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Examination of the iconography of the Minoan goddess as a nature goddess

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An Examination of the Iconography of the
Minoan Goddess as a Nature Goddess

by
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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts
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Date
An Examination of the Iconography of the Minoan Goddess as a Nature Goddess

The Minoans were a group of people who probably migrated to Crete from Anatolia around 3500 BCE. Their name is after the mythological King Minos and was given to them by Sir Arthur Evans, the archaeologist who excavated the palace at Knossos near Heraklion, Crete. These agricultural people developed trade routes throughout the Mediterranean area exchanging goods, ideas, and beliefs. This society flourished for the next two thousand years until its collapse around 1150 BCE. This collapse may be attributed to a number of causes: volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, fires, and floods, or the takeover first by the Mycenaeans and finally the Dorians.

As an agricultural people it follows that their religion and cult rituals were intimately involved with nature and nature goddess. That there were one or many deities cannot be proven. What we have to interpret from are the images the master Minoan artisans created on seal stones and rings, Kamares ware pottery, figurines, and on wall paintings. These images are the evidence of goddess worship in Minoan and Mycenaean religions. The goddess iconography points to a goddess(es) whose domain is nature in all its aspects.
PREFACE

In the winter of 1995 a fire destroyed the Malta, Montana Junior/Senior High School where I had been teaching since 1988. Lost with the school were many personal belongings, some replaceable, some not, and the Art History program that I had developed over the course of the previous seven years. The thought of starting over was overwhelming, but start over I did along with the rest of the staff. I made plans to return to Greece the next summer and start gathering information, slides, and replicas of artifacts to help rebuild the Art History program.

Then in the spring I was diagnosed with cancer. After the initial shock wore off and decisions were made about surgery, I began looking at life a little differently. Questions like, "what would I like to do with my life? do I have any unachieved goals?" kept cropping up. I had made plans to return to Greece and decided the cancer surgery would have to wait until after the trip – I had important goals to achieve first.

Revisiting Greece confirmed my interest in Ancient Greek art and sparked a desire to go back to school and work towards a Master’s degree in Art History. After surgery and the start of the 1996-1997 school year, I began pursuing this goal.

I entered Graduate School with much trepidation. The trauma of surgery had forced my body into the underrated throws of menopause. I wondered: how will I manage to sit attentively in class and refrain from removing my clothes as my body temperature soars to 120 degrees Fahrenheit? How will I remember anything when I am exhausted from awakening every hour either throwing off the covers as I lay in a puddle of sweat, or putting them back on as I chill down? I determined that if I could go through Graduate
School and menopause at the same time, there was nothing I could not do! And here I am today, a survivor of both.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my family for their love and belief in me; Dr. John Madden who guided my interest in the direction of the Minoan goddess; Mary Ann Bonjorni for encouraging me to pursue my artistic endeavors; Judy Blunt and John Roberts for their writing expertise; and finally, Rafael Chacón, my mentor, for his caring and endless encouragement and persistence that I achieve my goal.
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INTRODUCTION

The Minoan goddess (es) is a goddess of nature in all its manifestations: the life cycle of birth, death, and regeneration. This thesis is an exploration of the ancient Minoan goddess (es) through the iconography discovered on the Mediterranean islands of Crete and Thera. The thesis is divided into three parts: what we know of the history of the Minoans and Mycenaeans, their religion and the rituals they practiced, and the goddess iconography gives evidence that she is the goddess of nature in all its aspects.

Part 1 is an investigation of the history of the Minoan society. The Minoans, a name given to this group of people by Knossian excavator Sir Arthur Evans after the mythological King Minos, probably originated in Anatolia around 3500 BCE and brought with them their well-developed economy based on their former environment. These people developed trade routes throughout the Mediterranean area. They not only traded goods, they exchanged ideas and beliefs with their neighbors. By the Neopalatial Period Crete was becoming a cultural melting pot. Along with their cultural development came the use of written language. First Linear A then Linear B, imported with the Mycenaeans.

For the next two thousand years this agricultural society developed along religious lines as seen in their holy places beside springs, in peak sanctuaries on nearby mountaintops, and in caves. Their palaces, or regional centers, were also used for religious activity as well as for the dispersement of agricultural produce to the outlying communities.

The collapse of the Minoan society may be attributed to a number of causes: from volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, fires, and flooding, to the immigration and eventual
takeover of the Mycenaeans followed by the Dorians.

Religion and cult rituals associated with the Minoans and their goddess-worship are discussed in Part 2. Their religion was intimately involved with nature and the earth. The Minoans participated in sacrificial practices, making offerings to chthonic deities as well as celestial deities. Other rituals, such as dancing, tree shaking, and animal and bird disguises, were performed to celebrate the essential seasons in an agricultural society: planting and harvesting – spring and fall. They honored the life cycle of birth, death, and regeneration as characterized by their vegetation or nature goddess (es). Evidence for the practice of polytheism was found in artifacts dating from the Postpalatial period. Whether the Minoans were polytheistic or monotheistic prior to this period is still debated.

