

## Experiencing ritual: Shamanic elements in Minoan religion

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### *Introduction*

RITUAL HAS ALWAYS been a popular subject of study in archaeology and anthropology. Early ethnographers relished the details of its drama, and early archaeologists found it a convenient explanation for those finds they could not explain. More sophisticated modern scholars ponder the symbolic complexity of its action, and debate its social function. And yet, in all of this, there has been relatively little focus on the experience of ritual. What was it like to do any given ritual? What sort of experience were the participants trying to elicit from themselves? How did they modify the infinite possibilities of human action to create that experience?

### *Philosophy and the body*

Another fashionable subject in contemporary cultural studies, which has close affinities with ritual, is the body. Here we find many of the same problems. Though much scholarship on the body does proclaim the need to break free of Platonic and Cartesian mind/body oppositions, scholars still sustain implicitly the hierarchical dominance of the mind, in that the body is perceived of as being essentially a cultural category, constructed through language. The debate is focused on how descriptions of the body are socially and intellectually defined, and encoded. Even among those who do acknowledge the power of the body, such as Michel Foucault, a single sense, that of seeing, is typically attributed primary importance; hence the interest in the visual strategies of power, in display, in the image, in the gaze, and in the primacy given to 'viewing' the past (Porteous 1990, Tuan 1979).

Absent from such analytical discourse is the lived physicality, the being-in-the-world, or the multisensual experience of the whole body as opposed to the scholarly body (re)presented as text or metaphor. To address our interest in the experiences of ritual we must turn instead to another major theoretical approach,

that of 'embodiment', as developed in philosophy (Johnson 1987, Rorty 1979) and anthropology (Csordas 1990, Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1987, Lock 1993). This approach offers a more holistic engagement with the mind-body problem in that it locates what we experience as mind in and through our somatic encounters with the world. It lays emphasis on the 'concrete, the here-and-now presence of people to one another, and the full complement of senses and feelings through which they communicate with one another' (Strathern 1999:2), creating space for feeling and sensuous bodies (Asad 1997, Seremetakis 1994, Stoller 1989, 1997). It also recognises a complex interplay between our individual, experiencing bodies, the socially constructed, symbolic body, and the collective body politic, all of which are situated within and interpreted through their specific cultural context.

### *Minoan ritual action*

In the study of Minoan religion the most significant recent advances have come from the notion of ritual action, a response to contemporary interest in the *performative* nature of religion. Two fundamental concepts have emerged. First, there is the idea that pictorial art presents a record, albeit idealised and symbolised, of enacted events, *i.e.* what was really done: processions, sacrifices, offerings, and libations (Cameron 1978, 1987, Hägg 1985). Secondly, Peter Warren (1988) has articulated the notion of ritual action as the structural force of Minoan religion—religion not as belief, but as performance. These concepts have allowed scholars to read much of the narrative and something of the purpose of Minoan rituals: epiphany, sacrifice, rites of passage, healing. We ourselves have commented on the ambiguous, polysemic nature of ritual action (Peatfield and Morris 1990).

Within all this, however, the relationship of action to experience remains problematic, essentially because it has never been systematically addressed. Take epiphany as an example. Minoan epiphany is defined as having two main forms: enacted and envisioned. This conforms to the two dimensions of action: external and internal. 'External' action is purely symbolic, done for the sake of form and tradition, to express ideas that are only ever intellectually defined. It is action as play-acting. Even the most superficial actor is aware, however, of the emotional power of drama, that what you do affects how you feel. The drama is not simple pretence, but a collective participation and creativity between actor and audience with the ability to effect transformations (Turner 1982, 1991, Schechner 1994). This is the 'internal' dimension of action: physical action can be used to affect emotional and psychological states, and to access altered states of consciousness, which transcend everyday realities. In other words: the holistic interaction of body, mind, and spirit creates a conduit to mystical experience.

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Enacted epiphany is therefore relatively easy to understand—the role of the deity is performed by a human representative, who interacts with processions of worshippers, appears at windows, sits on thrones, receives offerings. But what about visionary epiphany? Study here has focused primarily on depictions, such as the gold rings, which we discuss in more detail below. On these rings, floating and flying images—figures, birds, butterflies and other insects—have been interpreted as *symbolising* the arrival of the deity; *i.e.* the vision is externalised into a depiction, an intellectual, rather than an experiential process. Where Minoan scholars do link the visionary process with the experiential domain of Minoan religion, they invariably describe it as ‘ecstatic’. And yet ‘ecstatic’ is assumed to be self-explanatory; it is never defined. Let us now look at the history of the ‘ecstatic’ within Minoan scholarship.

*Minoan religion: Evans and ecstasy*

‘Ecstatic trance’, ‘orgiastic frenzy’, ‘possession’—are all terms which can be found in discussions of Minoan religion from Evans onward (Evans 1930:68–9, 141–2, Nilsson 1950:275, Warren 1981). Yet the grounds for identifying the intense physical experience of trance behaviours as a component of Minoan ritual have not received critical discussion, and although there is a vocabulary of ecstasy, the nature of the trance state, the possible methods for achieving it, and its purposes all remain relatively unexplored.

The underlying model in most writers’ minds seems to be that of Dionysiac cult, and images of maenads in orgiastic frenzy spring readily to mind. Indeed Warren (1981) has presented an interesting argument for specific connections between Minoan and dionysiac cult in the form of Zagreus, but possession cults—from the Dionysiac to African Zar associations to possession by the Christian Holy Spirit within modern charismatic traditions—are only one of a range of possible models for ecstatic behaviours.

