

The 'Export' Significance of Minoan Bull Hunting and Bull-leaping Scenes

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The excavations of MANFRED BETAK at Tell el-Dab'a have brought to light several fragments of Minoan frescoes many of which depict bull-leaping or bull-grappling scenes. Why was this activity typically Minoan? Before making an attempt to answer this question, it is necessary to point out that bulls and bull games were associated with Minoans consistently outside Crete in the eastern Mediterranean.

Starting with Egypt, we have depictions of Keftiu in some tombs of the New Kingdom. In the

tomb of Menkheperasob (Fig. 1) the Keftiu emissary carries the customary gifts. Is it an accident that no less than four are vessels or objects decorated with bull imagery? Especially characteristic is a charging bull statuette¹. This obviously signifies that, in the minds of the Egyptians, the Minoans were associated with bulls and bull-decorated objects; such objects would then typify Keftiu culture.

¹ N. DE GARIS DAVES. *The Tombs of Menkheperasob, Amenmose and Another*, No. 86, London 1933, 7, pl. IV.

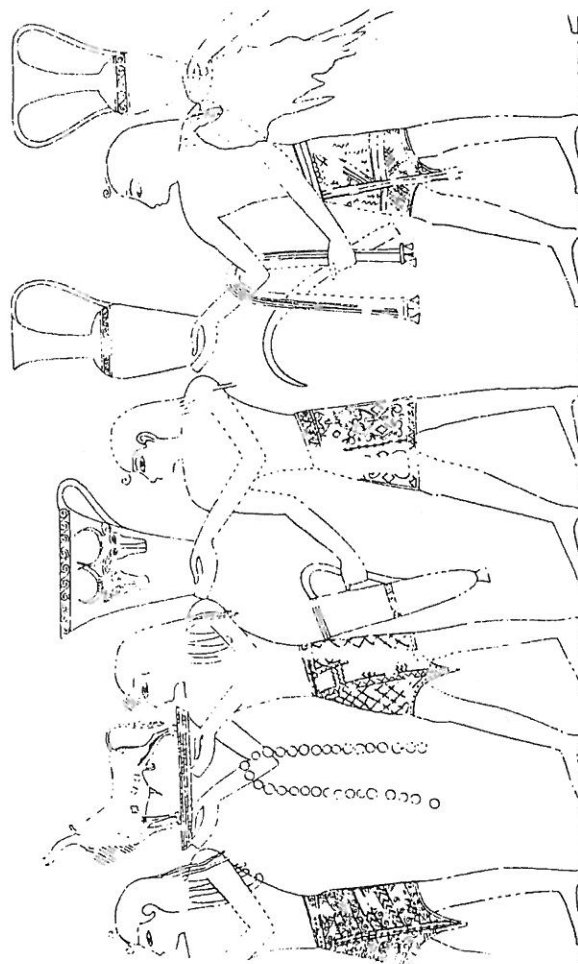
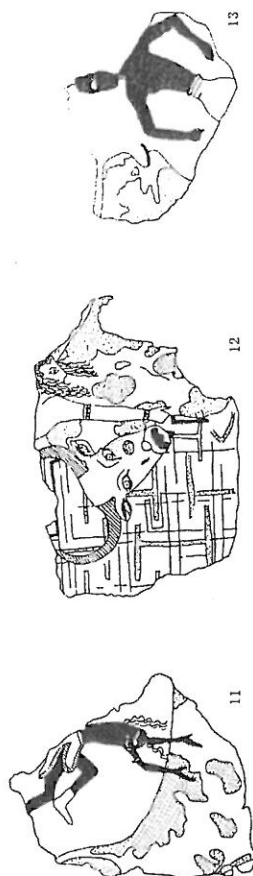


Fig. 1

Plate 3



Figs. 11-13. Minoan wall-paintings from Tell el-Dab'a; 14. Wall-painting from Çatal Hüyük; 15. Detail of 14; 16. Detail of 14; 17. Ashmolean.

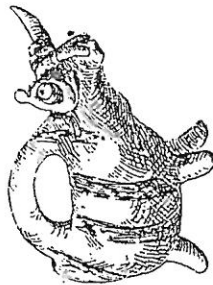


Fig. 2

In Syria we have seals depicting bull fighters or leapers. Their Minoan type kilt identifies the protagonists as Aegeans².

Closer to Crete, both in the geographical and cultural sense, was the Mycenaean mainland. Scenes depicting bull-games are numerous. We find them on seal-stones, frescoes, painted sarcophagi³. Bull hunting is also attested on imported Minoan or Minoanizing objects such as the gold cups from Vaphio⁴.

