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A SENSORY APPROACH TO THE PEAK SANCTUARY OF KOPHINAS

ABSTRACT

The Kophinas peak sanctuary exemplifies the integration of landscape, material culture, and human experience in Minoan ritual life. Its prominent topographical features, cliffs, chasms, springs, and wide intervisibility with the surrounding plain and sea, shaped ritual practice and symbolized connections to the sacred and metaphysical.

Archaeological evidence, including clay figurines, clay boat models, and food offerings, reflects both personal devotion and communal participation. I argue that the ascent to the peak constituted an embodied, multisensory experience, allowing reflection, engagement with ritual objects, and interaction with the natural environment. Large-scale public rituals facilitated collective effervescence, transforming imagined communities into sensed communities through synchronized bodily action, music, dance, and shared feasting. Offerings, such as whole grapes and clay boats, demonstrate the integration of natural elements into ritual meaning, linking mountain, sea, and participants in a dynamic ceremonial space. Kophinas illustrates how Minoan communities constructed religious meaning through sensory engagement, social interaction, and environmental awareness.



Fig. 1 Map of Crete showing Kophinas, Knossos Anetaki and Petras. Henkel and Margaritis, 2022.

SITE DESCRIPTION AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDINGS.

The Kophinas site is situated in north-central Crete, within the Heraklion prefecture. It is an open-air sanctuary located at an elevation of approximately 970 m above sea level, positioned beneath the highest summit of the Asterousia Mountains, also known as Kophinas and 2 Km from the mountain village of Kapetaniana (Karetsou and Spiliotopoulou, 2018) The sanctuary covers a roughly rectangular area of about 240 m². Its northern, eastern, and south-eastern limits are defined by a peribolos wall, while the western and south-western sides are naturally enclosed by steep mountain rock formations (Henkel and Margaritis, 2022).

The site was initially identified in 1959 by Nikolaos Platon, after the discovery of several clay figurines found by hikers. Subsequent excavations were carried out by Platon in collaboration with Kostas Davaras in 1961. Three decades later, in 1990, additional investigations were undertaken by Alexandra Karetsou and Giorgos Rethemiotakis as part of rescue excavations prompted by illicit looting at the sanctuary. Collectively, these excavation campaigns demonstrated that ritual activity at the site focused on the natural rock outcrop and a large, square niche set into the eastern wall of the peribolos. Platon's early work documented the intentional deposition of numerous figurines within fissures of the rugged rock formation, while the later excavations brought to light a substantial assemblage of votive offerings. These included a lead double axe, fragments of clay boat models, stone offering tables, human and animal figurines, seal stones, bronze daggers, and an array of valuable beads, many of which were concentrated in and around the niche of the peribolos. Both excavation phases also identified a substantial ash layer in the lower stratigraphic levels, interpreted as the remains of sacrificial pyres. The 1990 investigations further revealed that much of this ash deposit was contained within a low wall adjoining a constructed platform at the centre of the sanctuary. During this campaign, seven sediment samples were collected from the pyre deposits and several additional contexts (Henkel and Margaritis, 2022).

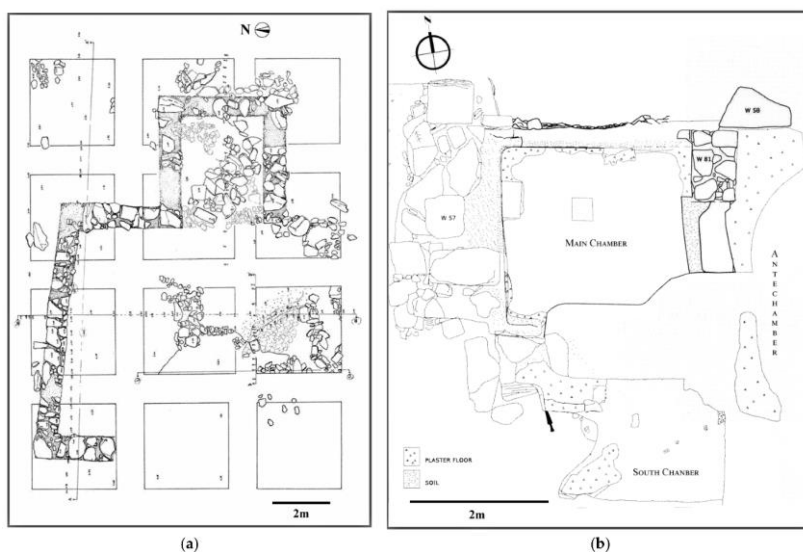


Fig. 2 Plan of the open-air sanctuary of Kophinas (a) and Knossos Anetaki (b). Henkel and Margaritis, 2022.