Evans too wrote of orgiastic dances, but he also shows an interesting awareness of the widespread and varied forms of ecstatic behaviours, particularly in the context of his discussion of scenes on Minoan gold rings. His haphazard but fascinating collection of comparative material does, for example, illustrate some of the prime methods for inducing trance. Drawing on the analogy of Vedic traditions, Evans suggested that the scenes of tree pulling showed the plucking of fruit, the juice of which ‘supplies the religious frenzy’ (Evans 1930:142). His specific interpretation may seem fanciful to us now, but it draws attention to the widespread importance of psychoactive or hallucinogenic substances in inducing altered states. The social context and intensity of such experiences may vary from the increased sociability generated by alcoholic drinks through to the opening of

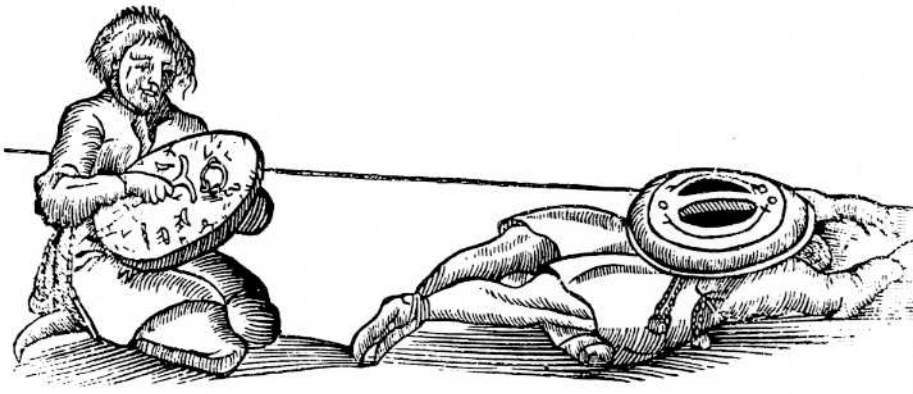


Fig. 1: Saami (Lapp) shaman in trance fallen beneath his drum. After J. Schefferus, 1673. *Lapponia* (Frankfurt).

channels to the other world by ingesting plants with powerful hallucinogenic properties such as ayahuasca, peyote and *Datura* (Balick and Cox 1996, Furst 1972, Harner 1973, Schultes and Hofman 1979, Goodman *et al.* 1995). The possible use of plant entheogens has yet to be fully explored for the Aegean Bronze Age, and we consider it unlikely that they did not have a role in both social and ritual contexts (see Hamilakis 2002:131 for the social dimension).

In a modern western context drugs spring all too readily to mind as conduits to altered states, but it should be stressed that such states can also be induced without the ingestion of hallucinogenic substances. Some of Evans' other *comparanda* show his awareness of the widespread importance of rhythmic movement and sound as methods for triggering trance states. He mentions in passing whirling dervishes (see also MacGillivray 2000:253, for the Dervish Academy at Tekke near Knossos), the musical accompaniment to the ecstatic prophecies of Old Testament prophets, and the drumming of the Saami (Lapp) shaman.

Comparing the Saami shaman with a Minoan image, Evans writes (1930:315):

... 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' description refers to the state shown in a famous drawing of the Saami shamans from the seventeenth century AD (fig. 1), but his assumption—that the trance was one of possession—is incorrect. In fact the Saami shaman, in common with the majority of shamans, is engaged on a trance journey where he sees and communicates with spirits or ancestors; he is not a passive receptacle or medium, possessed by another.

*Altered states of consciousness: methods and practice*

Whereas Evans was able to call upon only snippets of ethnographic information to help him give shape and meaning to Minoan rituals, a vast amount of research relating to ecstatic or trance states is now available. These include anthropological case studies of trance-based rituals and neurophysiological studies of different states of human consciousness. There is also a strong popular interest in the subject as part of the western search for alternate forms of spiritual experience and self-actualisation. Such writings vary greatly in quality, but include some internationally recognised anthropologists who have chosen to cross the academic boundary from observer to participant—usually as a result of actual trance experiences during fieldwork—and in some cases become Neo-shamanic practitioners (e.g. participant: Paul Stoller [1989], Edith Turner [1992]; practitioner: Michael Harner [1990]).

A word first about terminology. Within Minoan studies ecstasy, trance, possession have tended to be used interchangeably and without further discussion. There is extensive scholarly debate concerning the definition and use of each of these terms (Atkinson 1992:310–311), but they are all characterised by the active use of the body to enter an *altered state of consciousness* (ASC): that is, a non-ordinary bodily state in which sensations, perceptions, cognition and emotions are modified. It may be useful to think of ASC as a term which describes a spectrum of related trance and meditational behaviours (Walsh 1989, 1990), rather than yet another reductionist frame of reference which undervalues the nuanced interplay of embodied experience and the cultural context through which the experience finds shape and meaning.

Shamanism is itself a contested term. Mircea Eliade, in his classic work, *Shamanism. Archaic techniques of ecstasy*, defined a shaman as an individual who uses the 'technique of ecstasy' (i.e. altered state of consciousness) to undertake a soul journey in the manner of Siberian and Central Asian shamans (Eliade 1988:499–500). Some scholars have argued that the term should be reserved for this 'classic' shamanic complex of the Siberian-Arctic region; while, at the other end of the spectrum, 'shamanism' has come to be used in a highly generalised way to refer to almost any belief in and communication with spirits (Bowie 2000:190–218, Price 2001:4–5). The case for a geographically restricted definition is undermined by the argument that 'shamanism' is in many ways an externally constructed (albeit useful) western and academic notion, or in Michael Taussig's words 'a made-up western category—an artful reification of disparate practices' (cited in Atkinson 1999:307).

