religion from Arthur Evans onwards use terms such as ecstatic trance, orgiastic frenzy and possession (e.g. Evans 1930, 68–8, 141–2; Nilsson 1950, 275; Warren 1981; 1990; Niemeier 1989; Cain 2001) in relation to the depiction of a range of ritual actions which are interpreted as a means of bringing about an epiphany (a manifestation of a

supernatural being or force). The terms are used interchangeably and without further definition, though 'ecstatic' is the most widely used. The terms used within anthropology and religious studies to define and describe such behaviours are in fact highly contested and there is disagreement about where boundaries can be drawn and whether they fairly reflect actual ritual behaviours (Atkinson 1992).

Evans used a medley of analogies to help him understand the Minoan images, mixing into his interpretative pot the hallucinogenic properties of Vedic soma, inspirational prophecy in the Old Testament, and Saami (Lapp) shamans. He offers this colourful description of a famous drawing of a Saami shaman from Schefferus's influential work *Lapponia* (1673):

The Shamanistic soothsayer, after long chanting, accompanied by the pulsation of his troll-drum, has fallen in the same ecstatic state of possession, face downwards on the ground, swooning like a dead man, with the instrument over the back of his head and shoulders (Evans 1930, 315).

Here Evans uses 'shaman', 'ecstatic', 'possession' all together, even though the shaman here is *not* possessed (i.e. a passive receptacle or medium, possessed by another) but rather is engaged actively in a trance journey where he sees and communicates with supernatural forces such as spirits or ancestors. 'Shamanic' is another widely used term and it has come to be used in a very broad sense in modern scholarship. Unfortunately, it is a term which evokes strong reactions. As is well known, the word is derived from the Siberian term 'saman'. Some scholars have argued that the term should be reserved for this classic shamanic complex of the Siberian-Arctic region and areas which can be shown to be directly influenced by them, a position most forcibly adopted by Kehoe (2000). The contrary position is that the term, *as used*, is already a western construct, 'an artful reification of disparate practises' (Taussig, cited by Atkinson 1992, 307) and that the central feature of shamanic rituals is that they treat the body as a vehicle for communicating with the extra-human or supernatural world by moving into an altered state of consciousness. In this sense Minoan ritual *can* reasonably be said to include shamanic elements. By using this familiar (if controversial) term we can highlight the important fact that such behaviours are a significant and highly valued element in accessing and experiencing the supernatural in many societies, past and present, and that it is all too easy to undervalue both the sensory dimensions of these encounters and their social importance. Nor should such practices be thought of as only typical of non-complex societies, since scholars have identified shamanic practices in association with élites in Chinese and Maya contexts (Chang 1993; Freidel 1992; Schele & Freidel 1990; Schele & Miller 1986).

A more neutral, if less evocative, term in common use is altered state of consciousness (ASC) that is, a non-ordinary bodily state in which sensations, perceptions, cognition and emotions are modified. Here then I use shamanic and ASC as terms which describe a spectrum of related trance and meditational behaviours (Walsh 1989; 1990); what they are *not* intended to be

is a reductionist frame of reference which undervalues the nuanced interplay between multi-sensory experience and the cultural context through which these embodied encounters find shape and meaning.

In the Minoan context there has been relatively little discussion of either the underlying mechanisms or experiential character of ASCs, despite the fact that they are firmly rooted in bodily actions and sensations. The techniques for inducing an altered state are many and varied: fasting, sensory deprivation or focusing, repetitive rhythmic movement and sound (especially from rattling and drumming), and use of drugs are all recognized methods for inducing altered states of consciousness. The choice of technique is culturally and historically situated, but the techniques all stimulate similar and measurable neuro-physiological changes in the human body. Recent research within the exciting new field of neurotheology has demonstrated that the altered states of mind experienced and described by ritual practitioners are associated with observable and distinctive neurological activity (d'Aquili & Newberg 1999).

The use of rhythmic movement and intense focusing can be inferred from the Minoan imagery. We might speculate that music and drugs (entheogens) were used also. Rattles and drums are the familiar instruments used in such rituals, the pitch of both being highly effective as sonic drivers for altering brain wave patterns. Rattles (*sistra*) are attested in the Minoan record, from the Harvester Vase and the clay example from Archanes (Younger 1998). Warren has suggested that a pithos with a modified rim from Knossos could have been used as a drum (1981, 166).