The stratigraphic sequence of the sanctuary is rendered complex by its prolonged use, spanning from the Neopalatial period (c. 1750–1450 BC) through Roman times. Although the upper strata contained mixed ceramic material, the lowest levels produced deposits dominated by homogeneous Middle Minoan III pottery (c. 1750–1700 BC), which represents the principal phase of activity at the site. On stylistic grounds, the ceramics and figurines recovered from the ash layer can also be attributed to this period, despite the presence of some Hellenistic ceramic material. The substantial quantity of Neopalatial ceramics indicates that the sanctuary attracted large numbers of visitors or participants, while the predominance of vessel types such as cups and tripod cooking pots suggests that the consumption of food and drink was an integral component of the activities carried out there (Henkel and Margaritis, 2022).



Fig 3. Asterousia Mountains. Creta Maris (2020).

Soetens (2009) considers Kophinas, along with Juktas, a special peak sanctuary due to its several distinctive features. In this study, Kophinas will be described in greater detail than Juktas.

Special features of Kophinas

The first notable feature is a chasm located near the sacred area. On Mt. Kophinas, this chasm, known as Trypa tou Kofinou, lies southwest of the modern chapel of Timios Stavros. Although it has not been excavated, it is reported to be deeper than the chasm at Juktas and to contain Minoan figurines and bones. In other peak sanctuaries, circular man-made features have been excavated, such as at Korakias, which appear to serve a similar function to a natural chasm, suggesting that if a natural chasm was not present,

a substitute was created, highlighting its importance in peak sanctuary rituals (Soetens 2009).

The second defining feature of the site is the presence of a steep cliff. Kophinas, together with Juktas, is characterized by an exceptionally sheer drop, whereas other peak sanctuaries, although often located near steep slopes, do not include a chasm. This suggests that the cliff itself was a significant factor in the selection of the location for a peak sanctuary. The act or idea of falling from the cliff may have carried symbolic meaning, potentially representing a passage or descent into the other world (Soetens, 2009).

The third significant feature is intervisibility. Although most peak sanctuaries display a certain degree of visual connection with their surroundings, Kophinas and Juktas are notable for their exceptionally wide range of visibility (Soetens 2009). The peak of Kophinas is visible from the entire Mesara Plain, the Libyan Sea, and much of north-central Crete (Karetsou and Spiliotopoulou 2012). Moreover, Kophinas can be seen from the courtyard of Phaistos, and on clear days the peak sanctuary of Juktas is visible from the summit of Kophinas (Soetens, 2009).