In suggesting the presence of shamanic traits within Minoan ritual we follow the view that a defining feature of shamanism is the use of the body as a vehicle for communicating with the extra-human or supernatural world by moving into an altered state of consciousness. We emphasise that shamanism is nevertheless diverse in its expression, purposes, and societal contexts, though the skills and powers organised around the central faculty of trance typically include healing, mastery of spirits, psychopompic activities, and divination (Blacker 1975:26). We also draw attention to two common misconceptions about shamanic practices. It is widely assumed that shamanism is characteristic only of non-complex and non-western societies, since the 'classic' accounts of such practices are known from the hunters and reindeer herders in Siberia or from native societies of Central and South America where psychotropic plants are extensively used for inducing altered states. Shamanic activity has a place both in both non-complex and in complex state societies, with the latter exemplified by the Maya, the *wu* in China and Japanese Shinto practices (Maya: Freidel 1992, Drew 1999; China: Poo 1998, Robinet 1997; Japan: Blacker 1975). While the religious traditions of the west have taken a very different path, Greek ritual practice (and, we would argue, earlier Bronze Age practice) does include clearly shamanic elements if only we are open to recognising them, as has been eloquently argued by Peter Kingsley (1999:129):

Nothing would be easier than to think these traditions never took root in the West, or to believe that if they did they were never of any importance for the history of western culture. But that's not the case.

Fasting, sensory deprivation or focusing, repetitive, rhythmic movement and sound (especially from rattling and drumming), and use of drugs are all recognised methods for inducing the altered state of consciousness. The *choice* of technique is culturally and historically situated, but the techniques *all* stimulate similar neuro-physiological changes in the human body. Researchers have, for example, drawn attention to the physical changes induced through drumming (Neher 1962), and to a spillover between the normally separate functions of the left and right lobes of the brain during the trance experience (Lex 1979). More recent research within the exciting new field of neurotheology has demonstrated that the altered states of mind described by ritual practitioners are associated with observable and distinctive neurological activity (D'Aquili and Newberg 1999).

These 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. Although alien to most modern, western rituals which have tended to minimise (even denigrate) multisensual ritual experience, ecstatic behaviours within ritual

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are known from a wide range of societies, past and present, and as spiritual experiences they are welcomed and highly valued (Bourguignon 1973, 1979:233–269, Lang 1997, Lewis 1989).

We briefly enumerate the universal bodily sensations experienced in the altered state of consciousness; we shall return to some of them later in relation to the Minoan evidence.

*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. The experience of being out-of-scale with the world around is sharply observed in the *Adventures of Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, who was familiar with accounts of the micro- and macroscopic properties of mushrooms (Rudgley 1993:49). Bodily transformation is also common with the sensation of changing wholly or partially into another form such as an animal.

*Senses* may feel sharpened or heightened, leading to strong sensations of smell and taste.

*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 altered. Vivid visual imagery is experienced with brilliant colours and pulsating, fragmenting patterns and images. Modern experimentation on trance subjects suggests that this entoptic imagery may 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 applications to ancient art see Lewis-Williams 1998, Dronfield 1995).

At the purely physiological level then we may agree with Eliade that 'ecstasy is a timeless primary phenomenon' (1964:508). But, importantly, the experience takes its detailed content and interpretation from the cultural context; in other words the ecstatic ritual acquires meaning through a subtle interplay between physiological changes and the culturally defined worldview or set of beliefs and expectations. Thus the recognition of an underlying neurophysiological dimension to the trance experience is not a reductionist explanation of ecstatic behaviour, since individuals and communities select and process the products of their nervous systems and interpret their experiences in terms of cultural systems of knowledge (Atkinson 1992:311, Lewis-Williams 1998).

#### *Minoan gold rings and ecstatic behaviour*

What evidence is there for the ritual use of altered states of consciousness in Minoan culture? As we have already noted, Evans—using the complex imagery of

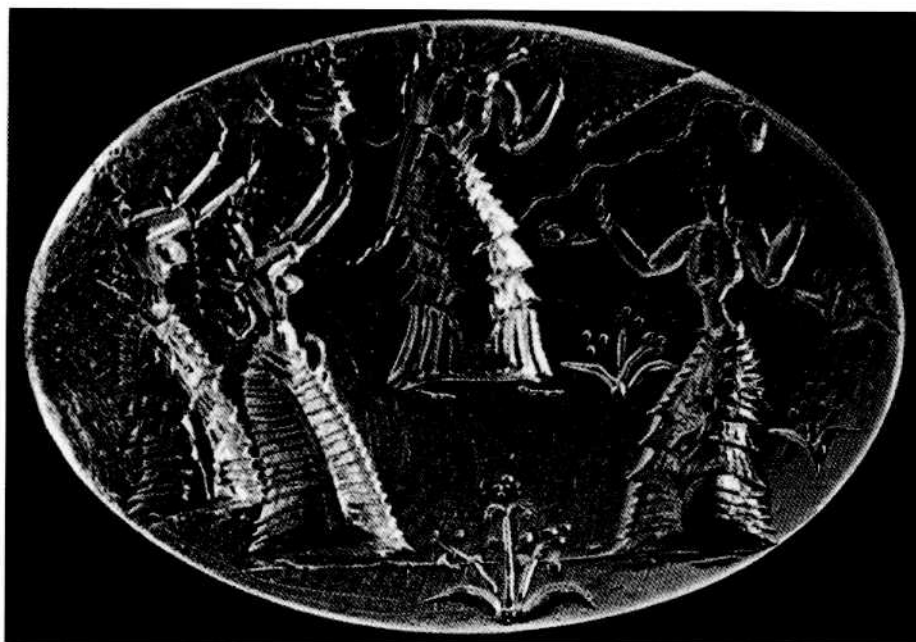


Fig. 2: Isopata gold ring.

gold seal-rings of the Second Palace period—first suggested that certain rituals which he termed ‘ecstatic’ served to summon the presence or epiphany of a deity (Evans 1930:67–73, 140).