Somatic changes facilitate the altered state of consciousness, and since the experience is rooted within bodily perceptions and sensations all humans with a normally functioning nervous system have the ability to access the altered state and there are strong experiential commonalities irrespective of cultural context. A short digression on these physiological features will offer a helpful framework for engaging with the Minoan material. Bodily perception is strongly affected. There may be sensations of floating or taking flight, perceptions of body size and form are distorted; for example, the body may feel elongated, or feel very small or very large (a process familiar from Alice's encounters with mushrooms in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*). Bodily transformation is also common — changing wholly or partially into another form such as an animal.

The senses in general may feel sharpened or heightened, leading to strong sensations of smell, taste or heat and cold. Time perception is altered — the participant's sense of elapsed time is distorted. For example, a long and complex journey may be undertaken in a relatively short 'real' or ordinary time. Visual perceptions are shifted. Vivid visual imagery is experienced with brilliant colours and pulsating, fragmenting patterns and images. Modern experimentation on trance subjects suggests that the visual imagery may



3.1 Drawing of a serpentine sealstone from Knossos. (After Warren 1990, fig. 14. Reproduced by permission of Peter Warren.)

follow a broadly common structure beginning with geometric forms and developing into full-blown iconic imagery and events in which the subject may participate (for application of these ideas to ancient art see Lewis-Williams 1998; Dronfield 1995).

Much discussion has focused on trying to establish a narrative structure within the scenes on Minoan gold rings and the human desire to 'narrativize' is a powerful one (Cain 2001, 32–3). Nevertheless, numerous interpretative problems remain, from the identity of individual figures as human or divine, the narrative format (episodic, synoptic), through to the spatial relationship of elements within scenes. These leave us with a fragmented and ambiguous picture, and much of the time we are, as Cain has observed, 'dancing in the dark' (2001). Here I want to sidestep the problem of narrative

and instead argue that a significant number of the gold rings and some seals 'make visible' the experience of communication with the divine through a shift of consciousness and that such experiences were an important element in elite identity and power. Such a reading of the imagery in no way excludes other layers of meaning since ASC experiences often include elements of mythology or ritual which arise from shared cultural knowledge and expectations.

Since the discussion depends on the imagery of the rings and seals, it is inevitable that we are trapped to some extent within the tyranny of the visual. By adopting an archaeology of the senses we can, however, draw in other sensory aspects of these ritual experiences. We can also question previous readings of the imagery which tend to describe the pictorial elements as external symbols flagging the efficacy of the ritual rather than as a means of communicating the ritual experience.

Both the objects themselves and the images on them engage senses beyond the visual. As objects they are palpable and tactile; they are also small and likely to have been worn close to the body and also touched and handled, so that their physical properties would be much in evidence. Colour, brilliance, translucence even smell could have stimulated the senses. Research in other cultures has emphasized the importance of such elements within a multisensory worldview and the particular role of brilliance and colour in relation to the supernatural and social prestige (Saunders 2001), although fuller exploration of this aspect of the Minoan material culture lies outside the

scope of the present paper.

The ritual activities on the rings and seals are well known as pulling at a tree or branch, hugging a stone, and rhythmic movement usually described as dancing (Plates 3.1–3.3). They are perhaps so familiar to Minoan scholarship that we forget to engage our own senses with the intense physicality of these actions. The figures hugging large stones (considered to be *baetyls*) are crouched and their bodies enclose the object. Since the figures are either semi-naked or naked (Warren 1990) the body is in direct contact with the stone, intensifying the sensory (even sensual) experiences of hard and smooth, and heat or cold. Sensations of heat and cold around the naked body and from the surface of the stone would depend on the location of the stone, season and even the time of day. The presence of trees in some scenes is suggestive of an outdoor location, but the enclosing rocky landscape on a serpentine seal from Knossos (Plate 3.1) could suggest the colder dark environment of a cave (Warren 1990, 198–9).

By contrast, the pulling at a branch or tree invites us to feel a body in vigorous action with limbs extended, and energetic rhythmic movement is a well-known way of inducing an altered state or trance. An auditory dimension should be added here of the rustling sounds of the leaves and branches, calling to mind, for example, the rustling leaves of oracular communication at Dodona in later times. Where both activities are shown together, as on the Archanes and Kalyvia rings, the contrasting bodily postures are thrown into sharp relief but so too is the shared tactile physicality of the activities (Plate 3.2).