Part 3 is dedicated to the various iconographical images of the Minoan goddess (es) of nature that have been excavated at various sites throughout Crete and Thera. We will see images of the bird-goddess and the snake-goddess, and examine the significance of other goddess symbols, such as trees, bulls, horns of consecration, double axes, butterflies, lilies, sea creatures, lions, and fantasy beasts. We will see how skillfully the Minoan artisans depicted their goddess (es) and rituals, such as the circle dance, performed in celebration of spring and the renewal of life, as well as the rituals concerning death as seen in the sacrificial images found on a sarcophagus from the villa at Hagia Triada. The goddess iconography will point to a goddess (es) whose domain is nature in all its aspects.
PART I: HISTORY

Sir Arthur Evans and his site supervisor Duncan Mackenzie began excavating at Knossos, Greece, in 1899. Mackenzie kept continuous and systematic records of the excavation in his *Daybooks of the Excavation at Knossos*. These daybooks, as well as Mackenzie’s correspondence with Evans, lead many to believe that Mackenzie was responsible for interpreting the archaeological discoveries at Knossos. Although there have been complaints about the reconstruction Evans undertook at Knossos, that it reflects the Victorian mind-set of the time, scholars acknowledge that Evans and Mackenzie made profound contributions to our knowledge of Minoan culture, architecture, pottery sequences, script, religion, and iconography.

Evans and Mackenzie devised an impressive chronological system that correlated with Egyptian chronology. Mackenzie divided the main phases of the Palace at Knossos into the Kamares Palace (the Old Palace period), the Mycenaean Palace (the Neopalatial period), a period of decline he called the ‘re-occupational phase,’ and then a later phase that he considered non-palatial and decadent in nature. Evans is attributed with distinguishing the three main periods within Minoan culture: Early Minoan, from c.3000 to 2000 BCE, Middle Minoan, from 2000 – 1600 BCE, and Late Minoan, from 1600 –

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1150 BCE.²

This system is currently modified because Egyptian chronology was based on historical events and Minoan chronology was not. Today’s scholars refer to Bronze Age Minoan chronology in two ways. Some use the general terms of Prepalatial, Palatial (composed of two parts: Protopalatial and Neopalatial), and Postpalatial. Others refer to the Early Minoan, Middle Minoan, or Late Minoan periods. To simplify matters, in this paper I will use the Prepalatial, Palatial, and Postpalatial terms, along with specific dates when available.

During the Prepalatial Period (3500-2100 BCE)³ Crete moved out of the Neolithic stage. Cultural development on Crete during this period was gradual and relatively modest. Recent scholarship has found no evidence of any social ranking during the time between 2900-2200 BCE. There is some question as to whether the Minoans had immigrated from Anatolia (Çatal Hüyük) or North Africa or whether they were the same people who had inhabited Crete since Neolithic times.⁴ L. Vance Watrous believes the first settlers were probably from Anatolia and arrived with a well-developed continental economy based on their former environment.

The colonization of Crete at Knossos was motivated by Crete’s advantageous environment. It was an unspoiled land with fertile soil, abundant water and trees, and a moderate climate. These physical characteristics were conducive to successful harvests of wheat, barley, grapes, figs, and apples. The people also raised sheep, goats, cattle and pigs

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and exported their surplus via the sea to other sea-faring countries. Watrous believes these first settlers were probably from the Anatolian coast, basing his premise on the fact that Knossian bread wheats were known in Anatolia, but not in the earliest mainland sites of Neolithic Greece.5

We do know from excavated stone vases that the Egyptians influenced Minoan stonecutters’ techniques. Crete seems to have been a cultural melting pot between Egypt and the Greek mainland. We also know there were close contacts with the Cycladic Islands and the Near East during the Prepalatial Period. This became evident when much obsidian, copper, and Cycladic pottery was found on Crete in the excavated Final Neolithic tholoi.6 Small towns developed around 2300 BCE. Excavations at the site of Fournou Korifi in south Crete reveal that these Early Minoan people kept livestock, made pottery, spun and wove, and cultivated grape vines and olive trees. This site is considered a collective settlement showing no signs of social hierarchy.7 An unknown widespread turbulence interrupted this society and many settlements were abandoned.8

The Palatial era is divided into two subdivisions: First Palace or Protopalatial and the Second Palace or Neopalatial. The Protopalatial period extended from 2100-1750 BCE. During this time, order seems to have been restored and urbanization was achieved. Along with the expansion of towns came constructions of “palaces” in central and eastern Crete. Architectural historian Vincent Scully states:

From roughly 2000 BCE onward, a clearly defined pattern of landscape use can be recognized at every palace site... Each palace makes use ... of the

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5 Watrous, 699.
6 Watrous, 701.
7 Goodison, Lucy and Morris, Christine, Ancient Goddesses, (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 120.
8 Watrous, 753.
same landscape elements ... first, an enclosed valley of varying size in which the palace is set; ... second, a gently mounded or conical hill on axis with the palace and lastly, a higher, cobble-peaked or cleft mountain some distance beyond the hill but on the same axis. 9

These palaces show a shift to a more centralized social hierarchy. 10 Since the excavation of Knossos by Evans and Mackenzie began, three more major Neopalatial palaces with Protopalatial predecessors have been excavated on Crete. Phaistos, in the south, was excavated by an Italian team in the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1915 Joseph Hadzidakis began excavating at Malia, in central Crete, but a full excavation was conducted later by a French team that continues today. Zakros, in the east, was excavated in the 1960s by a Greek team. In 1998 a fourth palace site was excavated at Galatas in the Pediada plain near Kastelli. 11 There is a widespread belief, although no discovery, that other palaces may have existed in Chania in western Crete and in the Rethymnon area in west-central Crete. 12 These so-called “palaces” all have large central courtyards and the buildings are sophisticated stone structures. They seem to have been centers for storage and distribution of large amounts of agricultural produce for the surrounding communities, and thus have been renamed ‘regional centers’ by some scholars. Phaistos and Knossos stand apart from the rest because of their larger sizes and architectural sophistication. 13