The ritual actions performed in this context are pulling at a tree, hugging or embracing an object identified as a stone or pithos (Warren 1990), and a rhythmic movement of the body, usually described as dancing. These actions are understood as a performance intended to invoke a visionary epiphany. Thus a deity may appear as a small descending anthropomorphic figure, or the depiction may include a bird, butterfly and other floating images such as an eye; these have been interpreted as *symbolising* the arrival of a deity or as cult symbols confirming and defining the ritual context (Warren 1988:18, Marinatos 1993:177 [Isopata], 283n24). Although the language of ecstasy is used in connection with these images, the implications of ecstatic *experience* have not received the attention they merit, and the emphasis has remained on *symbolic* representation.

By shifting these images into a shamanic idiom, a rather different reading may be offered; one which centres on the body as the conduit to ritual experience and which argues that far from being purely ‘symbolic’ the iconic content represents the technique and experience of trance. We focus on the Isopata ring (fig. 2) to illustrate our reading, which does not claim to provide a ‘neat’ or single interpre-

tation of the scene, but seeks to open up the possibility of a different way of understanding the imagery on many Minoan gold rings. Following Evans, the technique of ecstasy on the Isopata ring has been described as 'orgiastic dance' implying violent and uncontrolled movement. But is this what is depicted? Figures with tresses of hair flying out away from the body (e.g. on the Knossos dancer and the bull-leaper fresco) illustrate the existence of an artistic convention for indicating vigorous motion. The tresses of hair on the four large figures on the Isopata ring are not shown in this way; only the small figure has possible flying tresses, perhaps implying swift descent and arrival at the scene. The graceful curve of the women's bodies and skirts is suggestive of movement rather than a body at rest, but in the absence of other somatic markers for frenzied activity, a more limited rhythmic movement or swaying might be suggested.

Most importantly, the three different body postures are very specific; they are repeated on other rings, and we now know that some of the same postures are shown on peak sanctuary figurines. The clearly defined shape of the postures suggests that they are purposeful in themselves—a point to which we will return in a moment. The technique of ecstasy may be described as comprising rhythmic movement or swaying in relation to defined body postures. From the numerous well-documented accounts of shamanic techniques, we might expect the use of drugs and music, though neither can be directly inferred from this image. The classic shamanic instruments are the drum and the rattle, the pitch of both being highly effective as sonic drivers for altering brain wave patterns. From our fairly limited knowledge of Minoan musical instruments we can at least observe that the sistrum (rattle) was known on Crete, most notably from the actual example from Archanes and the representation on the Harvester Vase (Younger 1998:65, 74–6, 78–80 for these and other examples). In addition, Warren has made the attractive suggestion that a pithos with a modified rim from Knossos was used as a drum (1981:166). In this content we might—very tentatively—offer the suggestion that the pithos with a lid or cover on the Archanes gold ring might be a drum over which the drummer has fallen into a state of trance.

Can we find firmer grounds for locating the rhythmic movement and special body postures within a shamanic idiom? Indeed, how might an artist meet the challenge of depicting an altered state of consciousness? Here we can draw upon the universal physiology of the experience which we have already described in terms of altered perceptions of the body itself, distortions of space and time, and powerful visual imagery.

A distinctive feature of the Isopata ring is the attenuated, almost non-human form of the human heads, which contrast powerfully with the supple, rounded body forms and indeed the elaborately flounced skirts of the participants. This strange convention occurs on other rings and seals, and writers on Minoan

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religion have noted that this may have 'a religious significance'. If we think of the image as located within the trance experience, then the non-human or aniconic head could be read much more specifically as an artistic device for representing the shift of 'self', of both mind and body, into the altered state of consciousness.

In support of this interpretation, we can cite the commonly reported experience of trance participants, where the head feels as though it dissolves, explodes, somehow disappears or turns into a non-human (often animal) form, a sensation which may have a basis in the physiological factors of the trance state (Halifax 1982:80, Whitley 1992:101 fig. 10). Remembering that the enabling mechanism is the human nervous system, and that we are *not* therefore modelling Minoan experience on that of other cultures, we can convey the intensity of these bodily sensations and their focus on the head by reference to documented accounts.

A vivid account of a Haitian ceremony using drums goes as follows (Deren 1953:260):

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

Amongst the !Kung San of Southern Africa energy (known as N/om) is activated during trance induced through rhythmic movement and rattling. Participants describe the sensation of this energy boiling up in their spines, and exploding in their heads (Lewis-Williams 2001:21, Katz 1982). In this case there are drawings in rock art of the experience—they show both distorted and therianthropic heads and energy streaming from the crowns of their heads (Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1998:25–26, Halifax 1982:80).

The distorted, non-human heads and the rows of dots around the heads of the otherwise elegant ladies on Isopata ring make sense in this context. They represent the bodily experience—the gathering of heat and energy up towards the head, sensations of it breaking open, and sometimes of transformation into other beings. If this explanation is correct, then we may have a framework for reading the distorted heads elsewhere in Minoan art, which allows us to locate the image within the experience and narrative of the alternate reality.

A second physiological dimension of the ecstatic state is its visionary content. The active engagement of physical sensations—so vivid that they may be experienced and accepted as being more real and significant than ordinary reality—is a major element of shamanic trance. The nervous system provides a common experiential basis, but the detailed content and interpretation of the imagery is culturally specific. Viewed within this shamanic idiom the images above and around the four women can be understood as elements of *experienced* vision rather than standing as external symbolic markers of ritual action. The descending figure is part of this visionary content but so too are the other images. We may note

some common elements in visions for which we may be physiologically predisposed; these include floating and flying images (e.g. birds, butterflies), eyes and masks, and rope-like images and small scrolls which are thought to arise from chemicals acting directly on the nerves. The floating images on the Isopata ring fit readily within this frame of reference, as do the depictions of and references to flight on a number of other rings. It should be stressed again that such shamanic imagery is produced through a nuanced interplay of physiological possibilities and cultural experiences and expectations. In other words participants learn to shape and interpret the potent images and sensations encountered in the altered state in terms of the ritual structures and world-view of their own society.