Rhythmic movement is best represented by the female figures on the Isopata ring (Plate 3.3), though females similar in dress and posture occur singly elsewhere. A sense of rhythmic motion is expressed through the graceful curves of their skirts. The careful depiction of three distinctive arm gestures, which recur elsewhere in glyptic and in figurines, suggests that purposeful bodily position is again important. Beyond what we see, the outdoor location prompts us to respond to the sense of heat/light, the feel of the ground beneath their (carefully depicted) feet, and perhaps the perfume from the flowers. The elaborately flounced skirts associated with this activity contrast strongly with the unclothed or partially clothed bodies of the huggers and shakers. Auditory senses were perhaps stimulated by the rustling or swishing skirts, and also by the jangling of bracelets which are prominently worn on the arms.



3.2 Gold ring from Archanes.
(Photograph: Greek Archaeological Receipts Fund (TAP)).



Having placed these activities within a feeling world of the senses, let us now shift back to the visual domain. It would be unfair to reduce the rich and insightful scholarship on this material to a single point of view, yet it is the case that the scenes are read primarily as symbolic. Thus objects apparently floating in scenes are said to be emblems or symbols of the deity or an indication that the deity has been successfully summoned: in other words they represent symbolically the efficacious outcome of the performed ritual. Sourvinou-Inwood, for example, describes the floating or airborne

figures as ‘articulating in visible terms what the ritual hoped to achieve, the presence of the deity who is shown as ideally present’ (1990, 195). Nilsson suggests that objects identified as eyes and ears symbolize the ability of the deity to ‘hear and see’ (1950, 287). The imagery is read then from the perspective of the viewer, who is presented with the external shape of the ritual action and symbolically informed about its desired outcome. Marinatos comes closest to the viewpoint adopted here, since she suggests that the small descending figures in some scenes show ‘subjective visions’ of a divine epiphany (1993, 177–9).

I argue that the images represent the ritual action through which altered states were achieved, but that we can better explain a range of problematic features, such as the distorted heads of the figures, and the ‘bewildering dreamlike quality’ of the Isopata ring (Cain 2001, 34) by locating the imagery *inside* the experiential world of the participants. In other words, what we are glimpsing, if only darkly, is the Minoan artist using certain iconographic elements to express the experiences of the participants and thus emphasizing their special and privileged access to the world beyond the here and now. It is important to note that the initial argument rests on the *collective* presence of a range of features, which support this experiential interpretation, although shamanic activities or experiences may be alluded to on a wider range of seals.

It would be difficult — perhaps even impossible — to convey visually a multi-sensory embodied experience, since images or indeed words describing sensations such as pain, ecstasy or orgasm are meaningful in so far as they evoke some part of the sensations or emotions of such experiences. To ‘make visible’ an experience which is directly accessible only to one person, such as a trancer or dreamer, presents an obvious challenge, yet artists in many cultures

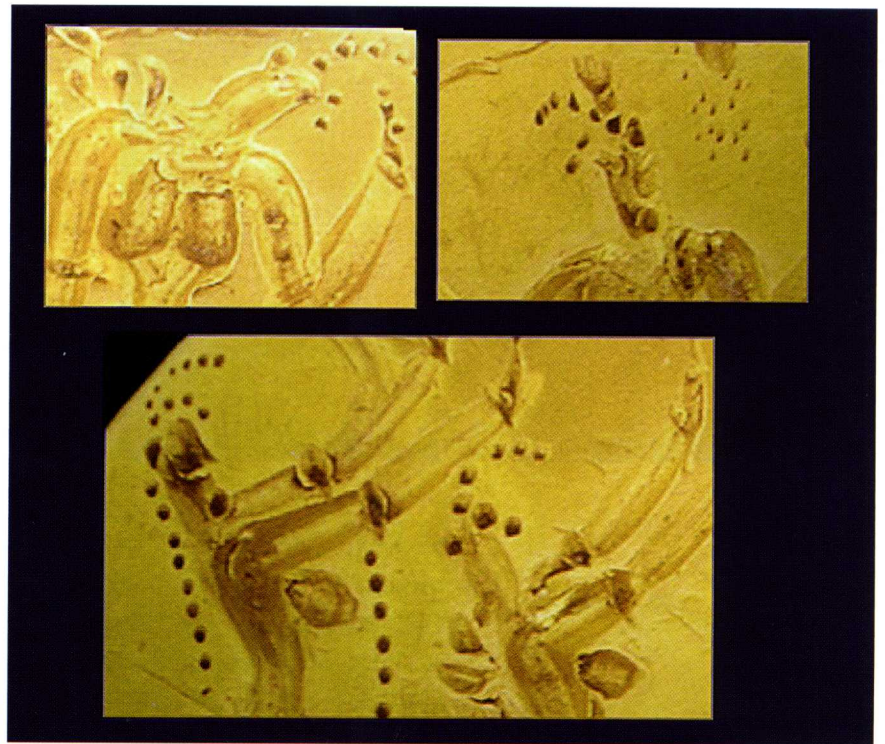
3.3 Gold ring from Isopata, Knossos. (Photograph: Dr A. Peatfield.)