There have been smaller court-centered buildings discovered in Petras in northeastern Crete in 1985, Makriyialos in southeastern Crete in 1973, Gournia and the

10 Goodison, 120.
13 Rehak, 102.
villa at Hagia Triada in the early years of the twentieth century. Because of the discovery of numerous court-centered buildings, there is some question as to whether these buildings were palaces or wealthy villas.14

During the Prepalatial period the people of Crete lived in closely built villages and towns. In these villages there was often a central community building where craftwork, cooking, and religious ceremonies seem to have been held. These community buildings evolved into what was later referred to as ‘palaces,’ but today scholars believe they were temple-palaces: centers of religion, economy and administration.15 The discovery of mountain top sanctuaries, or “peak-sanctuaries”, with votive figurines indicates a migration from the towns and villages to outlying holy places where the people could practice cult rituals.16 Later, around 1850 BCE, Cretan-made cult items such as phalli, bull vases with acrobats, Snake Goddess figures, bird-like vessels, and sheet-bronze double axes, were found in palatial settings, leading to the belief that these sanctuaries eventually came under palatial control.17 It would behoove the ruling elite to gain control of the peak sanctuaries and incorporate them into the emerging palace-oriented religion, thus establishing the ideological primacy of the palaces over neighboring areas.18

At one time scholars believed that the sea and an effective navy protected the island of Crete and that since there was no fear of intruders, there was no need for fortifications. The Minoans therefore devoted all their energies to craft development and

14 Ibid, 103.
16 Marinatos, (1993), 2-4;
17 Branigan, Keith, Dancing With Death: Life and Death In Southern Crete c.3000-2000 BC, (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, Publisher, 1993): 139
trade. Greek archaeologists Stella Chryssoulakis and Maria Agouli question this belief. In recent research they have identified the remains of some sixty Minoan watchtowers, walls and roads scattered around a small area in eastern Crete (between Palaikastros and the Palace of Zakros in the Karoumes Bay area). The watchtowers were positioned so as to be within site of one another, they were sturdily built and were connected by winding roads, which leads them to believe they had military purposes. The pottery excavated at these sites dates to the Protopalatial period, around 1900 BCE. In light of this new information, some scholars still maintain that the Minoans devoted much effort to craft development and trade.

Along with cultural development came the use of written language. The Minoans used two scripts during the Protopalatial period: Cretan Hieroglyphics and Linear A. The major palaces of Phaistos, Knossos, and Malia acted as regional power centers during both the Protopalatial, or First Palace (c. 1925-1750 BCE) and Neopalatial, or Second Palace (1750-1425 BCE) Periods. During the Protopalatial Period the palace at Phaistos used Linear A while the palaces at Knossos and Malia used Cretan Hieroglyphics. Carl Knappett believes these palace centers had their own professional managers to oversee the processes of accumulation and dispersement of the economic resources to the polities. These different systems imply that each palace center’s political economy was organized and managed along different principles: Knossos, in the north, and Malia, in the east, were centralized and Phaistos, in the south, working with second-order centers such as Monastiriki, was decentralized.²⁰

²⁰ Knappett, Carl, and Schoep, Ilse, “Continuity and Change in Minoan Palatial Power,” *Antiquity*, v74
We see technological advancement displayed in the engraved seal-stones, rings and other jewelry, and Kamares ware pottery produced during the Protopalatial Period. Excavations at Malia of the town complex close to the palace, called “Quartier Mu”, uncovered workshops that had been occupied by skilled artisans in the production of Kamares ware, stone vases and seal-stones. These luxury items were crafted for the elite. The Minoans continued establishing contacts and furthering trade around the Mediterranean, enhancing the development of what became the Minoan Empire.

Protopalatial seal-stones, Kamares ware cups and jugs, and Minoan cooking vessels were excavated at Miletus within the Anatolian Middle Bronze Age architecture levels, thus confirming there were trade connections between Crete and Anatolian cultures. Steven J. Garfinkle suggests that there was trading between the Canaanites and the Minoans during the Late Middle Bronze Age because the images on fresco fragments found at Tell Kabri in Israel are similar to Minoan frescoes found at Akrotiri on the island of Thera.

Some scholars believe that around 1700 BCE a massive earthquake destroyed these first palaces. The cause of the interruption between Protopalatial and Neopalatial periods has not been positively determined, though there is evidence that there were major destructions during the time between 1900 – 1700 BCE; there were fires at Knossos, Phaistos, Malia, Monastiriki, Apodoulou, and Galatos, for example. The

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21 Pedley, John Griffiths, Greek Art and Archaeology, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1993), 53. Kamares ware pottery was first found in, and subsequently named for, the Kamares cave sanctuary located on Mt. Ida overlooking the palace at Phaistos. There are two types: the eggshell thin tableware and a heavier ware used for storage and pouring vessels. Decoration is white on black with yellow, red, and orange in a polychrome style. Designs range from abstract spirals to natural forms excluding human figures.