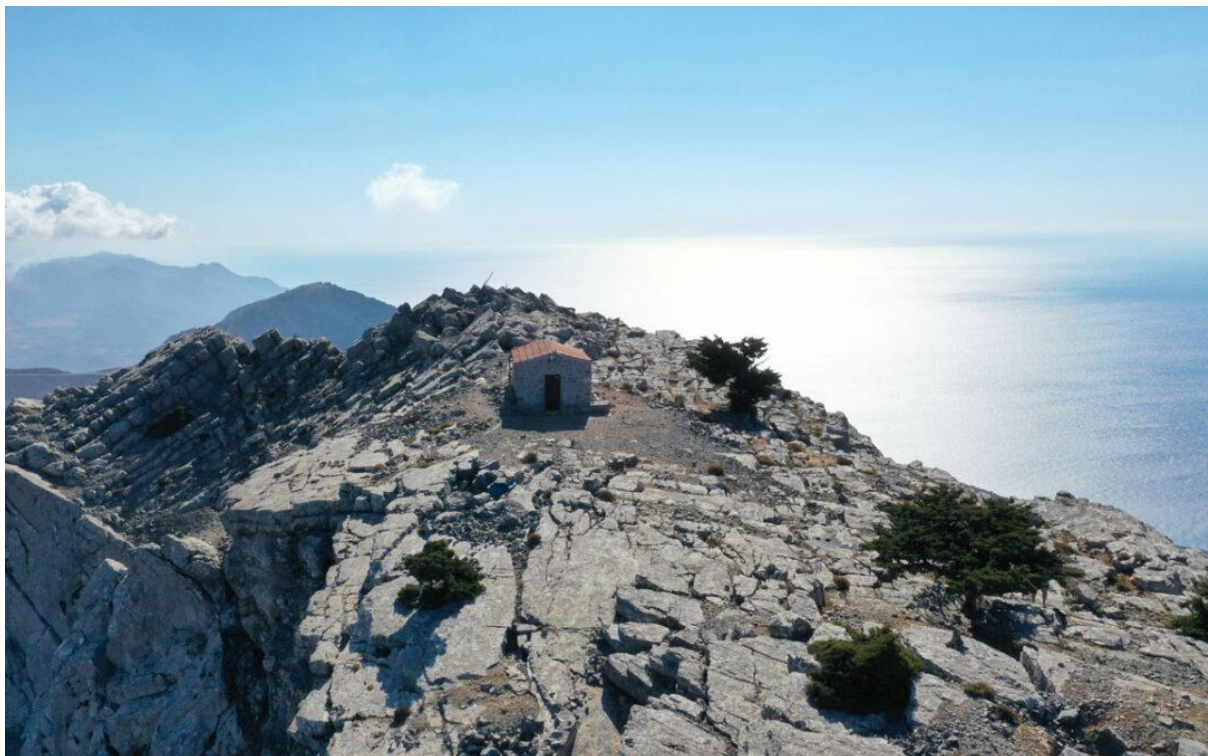


Fig. 4 Kofinas Peak Sanctuary. Unesco site in Crete (no date).

The fourth notable feature of Kophinas is the presence of springs. The site is associated with more than fifty springs, and water-worn river pebbles constitute a recurring category of finds at the comparable peak sanctuary of Juktas. The practice of bringing water-eroded pebbles to the sanctuary suggests a symbolic connection between the mountaintop and water. Closely related to this theme is the assemblage of clay boat models from Kophinas.

Soetens (2009) suggests that people associated mountains tops with water by observing how peaks attracted lightning and subsequently believed that ritual activities producing smoke at peak sanctuaries could help secure rainfall. The act of throwing figurines into the chasm may also have been connected to human requests for water.

Soetens (2009) further proposes a link between fertility, rainwater, and the offering of human figurines. The association of Kophinas with fertility practices has also been suggested by Henkel and Margaritis (2025), based on their study of the food offerings discovered at the site.

The fifth feature is the presence of a structure at a lower elevation. At Mezzolati, located 95 meters below and 503 meters north of the Kophinas peak sanctuary, another building has been identified where evidence of ritual activities similar to those at the peak sanctuary has been discovered and it is situated on an important access route to the sanctuary (Soetens, 2009).



Fig. 5 View of the Peak Sanctuary at Kophinas from the MMIII structure at Mezzolati. Megarry (2012).

Soetens (2009) relates Kophinas to the shamanic belief in a tiered cosmos as described by Professor Lewis-Williams (2004). Within this conceptual framework, the axis mundi is visually expressed through three levels: the upper level, symbolized by the mountain peak; the intermediate level, representing the world of humans; and the lower level, embodied by the chasm. Soetens (2009) further argues that the absence of anthropomorphic deities indicates that ancient Minoan beliefs were focused on natural forces and the inherent qualities of specific places.

Clay boat Figurines

Karetsou and Spiliotopoulou (2018) examined 18 clay boat models recovered from the peak sanctuary of Kophinas. These votive offerings clearly indicate a symbolic connection between the sanctuary and the sea. As noted earlier, the peak of Kophinas is visible from the Libyan Sea and may have served as a landmark for seafarers. The location of the sanctuary, together with the nature of the offerings, reinforces this association with water, a connection further supported by Soetens' (2009) suggestion that Kophinas was involved in ritual activities related to water.

The clay boat models analysed derive from earlier excavations, and their precise contexts are largely unknown, with the exception of one example recovered from a layer

containing hundreds of human and animal clay figurines, pottery, stone offering tables, and other finds. The boat models are fashioned from the same orange-brown, medium-coarse clay used for the production of Middle Minoan III human figurines. Karetsou and Spiliotopoulou (2018) suggest that these ship models were connected to funerary beliefs, drawing on parallels from neighbouring civilizations that envisioned a river to be crossed in the afterlife, as well as on gold signet rings depicting ritual scenes involving boats as evidence for maritime ritual ceremonies.