#### *Postures and peak sanctuaries*

If we are correct in identifying the Minoan gold rings as depictions of ASC, then clearly those states and the ability to enter them were accorded a high status in Minoan society. Scholarship recognises that religion, as presented in artistic media such as gold rings or frescoes, was very much a prestige activity in Minoan society, controlled by the palatial elite in the Second Palace period. Equally we recognise that this was not always so—religion appears to have been more accessible in the First Palace period (Gesell 1987, Moody 1987, Peatfield 1987, 1990). Is this likely to have been also true of ASC?

To address this question we turn to the primary evidence of First Palace period cult practice—the mountain shrines known as peak sanctuaries. Twenty-five-plus peak sanctuaries are distributed over Crete; they share consistent features of topography and votive material. Topographically, peak sanctuaries are set on prominent but accessible mountain peaks, close to upland areas of agricultural and pastoral exploitation. They also have strong visual links with the settlement areas from which their worshippers came, and with other peak sanctuaries (Rutkowski 1986, Peatfield 1983, 1990, 1994). The characteristic finds are large quantities of clay figurines of human beings, votive limbs, and animals. They seem to embody a rural nature cult arising out of the concerns of the peasantry—fertility of the earth and flocks, the continuity of their human communities. The special association of peak sanctuaries with healing is strongly attested by the deposition of votive limbs or models of human body parts. Such practices find obvious analogies in later Greek shrines to Asclepius and in modern Greek Orthodox offerings (*tamata*), as well as in practices elsewhere in the world, such as in the Shinto religion of Japan (Statler 1983:194). Overall, the Minoan offerings represent a sacred dimension to living in a mountainous marginal landscape.

Since the first peak sanctuary, Petsophas, was excavated in 1903, it has been recognised that the human figurines represent the worshippers themselves, rather



Fig. 3: Petsophas. Male terracotta figurine with arms to torso gesture. Ht 17.4 cm (HM 3405).

than deity images (Myres 1902–3). Thus it has been assumed that the standardised postures, in which the figurines are arranged, are associated with the acts of worship and offering. The most familiar of these worship postures, hands held to chest, is represented by the well-known male figurines from Petsophas (fig. 3). The first commentators on the peak sanctuary figurines also observed other postures, and suggested a possible gender distinction, with female figurines holding their hands up, or crossing their arms diagonally across the body.

This conventionalised image of peak sanctuary figurines and their postures has remained standard in archaeological literature, in which the same few figurines are repeatedly illustrated. It was not seriously modified by subsequent exploration of peak sanctuaries, because that exploration

has tended to be only briefly published and extremely selectively illustrated. If anything, attention becomes even more focused on the hands-to-chest gesture, perhaps because it tends to be better preserved.

The interpretations applied to the figurines were equally problematic. Even Bogdan Rutkowski, the pioneer of Minoan cult place studies, had relatively little to say about postures. He calls them gestures of supplication, or indicative of mortals addressing pleas to the divinity (Rutkowski 1986:87–88, 1991:52–56). In her synthesis of Minoan religion, Nanno Marinatos describes the worship postures as ‘attitudes of self-containment or respect, not display’ (1993:117). Significantly, she further describes the figurines as adorants. Such terminology—adoration, supplication—collapses description with interpretation, since the gestures are defined in terms of a presumed function. In addition, a variety of bodily postures are subsumed into this interpretative framework without addressing the possibility that the representation of distinct and different gestures could be significant.

The terminology of ‘supplication/adoration’ presupposes a form of ritual action familiar from Classical and Judaeo-Christian religions, and their emphasis

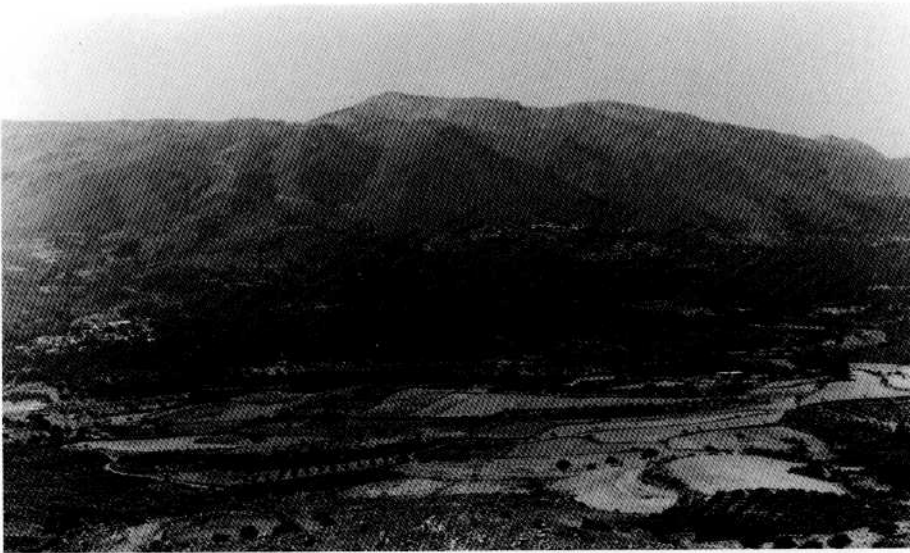


Fig. 4: View (looking south) of the peak sanctuary of Atsipadhes Korakias within the Kouroupas mountain range in the Ayios Vasilios valley.

on deities. The focus is on the external shape of the gesture or posture: hands folded in prayer, kneeling. Such actions mould the body within a structured environment and are conducive to creating a respectful and focused mood, but their primary purpose is supplication of the deity's mercy, and/or recognition and symbolic expression of the worshipper's moral need for that mercy. Ritual action, posture, is thus perceived of as having no meaning or significance beyond the externalised expression of devotion and supplication.