22 Knappett, INFOTRAC, 14 pages.


centralization process during the first palace periods probably met with resistance, yet there does not seem to be any significant break in Minoan culture.\textsuperscript{25}

While the Minoan culture developed on Crete, the Greek mainland was also experiencing change. The mainland was part of Old Europe, which had remained basically undisturbed for 2000 years until around 4400 BCE, when nomadic tribesmen from the East arrived. Marija Gimbutas called them Kurgans.\textsuperscript{26} They originated in the Russian steppeland between the Dnieper and Volga Rivers. Luigi Cavalli, a geneticist at Stanford University corroborates Gimbutas' theory. He discovered genetic evidence for a population expansion into Eastern Europe, originating from an area "that almost perfectly matched Gimbutas' projection for the center of Kurgan cultures."\textsuperscript{27}

Additionally, geographer Robert DeMeo used a vast database and computer generated models of climatic changes and human migration patterns around the world beginning in the Paleolithic period. His results show that climatic changes caused drought and desertification in the area he calls 'Saharasia,' which forced massive human migrations into Eurasia from the Middle East and Kurgan steppeland around 4000 BCE.\textsuperscript{28}

The Kurgan tribes entered Old Europe in three waves: 4400-4300 BCE, 3500 BCE, and 3000 BCE. The Kurgans did not destroy the naturistic culture of Old Europe, but rather partly assimilated and partly subordinated it. They brought worship of a sky-god that wielded an axe and thunderbolt, and they brought the horse, which allowed them to cover great distances in a relatively short amount of time. The Kurgans were

\textsuperscript{25} Rehak, 100.
\textsuperscript{26} Baring, 79, 109.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 84.
hierarchical, dominated by the most powerful males, and had a male priesthood.

Their burial customs differed greatly from the Old European customs. In Old Europe they buried all people with equal respect; they were egalitarian both economically and sexually. After the Kurgan immigration, burrow graves appear for the first time containing evidence of a privileged male society. They practiced human and animal (the horse in particular) sacrifice and immolated the living wives, children, and slaves, along with their deceased chieftains. Weapons and gold were also included in these graves. Traditional towns and settlements in the Kurgan’s path began to disintegrate, as did their pottery, shrines, frescoes, and sculptures. The Kurgans migrated southward into western Anatolia and the Macedonian plains, building massive rock walls along the way; examples still remain in Mycenae and Tiryns. Continuous migration resulted once their path of invasion was established.

The Swedish scholar Martin P. Nilsson referred to the lords at Mycenae, who migrated from Ionia in Anatolia, as barbarians because they lacked refinement and artistic culture. Intelligent and skilled in the ways of war, they appreciated culturally superior foreign civilizations and found them easy to conquer. This resulted in the Mycenaean absorption of Minoan civilization.

Once the Mycenaeans learned shipbuilding, travel to Crete was inevitable. Though there were intervals of peaceful relations, the Mycenaeans continued their absorption of Minoan culture, importing to the Greek mainland not only precious booty, 

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29 Ibid, 83.  
30 Baring, 82.
but also Cretan artisans and workers by marriage or slavery. Eventually new peoples from the north migrated into the Mycenaean strongholds. Some scholars believe the Achaeans, who superseded the Ionians, invaded and seized control of Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations around 1800 BCE.

The Neopalatial period covered the years from 1750-1450 BCE. The palaces were rebuilt on a grander scale at Knossos, Phaistos, Malia and Zakros. Linear A script became dominant all over Crete. Administration, represented by the Linear A tablets, was conducted at many different levels as well as at the palatial centers, thus increasing the degree of decentralization. The plans of these palaces are similar enough to imply some form of unification throughout the island. The areas for storage and distribution decreased, while areas for ceremonial activities increased. Accessibility of the palaces from the outside was restricted and the central courts were reduced in size.

The ruling class was thought to have been religious officials who used their religion to support a political system in the palaces and villas. The creation of open areas, probably used for large gatherings, the storing of cult equipment, and the lack of identifiable cult buildings, supports the idea that Minoan religion was theatrical and performative in nature. These palaces were adorned with wall paintings. Naturalistic floral and marine style pottery developed. The industries of jewelry making, faience, ivory and bronze working increased, and there were advances in the complexity of the

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33 Knappett.
34 Rehak, 103.
35 Rehak, 147-148. This type of performative religion as an aspect of politics was practiced in Egypt and the Near East.
scenes depicted on seal engravings. The Minoan Empire was expanding its influence in
the Aegean islands, especially to Thera, as its economy flourished.  

The final period, the Postpalatial period, lasted from around 1450 to 1100 BCE. There was an influx of mainland Greeks who introduced their language, modifying Linear A script into Linear B script. The essential cultural characteristics of the Minoans seem to have remained the same. The religious iconography and symbols remained stable, although not static. There was widespread destruction on the island of Crete around 1450 BCE. Only the palace at Knossos survived. Virtually all other palaces and mansions were destroyed. Some scholars attribute this destruction to either a Mycenaean takeover, a Knossian takeover, earthquakes followed by fire, or a volcanic eruption on Thera. One or more of these events initiated the decline and the eventual demise of the Minoan society.

Traditional dating has the eruption on Thera around 1500 BCE. P. I. Kuniholm’s Aegean Dendochronology Project supports a date of around 1628 BCE by using a 7,000-year-old sequence of tree rings. The project promotes the belief that this eruption created a global-cooling cloud of dust that affected tree growth. Some Danish geologists date the eruption to around 1645 BCE (plus or minus 20 years) by looking at signs of volcanic ash in the Greenland ice sheet. Some scholars believe the ice core

37 Ibid, 4, 244.
39 CORINA, the Cornell Ring Analysis Program
layers and tree rings do not provide satisfactory dating for the eruption on Thera. With this approximately one-hundred-fifty-year discrepancy between the traditional date of the eruption and current methods for dating it, much debate has ensued concerning the demise of the Minoan society.