have found ways to communicate the sensations, physicality and culturally shaped outcomes of such experiences.

We may begin by noting that visualization is a major experiential element in most ecstatic and meditative practices, and its importance can be illustrated by the comment that prophecies are given in images as the 'organ of prophecy' (Maimonides, cited in Noll 1985). It has even been argued that visions or 'the cultivation of mental imagery' is the central goal of such practices (Noll 1985). The multisensory nature of the experience is, however, better captured by the anthropologist and neoshamanic practitioner Harner, who argues that although 'visualization is the basic and

minimum sensory experience of the shamanic journey, all the other sensory experiences — hearing, smell, taste, and touch — also commonly come into play' (Harner 1985, 452). Within the ASC visual imagery is intensely experienced and while the visionary content cannot be directly shared it can be translated into an artistic idiom more readily than other aspects of the experience. Only aspects of what can be a complex and intense experience could be expressed in single images, and the imagery could also be deliberately ambiguous or mystical if the full meaning of the experiences might properly be shared only with a privileged few.

How might an artist meet the challenge of representing not only the visionary content but also other aspects of the experience of a shamanic state? This is where the shared physiological features of such experiences can be applied to the Minoan material. Scholars have long commented on the strange blobby heads of many figures on rings and seals, sometimes calling them 'aniconic'. Niemeier has argued convincingly that this is a distinctively Minoan feature which can help to distinguish Minoan from Mycenaean gold rings (Niemeier 1989). It can of course be argued that the 'blobby' heads are a factor of the miniaturist scale of the objects, yet heads (and other minute details) are sometimes shown in considerable detail suggesting that this was not beyond the technical capabilities of the artist. Indeed, some of the heads are not simply blobby but might even be described as distorted or even non-human; the Isopata heads, for example, look almost bird or insect like and rows of dots seem to rise around and upwards from the heads (Plate 3.4). Similar features are shared by other rings, as already suggested elsewhere



3.4 Details of the heads of the four large female figures on the Isopata gold ring. (Photograph: Dr A. Peatfield.)



(Morris & Peatfield in press), these could be artistic conventions for showing the physical shift into an altered state. A common physiological feature in altered states is the experience of feeling a focus of heat or energy in the head, or even the sensation of the head opening or splitting. This is vividly described in numerous contexts, which help to convey the intensity of the sensations:

My skull is like a drum, the singing is in my very ear, inside my head — the bright darkness floods up through my body, reaches my head, engulfs me. (Deren 1953, 260)

Such experiences seem also to be expressed in other artistic traditions which present the head as distorted or show lines and rays flowing out of it (Halifax 1982, 80; Whitley 1992, 101, fig. 10; Price 2001).

The distortions of the head are here interpreted as indications of the shift of self, of both mind and body, into the altered state. Another widespread element in these experiences is the idea of transformation, or the collapsing of boundaries of the self. Individuals in deep meditation often report feeling at one with the universe and the physiological correlates of this can now be mapped within the brain (d'Aquili & Newberg 1999). Experiences of complete or partial (hybridity) transformation into another creature, often able to fly or move at great speed, are characteristic of trance practices over a wide area, though the specific forms the creatures take is strongly shaped by cultural knowledge. On Minoan rings the presence in a number of scenes of butterflies, dragonflies and a chrysalis is significant in this context. They are creatures of flight and the transformative dimension is made explicit through the image of the chrysalis. The dragonfly is of particular relevance here, since it hovers or skims the surface of water (moving on the boundary between air and water) and it is also vibrantly iridescent (so shifting between colours). Zeimbekis (2002) has drawn attention to these features in relation to the dragonflies being expressive of liminality on the necklace of the goddess on the Xeste 3 fresco from Thera. The idea of liminality is further expressed on the rings and seals, where the participants occupied with tree-shaking and rock-hugging are naked or semi-naked. Such liminality ritually separates the participants and may also enhance/express the potential for the dissolving of boundaries of self and of penetrating the veil between the mundane and the world beyond.