It is evident that scenes with bull-hunting, bull-wrestling or leaping were perceived as typifying Minoan achievement. I am using the word 'achievement' deliberately here because, as I shall try to show subsequently, bull-hunting and leaping represented an aspect of Minoan official ideology.

It is time now to turn to Crete itself. Bull-grappling appears quite early, in the beginning of the first palace period in the form of small clay figurines found in tombs. They represent men hanging from the horns of bulls. On one specimen from Kournasa (Fig. 2) the men are trying to grapple with an exaggeratedly large animal as though they are trying to subdue it⁵. Note that the activity is aimed at the

² H. SEYRIG, *Syria* 33, 1956, 169-74; D. COLLON, *First Impressions, Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East*, Chicago 1987, 156-57.

³ For seals see J. G. VONDERG, *The Iconography of Late Minoan and Mycenaean Sealstones and Finger Rings*, Bristol 1988, 166 ff. For frescoes see H. BULLE, *Orchomenos I*, München 1907, 79 f., pl. XXVIII. 8; G. ROEHL, *Trypa II*, Athen 1912, 165; S. HODG, *The Arts in Prehistoric Greece*, Harmondsworth 1978, 78. For sarcophagi see K. DEMAKOPOULOU and D. KONSOLA, *Guide to the Archaeological Museum of Thebes*, Athens 1981, pl. 42.

⁴ See MARINATOS, M. HINXEN, *Kreta, Thera und das Mykenische Hellas*, München 1973, pls. 200-207. Note that E. N. DAVIS, *The Vaphio Cups and Aegean Gold and Silver Ware*, Michigan 1983, argues that one cup was of Minoan and the other of Mycenaean manufacture.

⁵ A. J. EVANS, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos I*, London 1921, 188-190, fig. 137; K. BRANIGAN, *The Tombs of Mesara*, London 1970, 81, fig. 18.

subjugation of the animal. On another figurine from Porti, the bull has a net over its back⁶. I believe that this net refers to the bull's captivity: it is no longer wild but tamed and subjugated.

These iconographical motifs continue into the new palace period in Crete. Several bull rhyta from Psaira, Mochlos and Thera depict bulls with nets over their backs (Fig. 3)⁷. In addition, there is an explosion of several other iconographical variants of bull hunt and leaping/grappling. We find them on a variety of media: seal-stones and rings, frescoes, bronze figurines etc.

I shall be raising two questions. Were there female as well as male toreadors? And is there a relationship between hunting the bull and performing acrobatics over his back?

Starting with the first issue, it is the *communis opinio*, which originated with EVANS, that there existed female bull-leapers⁸. EVANS based this idea on the colour code: some toreadors are white. It should be noted that among the fragments of bull-leapers at Tell el-Dab'a, there are figures painted in light cream colour. Does this mean they are female? I believe not but let us go back to EVANS.

His observation was correct, namely white colour normally does designate females in Aegean art. Nevertheless, as I have argued elsewhere⁹, the colour

⁶ K. BRANIGAN, *The Foundations of Palatial Crete*, London 1970, 110.

⁷ A. J. EVANS, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos II*, London 1928, 239-260; SE. MARINATOS, *Excavations at Thera III*, Athens 1970, pl. 54; N. MARINATOS, *Minoan Sacrificial Ritual*, Stockholm 1986, 30-31.

⁸ A. J. EVANS, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos III*, London 1930, 207-222. Almost all scholars accept female bull-leapers. An exception is S. DAMIANI-INDELICATO, *Cretan Studies* 1, 1982, 39-47.

⁹ N. MARINATOS, in *Ariadne V. Festschrift S. Alexiou*, Herakleion 1989, 23-32.

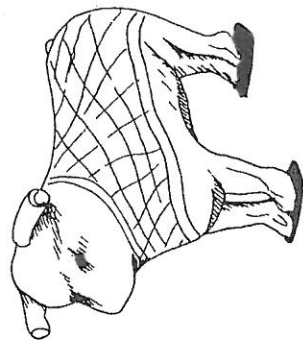


Fig. 3

To return to the Minoan white acrobats. That they are not female is shown by the fact that they have distinct male anatomy: broad torsos, articulated muscles shown as striations in the legs, no breasts (Fig. 4). Note that these are the *conventions for male anatomy* in Minoan art. Moreover, the white figures wear a distinctly male costume: a kilt with a