Joe Monaghan developed a theory about the Minoan extinction on Crete after the volcanic eruption on Thera from a mathematical technique called Smoothed Particle Hydrodynamics (SPH) designed to determine the formation and behavior of a tsunami created when a volcano erupts. If a tsunami did hit Crete and devastated the northern shoreline area, many Minoan people could still have survived, but their food sources would have been greatly damaged. The damage comes when the waves begin receding. The churning current carries much debris and as the waves recede, the land is scoured. The waters would also have salinated the chewed-up fields, ruining the cropland for many years. The volcano itself may have polluted the sea as well, killing off the Minoan’s fish stocks. Such devastation would have weakened the Minoan society making it susceptible to change or even attack.

An article by Oliver Rackham countering this theory appeared in New Scientist two months later. Rackham’s premise is that the eruption on Thera was not as huge as was previously thought and the damage to Crete was light enough that it recovered quickly. Excavations conducted along the northern coastline of Crete found no signs of any destruction from a tsunami, but Theran ash and pumice have been found on Crete at Gournia, Knossos, Malia, Nirou Chani, Pyrgos and Vathypetro. There were larger

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deposits from the Neopalatial (1700-1580 BCE) levels at Palaikastro and Pseira and even in Anatolia and the Dodecanese. The winds must have carried the ash in an easterly direction because so much volcanic ash was found in eastern Crete.\(^{45}\) Excavations at the site of Mochlos on the northeastern coast of Crete, conducted by Jeffrey S. Soles of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, have uncovered seeds in the volcanic ash from the Theran eruption dating to about 1600 BCE. Upon taking a closer look at the remains of a three-roomed house, he discovered the house had been built on top of the ash immediately after the eruption, thus preserving the ash and the seeds.\(^{46}\)

The earlier eruption date of c.1628 BCE is currently the more accepted date and may possibly have marked the beginning of the gradual shift of power from the Minoans to the Mycenaeans. If the Mycenaeans did initiate a takeover at this time they may have spared Knossos and used it in a remodeled form as a base for their operations against the rest of the Minoan palaces and administrative centers. This would then explain the similarity between new features in and around Knossos and developments on mainland Greece that occurred at the same time.\(^{47}\) The burning of the Palace of Knossos preserved the Linear B tablets by baking them, thus proving the Mycenaeans were well established at Knossos during this time.

There are many theories and combinations of theories as to who or what caused the destructions on Crete. If a combination of causes, rather than one event, is accepted,


\(^{45}\) Rehak, 98.


\(^{47}\) Rehak, 147-148.
the collapse of the entire system could be easily understood. The mansions and palatial culture had ended with Knossos as the lone survivor. Minoan culture was disrupted and many of its features were rejected. The losses in art and culture are profound: Linear A, court-centered buildings, lustral basins, stone relief rhyta, stone lion’s and bull’s head rhyta, stone chalices and maces, relief frescoes, three-dimensional figures in faience and ivory, and iconographic themes such as marine motifs, enthroned women, and landscapes with women and animals. Scenes of men, processions of men and women, and the man-made world replaced the scenes of natural landscapes with women, animals, and men.\(^48\)

During the Final Palatial period on Crete, palatial administration evidently ended and the final destruction of Knossos occurred around 1300 BCE.\(^49\) This time period contrasts with the mainland where palatial administrations continued until around 1200 BCE.\(^50\) The people who survived were reduced to a subsistence level, their art was reduced to simple and crude objects, and the writing they had developed and practiced for years was lost.\(^51\) According to Nilsson and other scholars, the Dorians invaded and seized control of the Achaeans around 1200 BCE, a move easily accomplished because wars and expeditions had already weakened the Achaeans. The Dorian Invasion marked the last phase of a migration that had begun 3000 years earlier and culminated with the ultimate destruction of Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations around 1200-1100 BCE. The Achaean invasion had weakened the Mycenaean civilization causing the loss of its freshness and vigor; the Dorians gave the

\(^48\) Ibid, 149.  
\(^49\) Rehak, 99.  
\(^50\) Ibid, 149.
Mycenaeans their deathblow.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{52} Nilsson, 24.
Excavations have uncovered artifacts dating from thousands of years ago that seem to prove the existence of an ancient goddess-centered religion. There is much debate as to whether there was one Great Goddess that was multifaceted or whether there were multiple female deities. According to Gimbutas, this Great Goddess was a monolithic entity, embodying a feminine force that embraced life-giving and life-sustaining energies as well as death, decay, and regeneration. This goddess has been referred to as the Goddess of Regeneration because she was the giver of life and death, and therefore embodied the entire life process. Her fertility was more than just the ability to produce; Carol Bigwood calls it the "wonder of bringing forth, itself." By bestowing fertility and fruitfulness upon the earth and its living creatures, she was life-giving. In her life-taking aspect, she represented the underworld as its queen and withdrew the life she had granted.

Recent scholarship disagrees with the Great Goddess concept and tends to agree with Nilsson's older study of Minoan-Mycenaean Religion in which he argues that there were multiple goddesses as well as multiple gods. The concept of polytheism is more in accord with other Mediterranean cultures, such as the Egyptian and Near Eastern societies, in which polytheism was commonly practiced. Studying rings and seal stones,

53 Talalay, Lauren E., “Cultural Biographies of The Great Goddess,” American Journal of Archaeology, v104 n4, (Oct. 2000): 789-792. In her review she says Gimbutas' book is a "single-minded, narrowly defined and unrigorous sweep through the archaeology and mythology of prehistoric, historical and modern Europe and the Mediterranean. There is little not already published elsewhere by Gimbutas...many of her ideas are frustratingly vague and unsupported."