Images of flight are a striking feature of the rings and the concept and sensation of flight is central to shamanic states. The bird, apparently moving at speed, on the Sellopoulo ring (Plate 3.5), and the butterfly and dragonfly elsewhere are expressive of experiences of flight and perhaps also

3.5 Gold ring from Sellopoulo, Knossos. (Photograph: Dr A. Peatfield.)

transformation within the altered state. Most striking is the gold ring from Tholos B at Archanes (Plate 3.6), on which a griffin and a female figure take flight together, sweeping across the circular field of the ring. Here the sensation of flight is clearly expressed and flight with the griffin (a fantastic creature but one familiar within the Minoan worldview) locates the experience firmly in the realm of the supernatural. The hybrid figures on seal-stones may also be relevant here, since these evoke transformation/collapsing of boundaries and often emphasize flight through raised wings and fanned tail feathers. Are they 'bird goddesses' or is the imagery also a culturally shaped product of shamanic visions?



Flying and also floating images are features commonly experienced in altered states.

Alongside birds and butterflies, eyes and masks, and also wavy rope-like images and small scrolls are widely reported by participants. The latter are thought to arise from chemicals acting directly on the nerves. Precisely such features are depicted on the gold rings; the Isopata ring (Plates 3.3 & 3.4), for example, has an eye and wavy lines, while the Archanes ring (Plate 3.2) shows two insects in flight and an eye. Rather than standing as external symbolic markers of ritual action the floating elements in the Minoan scenes may be thought of as elements of experienced vision in which the physiological commonalities have been shaped into culturally relevant forms.

The small floating or airborne figures in many of the scenes have been taken as the primary evidence of epiphany, that is the appearance of a deity in human form in response to the ritual. Sometimes they seem to hover, in other cases flight and speed are implied, as, for example, on the Isopata ring where the small figure has flying tresses of hair suggestive of swift movement. The scholarly emphasis on the arrival or appearance of the deity has distracted attention from an equally importance feature of the scenes, the *interaction* between the small floating figures and the larger figures. The participants are shown accessing and experiencing the divine in a highly personal way through ritual action. An interesting analogy can be drawn with Maya elite rituals where bloodletting practices induced visionary trance and the supernatural figures (ancestors) are shown communicating with the practitioner (Schele & Miller 1986, 177–8).

There is clear evidence for the Minoan elite's intense interest in expressing control over ritual, especially in the Neopalatial period when there is an increase in ritual paraphernalia and imagery, and stronger links develop

3.6 Drawing of gold ring from Archanes tholos tomb B. (Drawing by Jenny Doole. After Sakellarakis 1991, fig. 68.)

between peak sanctuaries and palatial centres (Moody 1987; Peatfield 1987). Many of the gold rings belong to this time frame though some remained in circulation beyond this time. Ritual action and performance is emphatically shown in a range of media including the frescoes, but imagery in a 'shamanic idiom' is reserved for objects of a specifically personal nature (rings and seal-stones). Gold, the most precious of materials, is used for the rings, and the exquisite miniaturist skill of making and carving the rings invokes something of Gell's idea of the technology of enchantment.

All of this underlines the importance of such experiences and the desire of the élite to memorialize them through imagery. Direct access to the supernatural (whether gods, ancestors or spirits) through altered states confers status on the individuals privileged to experience it, allowing a claim to special knowledge and information, such as divination or healing. The underlying idea of restricted access to the supernatural through direct bodily experience can be paralleled in many cultures, though details of the rituals, the means inducing altered states, visionary content and the nature of the supernatural are all culturally contingent. In Minoan palatial society, as in other cultures, such practices can provide a strong source of power since they tap into fundamental human needs to make sense of the world and are particularly difficult to challenge. Beyond issues of élite power, the gold rings offer a glimpse into a feeling and sensory world of Minoan experience, which art has made visible.

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