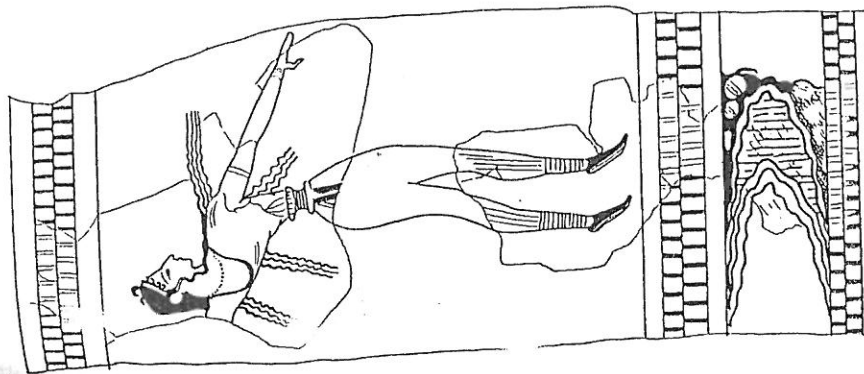


Fig. 4

is not absolute. It is important to note that the convention was often broken, adapted and modified in other cultures. In Egypt, for example, females are as a rule painted with yellow skin whereas males with red. Yet there are exceptions: queen Nofertari appears with a reddish skin in some scenes of her tomb¹⁰. In Archaic Greece also, the convention dark skin for males, light for females was the rule. Yet on the Eleusis amphora, the one with the scene of the binding of the Cyclops, the hero Odysseus is painted white (presumably to show his status)¹¹.

¹⁰ E. HOERNIG, *The Valley of the Kings*, New York 1990, 195.

¹¹ J. BOARDMAN, *Pre-Classical. From Crete to Archaic Greece*, Harmondsworth 1967, 90, fig. 50.

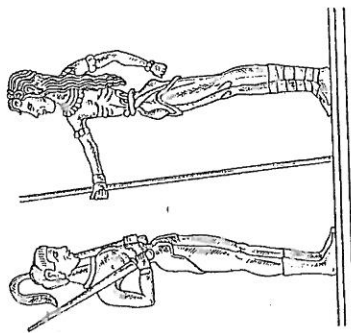


Fig. 5

pronounced phallus sheath. This kilt with the phallus sheath was perceived as characteristic of the Kefiti by the Egyptians and is worn by them in the tomb of Rekmire¹². I find it very hard to believe that women would wear a phallus sheath! To make this clearer a comparison is instructive. Compare the supposed female toreador from Knossos (Fig. 4) with the 'Chieftain' from the so-called Chieftain's cup from Hagia Triada (Fig. 5)¹³. Note especially: the broad torso, the striations of the legs (muscles), the boots and the characteristic kilt with the phallus sheath. The 'Chieftain' also wears jewelry similar to those of the toreador.

Another argument in favour of exclusively male leapers is that in *no other medium* showing bull-vaulting (such as rings, seal-stones, statuettes etc.) are there any female acrobats.

Given the above observations, it is difficult to believe that the white colour is an indication of the female sex in this case. Some other distinction is operative here which has to do with the youth of the acrobats. Thus, white acrobats are younger and less skilled, brown ones have attained the desired degree of skill.

¹² N. DE GARIS DAVIES, *The Tomb of Rekmire at Thebes*, New York 1948, 22, pl. XX.

¹³ For the white toreador, EVANS, supra n. 8, 216, vol. pl. XXI. For the Chieftain's cup MARINATOS-HINXEN, supra n. 4, pl. 102 and A. J. EVANS, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos II*, London 1928, 790-791, fig. 516.



Fig. 6

Perhaps the fragments from Tell el-Dab'a will throw light on this issue. On one of them the light-coloured leaper has a blue head visible beneath the long locks. Blue heads indicate shaved skin in Aegean art. What is more, partial shaving of the head indicates pre-adolescent youths in the Aegean as well as in Egypt. We thus have an important correlation here: the youth of the acrobat is indicated both by the colour of the skin and the partially shaved head¹⁴. For blue heads in Aegean art the Thera frescoes offer the best parallels¹⁵. We shall not pursue this any further here. Suffice it to say that activities centering around the bull seem to belong to a male domain.

A second question is the connection of bull-leaping with hunting. That they are obviously related can be seen on a Minoan ivory box (or *pyxis*) found at Katsambas near modern Herakleion (Fig. 6)¹⁶. On this scene we see two hunters running as though escaping from a charging bull. One holds a spear directing it towards the bull. This is obviously a scene of hunt but what gives it special interest is that there is a third human figure, a male acrobat who has caught the bull's horns and is performing a leap. The clear implication of this is that hunting and acrobatic skills were intimately related. Perhaps the formalized and ceremonial bull-vaulting was originally a distracting technique which evolved out of hunting and eventually became a formalized sport in its own sake. The significance of the two activities is slightly different. In hunting the objective is to kill or catch the bull; in leaping to make the animal look inefficient *vis à vis* the human adversary. Bull-leaping then, can be seen as a *display of human skill and intelligence*.