#### *Atsipadhes Korakias*

In 1989 we excavated the peak sanctuary of Atsipadhes Korakias in the Ayios Vasilios valley in west central Crete (fig. 4). Part of the purpose of the excavation was the detailed recording of the finds, in order to recover the spatial functioning of the sanctuary. A preliminary report of the excavation has been published (Peatfield 1992; see also Morris 1993, Morris and Peatfield 1996). In summary: the Atsipadhes sanctuary occupies the two natural terraces of the Korakias peak, Upper to the west, Lower to the east (fig. 5). The Upper Terrace seems to have been the main liturgical part of the sanctuary. Finds here were restricted to the eastern edge overlooking the Lower Terrace. On the east-west axis of the site was a small feature, hollowed into the earth and empty of finds. Around the feature was an exceptional density of figurine fragments, fragments of pottery, and, unique to this part of the



Fig. 5: Atsipadhes Korakias, showing Upper terrace to the west, and Lower terrace to the east.

site, small rounded pebbles (Peatfield 1992:68 fig. 8). It is likely that something once stood in this feature, probably as a focus of ritual activity. The Lower Terrace seems to have been the main area of congregation and offering. More than 50% of the *ca.* 5000 figurine fragments were concentrated in the rock clefts just abutting the rise to the Upper Terrace. The density of finds diminished rapidly the further east one moved.

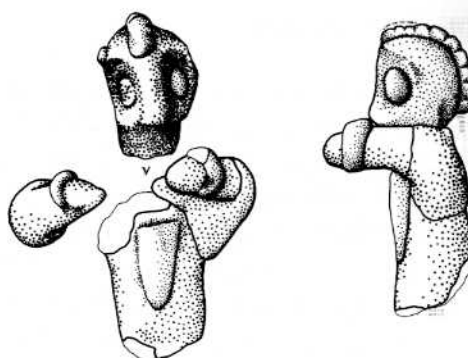
Within our study of the figurine postures two significant patterns emerged. First, there was a greater variety in the number of postures. Secondly, there was a distinct pattern to the spatial distribution of postures over the site. On the variety of postures: the hands-to-body posture has two main variations—hands-to-chest and hands-to-waist. Re-examination of figurines from other peak sanctuaries reveals that this variation is common. It should be noted to that both male and female figurines (fig. 6) are represented in this posture, undermining the suggestion that this gesture is strongly gendered (Morris 2001:249 with n. 18).

More significant is the discovery of figurines, again both male and female, whose arms are held away from the body in a variety of open postures. The most common posture embraces an empty open circle in front of the body, the hands held up symmetrically at head or chest level (fig. 7). In some, the arms are held more forward, but still curving up (figs. 8–9), a posture closely paralleled by that of two



Fig. 6: Female terracotta figurine fragment from Atsipadhes Korakias peak sanctuary, from the rock clefts between the Upper and Lower terraces. Arms to torso gesture (left arm preserved, and scar of right arm on chest immediately below pellet breast). Ht. pres. 6.3 cm (RM 6825).

Fig. 7: Anthropomorphic terracotta figurine fragment from Atsipadhes Korakias peak sanctuary, from open area on Lower terrace. Arms curving round in front of the body. Ht. pres. 7.6 cm (RM 6891).



of the figures on the Isopata Ring. Several other figurines also hold their arms up in front of the body, asymmetrically at head and chest level. We also have one example of hands held out to the sides.

On the spatial distribution: the hands-to-torso figurines are concentrated on the Upper Terrace and in the Lower Terrace rock clefts. The open gestures—figurines with arms up and away from the torso—are almost entirely confined to the outer semi-circle of find distribution on the Lower Terrace. It is clear therefore that the distribution is not random. Nor is it correlated to chronology or figurine manufacture, quality or fabric type. In the face of these patterns the common ritual interpretation of these postures as supplication or adoration seemed seriously inadequate. Our interpretative step was to consider these postures within the experiential domain of ritual action.

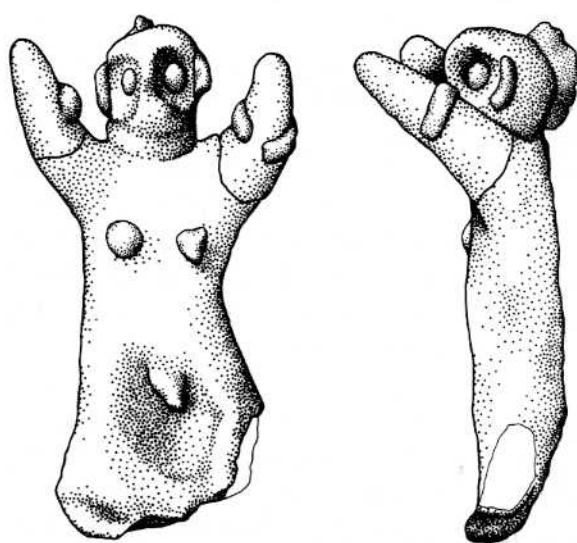


Fig. 8: Anthropomorphic terracotta figurine fragment from Atsipadhes Korakias peak sanctuary, from open area on Lower terrace. Arms raised forward and up. Ht. 13.7 cm (RM 6891).