Marinatos found more than one deity represented. She states, "female polytheism certainly did exist and the goddess was several deities."

The iconography of the Minoan goddess reveals a nurturing goddess of nature: "this goddess portrays an important Minoan perception, the essence of the goddess, which can be established independently of the issue of the One or the Many." Marinatos points out that Sir Arthur Evans, who initiated the excavation at Knossos on Crete in 1899, admitted that there might have been multiple goddesses, although he himself could not distinguish them in the ancient iconography. Evans contended that through iconographical analysis he saw a unity in the symbolism that connected the goddess with nature in all its manifestations. Although we are not positive whether there was one multifaceted Great Goddess or multiple goddesses, we can accept that the religion of the ancient Minoans and Mycenaeans was goddess-centered and nature-based.

Sir Arthur Evans called the Minoans after Minos, the legendary King of Knossos. During the Neolithic Age, c. 7000-3000 BCE, colonization by people who brought agriculture, animal husbandry, and permanent settlement took place on the island of Crete, south of the Cyclades in the Mediterranean Sea. Between 3500 and 2000 BCE, the Minoan civilization began developing. The Minoans apparently lived in harmony with nature and their goddess (es). The evolution of this goddess-centered society and the numerous symbols associated with it are traceable through excavated artifacts from

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56 Marinatos, (1993), 165.
57 Ibid, 166.
58 Ibid, 165.
59 Markale, Jean, *The Great Goddess*, (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1999), 194. There is some conjecture that the word minos was only a title, not a proper name, for the king-priest who was the
Minoan and Mycenaean cultures.

From physical evidence, modern scholars infer that the Minoan religion was closely associated with nature; this follows since they were an agriculturally based culture. Cult activities occurred inside settlements, at tombs, and at mountain peak sanctuaries from c. 3500-1750 BCE. Marinatos believes that cult activities were concentrated around the tombs in the early times, and that a female deity of regeneration and death was in charge.\(^6\) The peak sanctuaries seem to have been a place for diverse cult practices during the Protopalatial period (2100-1750 BCE). A variety of deities were worshipped at these sanctuaries. Perhaps any earlier evidence of worship was lost if the offerings were made of perishable materials.\(^6^1\) Apparently these cult activities included dancing, animal and bird disguises, animal sacrifice, touching parts of dead animals, carrying vegetation, concern with bones, and possibly sun worship.\(^6^2\)

These rituals and the goddess-centered religion were intimately involved with nature and the earth. Bones of bulls, goats, sheep, deer, and rams, as well as ceremonial or symbolic double-axes, were found in various cult places, encouraging the belief that sacrifice was a part of the cult practices. Some offerings were sent below to the chthonic deities by burying the meat, while other offerings were sent upward to the celestial deities by burning it. Both types of ritual were practiced at peak sanctuaries and in caves. Examining the remains of animal bones, Marinatos concluded that they also ate the sacrificial animal, which is not surprising since this is a universal custom.\(^6^3\) Cretan

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\(^6^1\) Marinatos, Nanno, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 95.08.11, Response to James C. Wright, 116, 123-126.
\(^6^2\) Goodison, 115, 120.
religion, however, was not only a cult of the dead. Sex, birth, death, and rebirth were also celebrated in their rituals. The dead were buried in womb-like tholos tombs that faced eastward, as if the power of the sun could assist rebirth from the womb of the Mother Earth. These celebrations showed the interconnectedness of all aspects of the life cycle.

One of the earliest forms of ritual may have been the circle dance accompanied by music. This dancing ritual may have been practiced at the tombs themselves. Paved areas of slate, found near tombs and dating c.2900-2200 BCE, covered areas 6m wide and 50m long. Evidence to support this theory was found in the form of a clay model of four nude females in a circle with their arms linked shoulder to shoulder (fig. A). A low wall with models of four horns of consecration surrounds them. This piece was found at the tholos tomb at Kamilari and dates from between 1450–1300 BCE. A second painted clay model (fig. B) also represents the circular dance and dates from c. 1400-1100 BCE. It shows a group of women holding one another’s shoulders while another woman plays a lyre in the center. In later years this dance was called the geranos or crane dance. The return of cranes to Crete meant the return of spring, and the dance was probably performed for New Year celebrations of regeneration. The dance may have been an imitation of the circling cranes and also the circling passageways of the legendary Labyrinth at Knossos. Homer suggested a link between dancing and the Labyrinth when he wrote of Ariadne's dancing floor at the Palace of Knossos:

And the renowned smith of the strong arms made elaborate on it a dancing

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65 Branigan, 129-130. Similar groups were found in Late Minoan Palaikastro, from the Geometric period in Olympia, and Hellenistic Corinth, both on the Greek mainland. This shows the longevity of the dance ritual and perhaps the deity for whom it was performed.

floor, like that which once in the wide spaces of Knossos Daidalos built for Ariadne of the lovely tresses. And there were young men on it and young girls, sought for their beauty with gifts of oxen, dancing, and holding hands at the wrist. These wore, the maidens long light robes, but the men wore tunics of fine-spun work and shining softly, touched with olive oil. And the girls wore fair garlands on their heads, while the young men carried golden knives that hung from sword-belts of silver. At whiles on their understanding feet they would run very lightly as when a potter crouching makes trial of his wheel, holding it close in his hands, to see if it will run smooth. At another time they would form rows, and run, rows crossing each other. And around the lovely chorus of dancers stood a great multitude happily watching, while among the dancers two acrobats led the measures of song and dance revolving among them.67