Anthropomorphic clay figurines

Most of the anthropomorphic clay figurines recovered from Mezzolati, the lower structure associated with the Kophinas peak sanctuary, date to the Middle Minoan III period and are predominantly male. Some examples are exceptionally well crafted, exceeding half a meter in height. Two distinct stylistic traditions are evident: a naturalistic tradition and a stylized one (Spiliotopoulou, 2016; Rethemiotakis, 2014).

Spiliotopoulou (2016) suggests that these clay figurines were inspired by ivory models, based on their construction techniques, including the use of tenons and the application of finer, lighter coloured clay for decorative details. These features indicate that the artisans were familiar with ivory figurines and chryselephantine statues. Because ivory production was largely restricted to palatial centres, the presence of such techniques at Kophinas suggests a direct connection between the sanctuary and Minoan palaces.

Archaeobotanical evidence

Excavations at the Kophinas peak sanctuary have yielded offering tables and vessels used for eating and drinking. Archaeobotanical analyses indicate that food was burned as offerings, largely consisting of staples from the everyday diet of the local population. In addition, a cereal-based item, likely a bread-like food, was identified from the ceremonial pyre at the lower level of the sanctuary. Henkel and Margaritis (2025) suggest that these offerings served as nourishment for metaphysical beings, such as deities or the dead. They further propose an analogy between bread production and fertility: just as seeds grow into crops, human “seeds” develop into new life, linking the sanctuary to ancestral and fertility-related rituals.

Plant remains were primarily recovered near the central pyre, with sampling conducted in association with charcoal deposits. Although the number of samples is limited, they represent some of the richest and best-preserved archaeobotanical assemblages from the site. Notably, grapes with preserved pulp were recovered, suggesting that whole fruits were placed on the pyre as sacrificial offerings (Henkel and Margaritis, 2022).

Plant Remains	Context	Pyre	Other	Totals	
	Number of Samples	4	3		
Type	Taxon			Taxon	Type
Fruits and Nuts	<i>Olea europaea</i> (stone)	0/1	0/2	3	
	cf. <i>O. europaea</i> (stone)	0/2		2	
	<i>Vitis vinifera</i> (pip)	6/94 (MNI: 7)	0/1	101	
	cf. <i>V. vinifera</i> (pip)	0/4		4	
	Fruit pulp (cf. <i>V. vinifera</i>)	0/33		33	
	Indet. nutshell	0/1		1	
	Indet. nutlet	0/2	0/3	5	
	Indet. fruit/nutshell	0/4	0/2	6	
	Fruit/nutshell type		0/2	2	
					157
Herbaceous	Lamiaceae (cf. <i>Stachys</i> / <i>Salvia</i> sp.)		1/0	1	
	Lamiaceae	1/0		1	
	cf. Poaceae (glume)	1		1	
					3
Totals		149	11	160	
Charcoal estimate		1–1500	1–500		

MNI = Minimum Number of Individuals.

Fig.6 Archeobotanical data for Kophinas. Henkel and Margaritis (2022).

SENSORIAL ANALYSES OF KOPHINAS

As Hamilakis (2012) argues, understanding past ritual practices requires moving beyond abstract concepts of religion and focusing on embodied, sensory experiences. This approach emphasizes the role of the human body, multisensory engagement with the material world, and collective bodily memory in shaping meaning. Accordingly, the peak sanctuary of Kophinas can be analysed through the sensorial engagement and bodily experiences of its visitors.

The Landscape

Ingold (1993, pp.154) notes that “a place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there; to the sights, sounds, and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience. And these, in turn, depend on the kinds of activities in which its inhabitants engage.” Kophinas functioned as a culturally significant landscape meaningful both to local communities and to those living further afield. For instance, Zeimbeki (2004) suggests that institutional and organizational links may have existed between palaces and peak sanctuaries, as material culture was embedded in the social and economic life of associated communities. This connection is supported by Spiliotopoulou’s (2019) study of Kophinas clay figurines, which exhibit production techniques similar to those used for ivory figurines crafted within the palace of Knossos.

Hoanen (2020, p. 166) observes that “the perception of the environment is related to the history of an individual,” suggesting that landscapes acquire meaning through lived experience and memory. In this sense, Kophinas can be understood as part of a culturally remembered landscape embedded with collective memory. Its selection may have been influenced by the experience of a hierophany, which Megarry (2018, pp. 96–97) defines as humanity’s tendency to gravitate toward the sacred, made manifest through acts of transcendence or epiphany at particular points in the landscape. The distinctive topographical features of Kophinas, such as cliffs, chasms, and springs, may therefore have stimulated perceptions of sacred presence and facilitated encounters with the metaphysical.