There is another piece of Minoan art which should be discussed in this context: a stone vessel,

¹⁴ E. N. DAVIS, *AJA* 90, 1986, 399–406; R. KOEHL, *JHS* 106, 1986, 99–110.

¹⁵ Conveniently summarized in N. MARINATOS, *Art and Religion in Thera*, Athens 1984, figs. 18, 26, 42, 55, 75.

¹⁶ Hoon, *supra* n. 3, 122, fig. 111 (with bibl.).

and necklaces. Note the necklaces around the necks of the treader from Knossos (Fig. 4) and the 'Chieftain' (Fig. 5). The most important point, however, is to do with administration. In 1967 Barrs pointed out that impressions from identical or replica rings many of which bore *bull-leaping* representations were made in different sites on Crete, Gournia, Hagia Triada and Sklavokambos¹⁸. This shows that identical or similar seals have been involved in making impressions of gold rings at the above mentioned sites. Whoever their owners were, they were men of status and authority. It is likely, as Barrs argued, that they originated in Knossos. At any rate, the connection with official ideology is established beyond doubt through this administrative practice.

We can thus safely conclude that the aristocracy displayed its status in this activity. We can even explore a little further the mode of the self-representation of the elite of the Minoans and the meaning of their ideology.

It is a common occurrence in ancient art that wild animals are shown in combat with a human adversary. The contestants often face each other and the animal chosen is always a wild and dangerous one. It is beyond the scope of this paper to expand further on this; a few examples will suffice. On many a Mycenaean seal or dagger there are lion hunts where the hunter faces the lion¹⁹. Assyrian kings faced lions in adversarial combat²⁰. Egyptian pharaohs fought lions and chased wild bulls²¹. This brings us back to the idea of the bull as an adversary

¹⁸ J. BARRS, *Kadmos* 1967, 15–40. The theory of Barrs has been modified but not completely abandoned. See the recent discussion by E. HALLAGER in *The Function of the Minoan Villa*, R. HAGO and N. MARINATOS, eds. Symposium held at the Swedish Institute in Athens 1992 (forthcoming).

¹⁹ N. MARINATOS in *Celebrations of Death and Divinity in the Bronze Age Argolid*, ed. by R. HAGO and G. NEROUSSIS, Stockholm 1990, 143–148.

²⁰ See for example the reliefs from Nimrud and Nineveh: J. READE, *Assyrian Sculpture*, London 1983, pls. 33, 77–79.

²¹ K. LANGE, M. HEMER, *Aegypten*, München 1957, fig. 249.

the conquest of which confers prestige to the hunter. Yet, neither Egypt nor Crete were primarily hunter and gathering societies. The conquerors of nature's wildest creatures are at the same time the rulers and guarantors of an orderly society. Even in sophisticated 'Hochkulturen', the raw power of the hunter is admired; hence it is effective as a propagandistic tool.

The hunting, capturing and manipulation of the bull became the monopoly of the upper classes in Minoan Crete. Let us pursue this further.

It is not an accident that the palace of Knossos, the centre of power, was decorated with profuse imagery. Noteworthy is the presence of bull-frescoes in key areas of the palace such as the northern, eastern and western entrances; the anteroom to the room of the throne; the east hall. The eastern section of the palace yielded the well-known to-readers frescoes as well as ivory figures of bull-leapers²².

It was obviously to the advantage of the rulers of the palace to impress visitors with an iconography of power in which the conquering of the bull featured prominently.

Further, the Minoan aristocracy created emblematic images which appear on rings and seals of this period. Seal impressions with bull-leaping scenes have been found in various regions of Crete as we have seen.

We can now return to the Keftiu, bearing bull-decorated vessels to Menkheperasob and to the fragments of bull-leapers and grapplers found at Tell el-Dab'a. It is understandable that this imagery had 'export' value and that the Minoans wanted to be associated with it over-seas. Bull-leaping was more than a sport: it was the claim of the Minoan elite to have attained unusual skills of outwitting and conquering the wild bull.

²² Detailed description in N. MARINATOS, *Minoan Religion*, Columbia, SC 1993, ch. III. See also S. A. JAMERWALA, *Aegean Painting in the Bronze Age*, University Park and London 1990, 78–99.