*Taoist energy postures*

Posture is included among shamanic techniques for inducing trance. Just as the single repeated sound of the rattle or drum focuses the auditory sense, so fixed posture and rhythmic movement focuses the kinesthetic sense. Curiously, of all the shamanic techniques analysed by modern research for their neuro-physiological effects, posture is least studied, though J.D. Lewis-Williams has drawn attention to specific 'trance dance postures' (Lewis-Williams *et al.* 1996). Perhaps this is because western analytical thought finds it easier to accept externally administered stimuli such as sound or drugs, than the holistic implications of the body's potential to affect itself. It is therefore left to Eastern analytical traditions, particularly those which maintain techniques for manipulating the body for therapeutic and spiritual purposes, to provide some modes of understanding. Both Indian Yogic traditions and Chinese Taoist energy practices, known as *daoyin* or *chi-kung/qigong*, attribute to the body a systematic network of energy flows. Altering the posture creates specific energy matrices, which have therapeutic and spiritual effects (Cohen 1997, Frantzis 1993, Miura 1989). When one applies western terminology—changing posture alters blood flow, neurological pulsation, metabolism, differential thoracic pressures on the internal organs, biochemical and endocrine secretions, the bio-electrical field—then the notion becomes less esoteric (Kaptchuk 1983, Needham 1983).

The Eastern traditions are best known through their medical incarnations, such as Traditional Chinese Medicine and Indian Ayurvedic health practices. Less known in the west is that these same therapeutic methods also have profound spiritual implications, especially when combined with breathing techniques, and specific and free-ranging visualisations—all familiar shamanic techniques (Maspero 1981, Needham 1983, Robinet 1993). Scholars of Chinese religion have long recognised that these techniques owe their origin to the *wu*, Chinese shamans attested at least as early as the eighth century BC (Poo 1998, Paper 1995, Robinet 1997), and possibly as early as the Shang Dynasty of the Chinese Bronze Age (Chang 1993). Early texts even offer correlations between rain-making rituals and rituals for releasing flows of energy in the body—classic macrocosm/microcosm theory (Despeux 1989, Roth 1996). Similarly, much of the imagistic language of these techniques includes rising heat, opening heads, snake-like sensations, flying sensations—all familiar from the phenomenology of shamanic description (Schipper 1993).

One particular advantage of the Taoist models is that they represent an active, living tradition. Indeed K. Schipper's research observations of the trance and ASC experiences of *daoyin* in Taoist ritual were made as an ordained Taoist priest. Viewed from this experiential perspective, each of the three main variations of

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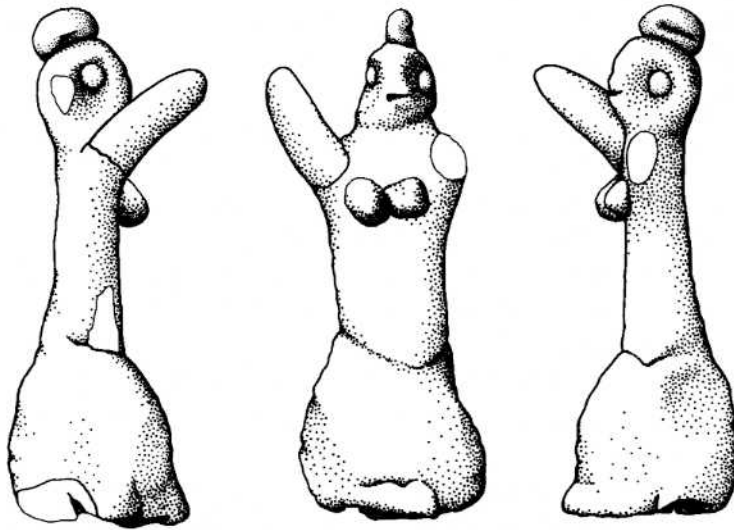


Fig. 9: Female terracotta figurine fragment from Atsipadhes Korakias peak sanctuary, from open area on Lower terrace. Arms raised forward and up. Ht. 13.4 cm (RM 6785).

Minoan peak sanctuary postures, hands-to-waist, hands-to-chest, and hands extending at head level, can be explained activating the three main power centres (called *dantien*) of the body, abdomen, heart, and head (B. Frantzis, pers. com.). Individually they have healing functions, the hands-to-waist being the strongest and most commonly used. Bruce Frantzis, another scholar ordained in a Taoist sect, further observed that Taoists could also combine these postures in a semi-circular arrangement at a communal ritual, in order to elicit oracular activity from a person located at the focus point (Frantzis, pers. com.).

#### *Ecstatic body postures*

The only anthropologist to take a specific interest in shamanic postures has been Felicitas Goodman. In her initial research on *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues) she observed that the trance was often initiated by a restricted posture. She then gathered a wide variety of postures from traditional and ancient cultures, and researched their trance and visionary effects, using large numbers of her students and colleagues (1986, 1990). While she was among the first to observe that the universality of the neurophysiological experience was given content only within a cultural context, she went on to group shamanic postures according to functional categories, such as, healing, oracular, metamorphosis, soul journey. Within this

categorisation, the hands-to-waist posture is the commonest healing posture worldwide. The hands-to-chest posture, nicknamed the 'Singing Shaman', is associated with particularly intense trance experiences and attributed a healing dimension.

Goodman is one of the anthropologists who has become a modern Neo-Shaman, and she has marketed the postures as a New Age method. Nevertheless among the second generation of researchers at Goodman's Institute, Robinette Kennedy, is taking an ongoing interest in Minoan ritual postures. Based on some experimentation in co-operation with her, we can make some preliminary observations about two peak sanctuary postures—the hands-to-waist, and the arms extended up and round.

The healing nature of the hands-to-waist posture, described in both the Taoist tradition and the ecstatic body posture research manifests in a profound sense of well-being and security. The tilted head observable in many of the figurines may be a deciding factor in the visionary experience, restricting as it does the connections between the spinal nerve and the cerebral cortex. The stretched throat, caused by the tilted head, seems to stimulate saliva production.