Sensorial Experience of the Environment

Climbing the mountain would have been physically demanding (Glaraki, 2016), requiring preparation, especially if a festival was being held at the peak (Peatfield and Morris, 2019, pp. 233). I state that, at the same time, the ascent can be understood as an individual experience that allowed for reflection and introspection. People may have undertaken the climb at various times throughout the year, not solely in connection with communal festivals.

Sensorial Experience with Material Culture

Most clay figurines recovered from peak sanctuaries are small in size and fit comfortably in the hand. This suggests that they may have functioned as personal ritual objects, serving as tangible reminders of belief during the ascent. Carrying and physically engaging with a figurine during the journey may have intensified the personal

experience that culminated at the peak. Kophinas also yielded figurines exceeding half a meter in height, suggesting that their transport to the peak would have required collective effort.

As stated above, the majority of the clay figurines recovered from Kophinas are male (Spiliotopoulou 2019; Rethemiotakis 2014; Sienkiewicz 2022). Rethemiotakis (2014) proposes that the peak sanctuary functioned as a place of male gathering. Based on an analysis of male figurine hairstyles, he distinguishes representations corresponding to childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Moreover, many figurines appear to wear objects resembling boxing gloves, leading him to suggest that Kophinas may have served as a location for initiation rituals associated with boxing.

In relation to anthropomorphic clay figurines, I agree with Murphy (2024), who argues that material culture should be examined in terms of the kinds of behaviours and experiences it generates in people, rather than being viewed solely as a medium for projecting social status. Accordingly, I do not interpret the predominance of male figurines at the Kophinas peak sanctuary as evidence that the site was frequented exclusively by men. Acts of worship are not necessarily motivated only by personal needs but may also be performed on behalf of others. It is therefore possible that male figurines were dedicated by mothers, sisters, or companions of boxers as expressions of care, protection, or affection.

Building on the discussion of anthropomorphic clay figurines, I also propose that a shamanistic perspective may be relevant for interpreting ritual activity at Kophinas. Peatfield and Morris (2019) observes that the physical posture of some clay figurines may depict altered states of consciousness, suggesting that ritual actions could have involved shamanistic practices or trance-like experiences. These figurines, while reflecting social meanings, as discussed in the previous paragraph, might also represent participants in transformative states, bridging the human and metaphysical realms. Soetens' (2009) concept of a three-tiered cosmology at Kophinas, connecting the peak, the human realm, and the chasm, supports this interpretation, indicating that rituals may have engaged multiple levels of experience beyond the visible landscape.

I view the peak sanctuary not as a self-contained site but in dynamic relation to the broader environment, including the lowlands and the sea. Zikakis (2019) notes that buildings with traces of ritual activities similar to those at peak sanctuaries have been found in lowland sites such as Phaistos, Malia, and Galatas. While the mere presence of ritual objects does not necessarily indicate identical functions to the peak sanctuary, these finds support the idea that the peak sanctuary's ritual practice was spatially interconnected.

Sensoriality of Public Spaces and Events

Public spaces and events create the setting for forms of sensorial experiences that are different from those encountered in private and mundane sites and behaviour that were extremely out of the ordinary were encouraged during public festivities., such as feasting. (Inomata 2020, pp248) Many ritual vessels in relation to food offering and

feasting has been found at Kophinas showing that the communal consumption of food was part of the activities that were taken place during the ritual festivities.

On the other hand, the sensory dimensions of public events remain closely connected to everyday life. This is evident at Kophinas, where archaeobotanical remains recovered from the sanctuary include items typically associated with domestic contexts (Henkel and Margaritis 2025).

The purpose of public events is to create intense sensory experiences and emotional reactions (Inomata, 2020). Sensorial stimuli have mnemonic properties and are important to permeate ritual activities with meaning (Livarda, Madgwick, 2018). Colourful clothing and jewellery, smell of food incense or smoke, sound of music or natural features such as echoes or waterfall, feasting were all part of an elaborate event focused to create a sense of unity and belonging and at the same time of social distinction among the participants. Your specific attire, body painting and position inside the social gathering could have resembled your rank inside the imagined community (Inomata, 2020).