The festivals of the Sacred Marriage at planting time and the Harvest Festival at the completion of the harvest were perhaps the most important celebrations of the Minoan community. The process of planting seeds and waiting for growth and harvest symbolically represents impregnation and gestation. The Sacred Marriage, or divine union (hieros gamos), celebrated the procreative union of a vegetation goddess and her lover (perhaps a god also), to ensure a fruitful harvest to come. This ritual may have included the sexual communion of priest and priestess and men and women, symbolizing the sacred union,68 although in the Minoan iconography there is no explicit reference to a sexual union. These rituals may be celebrations related to Ariadne who was not only the daughter of King Minos but also the wife of Dionysus,69 god of wine, plant-life, and the fertility of the vineyard who was also associated with dance. Ariadne was originally a Minoan vegetation goddess, a goddess of spring. The celebrations, in

67 Homer, The Iliad, translated by Richmond Lattimore, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), Book 18, line 590-605. Also spelled 'Daedalus.'
69 During the Dionysian “orgies” (orgia is the Greek word for “mystery”) the people were overcome with a
all likelihood, occurred in the spring and in the fall after the harvest. They honored
death and resurrection, the life cycle, which she as a vegetation goddess characterized.
Her association with the fertility of the soil and crops would explain the fertility
symbols (clay phalli) that were found in the cemeteries.\footnote{70}

One of Crete’s ancient names is \textit{Chthonia}, after the Mother Earth Goddess.
The Greeks believed Demeter Chthonia, the great Earth Mother, was worshipped on
Crete.\footnote{71} We know from Greek mythology that Demeter was a vegetation goddess, a
mother-deity associated with the earth and its fruitful production. She was the goddess
of the birth of the world. Some symbols associated with this goddess were wheat, the
narcissus and the poppy, and her favored bird was the crane. All of these symbols are
seen in the goddess iconography of ancient Crete.

\footnote{70} Branigan, 131-136.
\footnote{71} Keller sites Logiadou-Platanos, S. and Marinatos, N., Eds, \textit{Crete}, translated by D. Hardy and N.
PART 3: GODDESS ICONOGRAPHY

Goddess-centered religion has probably been in existence since at least Neolithic and perhaps Paleolithic times; representations of breasts, hips, buttocks, and the pubic triangle are found on most of the early artifacts from excavations throughout Old Europe, (pre-Indo-Europe), c.10,000-3000 BCE. These representations of sexualized figures suggest an early belief in the goddess as a fertility figure. Goddess figures from Paleolithic Austria and France (figs. C, D) and from Neolithic Çatal Hüyük, Anatolia (figs. E, F) depict the typical fertility image of a female with enlarged breasts, belly and buttocks. Fig. F also shows this figure giving birth, emphasizing motherhood. Nowhere in Minoan iconography does a similar figure appear. The Minoan goddess iconography portrays a female figure with a trim waist and bare breasts: not a typical mother image although the figures with engorged-looking breasts could possibly symbolize a nurturing aspect. Modern scholarship considers the Minoan goddess to embody the entire life process of birth, life and death. The goddess does not represent fertility as in motherhood, but rather fertility in the life cycle demonstrated in this agricultural society through planting, harvesting, and regeneration.

We are able to follow the development of Minoan religion through the artifacts discovered at Minoan sites throughout Crete. The primary holy places were in caves and mountains, but rituals were also performed in household shrines as well as in shrines by graves or tombs, and by springs. These rituals and Minoan religion in

general were intimately involved with nature and the earth. The goddess is always placed in a natural setting, among flowers, trees, birds, and other animals. She is depicted sensuously bare-breasted, narrow waisted, and wearing a flounced skirt, emphasizing "femininity." Her adorants are usually women or animals. The cave, tree, and pillar, (a variant form of tree), were apparently manifestations of the goddess. The tree could symbolize birth, death, and regeneration: it is rooted in the earth, sprouts, flowers, withers, "dies" and then "grows" again in the spring. The cave suggests the presence of the goddess with its womb-like configuration and its stalagmites, which may have been representative of trees or sacred pillars. The conical hill represented the earth's fertile body and the twin peaks represented the horns of the bull, a "symbol of the earth's activating power." Minoan life was keenly attuned to nature, as was their goddess-centered religion.

The goddesses of Old Europe from Neolithic times were represented in various human, animal, and animal-human combinations. Nearly forty percent of the surviving figurines are of two hybrids: bird-woman and snake-woman. These images can also be found among the Minoans. The snake, a seminal symbol, suggests the life force. The energy exuded by the snake was sacred and powerful. Because the snake was believed to come from the depths of the waters where life was thought to begin, the snake

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73 Marinatos, (1993), 162.
74 Gadon, Elinor W., The Once and Future Goddess: A Symbol For Our Time, (San Francisco: Harper &
had a mysterious and primordial aura to it. The seasonal sloughing of its skin, its hibernation, and reappearance continued in late spring made the snake a symbol of the continuity of life and linked it with the underworld. The snake's powers, when combined with plants, were used in healing. A coiled snake represented a regenerative force and a vertically winding snake represented an ascending life force. This vertically winding snake may also be interchangeable with the tree of life.\(^7\) The snakes represent life and death. Life and death belong to the goddess as manifestations of her power to give and withdraw life.