The physical difficulty, the intense pain of holding postures with arms away from the body for extended periods of time may be crucial to the intensity of the trance experience (as with !Kung San). Pain releases more endorphins and other biochemicals. Judging by the ethnographic descriptions of physically difficult postures, the more extreme the posture, the more intense the trance experience, including perhaps the sense of power and energy. Another feature of difficult postures is that they can release a kinesthetic impulse, manifested in a rhythmic shaking or swaying of the body. We have already observed that this may account for the curves given to the figures on the rings.

#### *Minoan postures*

Viewed in this way the Minoan ritual postures take on a much stronger and emphatic role within Minoan religion. Rather than being somewhat weak and generalised expressions of worship, they seem to have had a much more dynamic function to access the experiential domain of Minoan ritual action—the most obvious examples being true visionary epiphany through trance, healing through the sense of energy, and divination through psychological insight.

Perhaps significantly, in later Greece, the Cretans maintained a special reputation for mantic power (Kingsley 1999, Chaniotis 2000). Could that have been inherited in part from Minoan religious traditions? Furthermore, references to Keftiu remedies (in the Ebers papyrus) and incantations (London papyrus) suggests that the Minoans (identified as the Keftiu) were known by the Egyptians

for their knowledge of healing plants and rituals (Warren 1995). Such knowledge, combined with a Cretan landscape rich in medicinal plants, offers a link back to the healing role of plants and to their psychoactive properties and possible roles in ASC activity.

We introduced this discussion of peak sanctuary postures by observing that the figurines represent the worshippers, and that there are large numbers of figurines. This certainly suggests that the altered states of consciousness activated through the postures were, hypothetically at least, accessible to all worshippers at peak sanctuaries, during the high point of their use in the First Palace Period.

Elsewhere we have observed that the centralisation of the peak sanctuary cult in the Second Palace period, manifest in the reduction in the number of sites to those of the elite, palatial centres, was also accompanied by a change in offering patterns (Peatfield 1987, 1990). The predominant First Palace period offerings of clay figurines were replaced by a larger variety of Second Palace period offerings: beads, jewellery, stone vessels, bronzes. This supports the idea, apparent in the gold seal rings, that trance activity may have been monopolised by the Second Palace elite, as an ideological component in support of their hierarchy. The rings, with their visionary depictions, would be the visible sign, even badge, of that ritual ability and the status it bestowed, especially within the elite group. According to this narrative the figurines would then represent an earlier phase of wider and direct access to ecstatic ritual behaviour, in the context of peak sanctuary cult.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, we have argued that the language and definitions of the scholarship of Minoan religion are embedded with western presuppositions about the mind/body relationship. Furthermore they foreclose understanding of Minoan religion within Classical and Judaeo-Christian theistic models. By re-introducing the body as an active element within Minoan religion, we have sought to re-establish that religion is an experiential, not merely intellectual process. This opens up new ways of exploring the interaction of religion and society in Minoan Crete. When ritual action is analysed only within the intellectual dimension, it is easy to assume its meanings are forgotten and unrecoverable. But as so often re-iterated in shamanic scholarship, the human body is universal. The active involvement of the body in the religious process means that, to quote Edith Turner, 'the frigidity of ritual action gives way to the orgasm of experience' (1992:163) and that the human body is itself the dynamic instrument of ritual.

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## DISCUSSION

*E. Thomassen:* We have very little time but I think in view of the provocativeness and interest of this paper I will allow two questions.

*D. Handelman:* I also found it fascinating. I would like to draw your attention to two pieces of information that may be relevant to what you are doing. One is a book by Elliot Friedsen on people in Malawi. The book is called *Dancing prophets*. What Friedsen has discovered is that drumming generates certain harmonics which have a kind of multi-stable effect in the sense of generating possibilities of perception. Something like you would get by looking at a Necker cube. You look at it and its ground-figure relationship changes and another possibility comes into being, you can't hold that possibility, it disappears from your perception and so forth. This is a kind of intermediate effect between the central nervous system and the cultural interpretations that are given to this. But beyond this, what he discovered was that certain rhythms have a certain physical effect on the body, a feeling of the body like something pushing into the body, something moving around in the body, something extruding from the body, and that this was not a culturally specific phenomenon. That is, he, too, listening to the same rhythms, separated from the people, the prophets who were creating the entry of spirits into the body of their patients, he, too, felt, physically, intrusion, moving around, extrusion. Beyond this he also found that he could chart changes in the rhythms, changes in the harmonics among neighboring peoples, too, where they generated sort of complementary effects, that is, cultural differences which were related to these shifts in the way that the drumming rhythms were used. So, there is something here that is intermediate between the immediate shaping through the central nervous system and the culture. The other comes from a study done about 20 years ago on laughter, measuring laughter physiologically while jokes were being told among people who through previous interaction had some kind of social relationship. What this researcher, who was himself a physician, found was that on the physiological level or domain, the cognitive domain and the social domain, laughter shook up whatever there was to shake up. It shook up the person in all of these domains, which then settled into a kind of reorganization. He was coming to these conclusions before Chaos Theory began to put its tendrils into social thinking. I might add also that Plessner, the phenomenologist, did a very interesting book on laughing and crying, where he argued that in both of these modes one loses control over one's body, the body takes over. And the body then has its own duration, whatever it is, of acting through, working itself through these modes. I would assume that crying has something of the same kind of inner history as laughing does in terms of shaking the person up, and then into patterns of reorganization. You may find some connection between all of this.

*A. Peatfield:* Yes, that's very useful. Thank you. We will certainly include those ideas in our written paper. We are already aware of this idea of the sonic driving, but the idea that it changes and that this can change the effect is very useful.

*H. Tzavella-Evjen:* Have you thought about the Mycenaean Psi, Tau and Phi?

*A. Peatfield:* No, we haven't. We leave that to the Mycenaean specialists to pick up on our ideas and perhaps run with them.

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