I propose that the ritual space associated with the Kophinas sanctuary extended beyond the peak itself to include the sea in front of it. Clay boat figurines recovered as offerings at the peak suggest a meaningful connection between the sanctuary and the maritime world. It is therefore possible that during festivals the large pyre lit at the sanctuary was visible from the sea, visually linking the mountain and the water as part of a broader ritual setting. Participants may have observed the fire from their boats, sharing in the festivities from the sea while those gathered on the mountain engaged directly in the ritual, thus connecting both spaces within a single, shared ceremonial experience.

Collective Effervescence and Community

When people take part in large gatherings and public events, it is possible to experience collective effervescence. The term was coined by Émile Durkheim and describes a group experience of intense affect, in which individuals feel “swept away,” “become one with the crowd,” and often experience a sensation of awe (Kronstead, 2025, pp. 2). Nevertheless, Kronstead (2025) explains that merely being together in a crowd does not necessarily lead to collective effervescence. Instead, two additional conditions must be present. First, participants must direct their attention toward the same focal point at the same time. Second, what Kronstead (2025) terms a “high degree of bodily synchronization” must exist among participants, for example through clapping, chanting, or dancing.

Inomata (2020) notes that communities rely on material symbols recognized collectively as representations of their unity. At Kophinas, I believe the primary symbols were rooted in the natural environment: the mountain itself, its springs, rocky crevices, and the sea. Engaging with these features as part of the ritual landscape allowed participants to connect with one another and with the sacred dimensions of the site. As Inomata further observes, “most political organizations are imagined communities”

(2020, p. 249); individuals cannot meet every member, yet they can perceive unity. During public rituals, this imagined community becomes a sensed community, as shared values are reinforced through bodily interaction, communal movement, and the creation of collective memories. The community may include non-human members, such as deities, ancestors, or elements of nature, which are engaged through non-verbal forms of communication, like singing, dancing, or offerings.

Remains of grape pips with pulp still attached were recovered from an ash layer interpreted as a sacrificial pyre, showing that whole fruits were deliberately burned as offerings. As Insoll (2012) notes, not only animals but also plants could serve as sacrifices. I think the grapes may have been intended to nourish the metaphysical beings associated with the peak and to facilitate communication with them. Grapes are a versatile and meaningful food: they are easily transported, their sweetness and freshness could provide enjoyment during the heat of summer, and they can also be transformed into wine, giving them a dual significance. It is therefore possible to imagine people ascending the mountain carrying baskets of grapes as offerings to the metaphysical members of the community believed to inhabit or watch over the peak sanctuary.

During the peak sanctuary festivities at Kophinas, the imagined community becomes tangible, transforming into a sensed community. Large numbers of participants gathered closely, focusing their attention on shared ritual focal points, while rhythmic bodily interactions, such as chanting, dancing, and coordinated movement, generated states of collective effervescence. Through these embodied and multisensory practices, social norms and communal values were enacted and inscribed into the collective memory, allowing participants to directly experience communal values. Combined with offerings of clay figurines, boats, and food, including whole grapes, the ritual engagement integrated personal devotion, social cohesion, and interaction with the natural and maritime environment. In this way, Kophinas exemplifies how the Minoans merged landscape, material culture, and human experience to construct meaning, making the sanctuary not merely a sacred peak but a hub of dynamic, shared ceremonial life that connected mountain, plain, and sea.

CONCLUSION

Kophinas exemplifies the dynamic interplay between natural landscape, material culture, and human experience in Minoan ritual life. The sanctuary's topographical features, including its cliff, chasm, springs, and visibility from the sea, shaped ritual practices and reinforced symbolic connections to nature and the metaphysical world. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that offerings ranged from clay figurines and boats to food and grape, reflecting both personal devotion and communal participation. Sensorial engagement, such as climbing, fire, feasting, music, and dance, created intense embodied experiences, fostering social cohesion and collective memory. Public rituals transformed abstract social structures into tangible, shared experiences,

illustrating how Minoan communities constructed meaning through the integration of environment, ritual, and sensory engagement.

Importantly, the connection between the peak sanctuary and the sea suggests that ritual activity may not have been confined to the mountain itself. Future archaeological research at sea level could investigate traces of offerings, pyres, or communal gatherings, potentially revealing a broader ceremonial network that linked mountain and maritime spaces. Such studies would deepen our understanding of how the Minoans engaged with both landscape and seascape, extending the sensory and symbolic dimensions of their ritual world.

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