The Old European snake-goddess reappears in Crete. A terracotta anthropomorphic vessel-figurine, dating from the Prepalatial period c. 2900-2300 BCE (fig.1), was found at Koumasa cemetery. The figurine represents a female with a snake wrapped around her shoulders and forearms. Standing 14.45 cm tall, she is a female with small but clearly formed breasts. The front of her body is decorated with a lattice pattern, a common decoration on many of the female figurines.\(^7\) She holds a pitcher from which nourishing liquid is poured. This vessel-figurine represents the nurturing power of the goddess.

A terracotta goddess figurine discovered at Petsofa and dating from c.2100-1800 BCE stands 16.3 cm tall. (fig.2) She wears a peaked hat and low cut bodice that exposes her breasts. The skirt is bell-shaped and is cinched at the waist by a coiled snake that wraps around her and down the skirt. The skirt is painted with vertical and diagonal tri-lines. She has a mask-like face and no arms. A similar figure dating from c.1600-1150


\(^7\)Branigan, 136; Goodison, 118.
BCE (fig.3) was found in the Shrine of the Double Axes at Knossos. She also has a bell-shaped skirt painted with horizontal lines, and it appears that she once had a headpiece. This figure's arms curve inward toward her body and end with snake's heads.

A Protopalatial (2000-1600 BCE) headdress of terracotta from Kophina (fig.4) resembles a tier crown from the front, but the back is a mass of writhing snakes.

Two snake-goddess figurines dating from c. 1600 BCE were found in a stone-lined pit, known as the "Temple Repositories," in an underground treasury of the central sanctuary of the west wing of the new second palace at Knossos. Probably the figures were placed in the sealed cist as a ritual foundation offering following an earthquake and the first palace destruction.\(^\text{78}\) There has been much controversy as to whether they represent priestesses or goddesses. Gimbutas refers to one as a Snake Goddess and one as a priestess.\(^\text{79}\) Marinatos thinks they are magical snake handlers like their Near Eastern equivalents: the snake was fought by male gods or tamed (handled) by females. Maybe the Minoans adopted this theme to show some special powers.\(^\text{80}\) Because the figures are not depicted in one of the widely accepted Minoan worship gestures with their arms raised in the sign of epiphany, some scholars assume they are images of deities rather than worshippers.\(^\text{81}\) Their physical attributes suggest that none of these figures represents the typical fertility, or "mother," goddess. They are small-waisted, narrow-hipped and have full, firm breasts rather than pendulous ones common to fertility figures (see figs. C, D, E, F).

\(^{78}\) Goodison, 124.  
\(^{79}\) Gimbutas, 130.  
\(^{80}\) Marinatos, (2000), 112.  
\(^{81}\) Goodison, 125.
Their sensuous femaleness is represented instead.

The first figurine from the Temple Repositories wears a tall headpiece (figs. 5, 6a and 6b) and stands 34.2 cm tall. She is made of earthenware and decorated with opaque colored glass faience. Arms stretched out in front of her, she holds the head of a snake in her right hand and its tail in the other, its body wrapped around her shoulders and back. Entwined around her tightly cinched waist and coiling up her arms are two more snakes, one of which is continuing its spiral up her cone-shaped headdress. Her bodice is open, exposing her full breasts, a symbol of nourishment, and on her belly are intertwined snakes, perhaps symbolizing the womb as a life-giving source.\(^2\)

The second figurine from the Temple Repositories (fig. 7), also of earthenware with faience and standing 29.5 cm tall, shows two dominant characteristics of Cretan art: grace and naturalism. Her stance with her back arched occurs when someone gives a respectful salutation to another. The arms come straight out from her shoulders with elbows bent and forearms up. An Egyptian influence is noted when comparing this Minoan goddess figure with the Egyptian deity Qu-du-shu (the sacred one). Although Qu-du-shu is depicted naked (fig. 8), her attitude of display is similar to the Minoan goddess figure.

In each hand, the snake goddess grasps a writhing snake in a gesture of divine assertion. A lion cub, the guardian of mysteries of the goddess, perches atop her pillow-like hat.\(^3\) The net pattern of her apron, already seen on the Koumasa vessel-figurine, suggests Paleolithic and Neolithic influences. This suggests to some scholars

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\(^2\) Baring, 111.

\(^3\) Marinatos, (1993), 157. Originally the head was missing and the present head was found among the
"she is a weaver of the web of life, which is perpetually woven from her womb." The apron lies over her seven-tiered flounced skirt. The snakes wriggle freely, suggesting she is holding them firmly without fear, not trying to control them. Rather than exuding power over the snakes, she seems to absorb and hold their energy. Fragments of a third figurine closely resembling the goddess with the tall headpiece were also found. The fragments are part of a skirt and apron and an arm with a snake coiled around it.

The bare breasts of these goddesses depict the comfort the Minoans must have felt in displaying their natural bodies. The fullness of the breasts suggests they are engorged as a source of life-giving nourishment. Both figurines appear to be in a trance, perhaps induced by a drug such as opium, which may have been used in their rituals. Baring believes this facial expression is a meditation upon the theme of regeneration. The poppy shows up frequently in the goddess iconography, reinforcing the theory of its use in rituals.

The Neolithic Bird Goddess re-emerges in Minoan Crete as a popular iconographic image. She has the body of a woman, but the head and wings of a bird. According to Baring, since Paleolithic times the bird was a messenger from the vast, invisible world. The Minoans may have believed the bird constituted "the supreme image of epiphany," the manifestation of the divine. This merging of the goddess and her attributes is similar to the Egyptian gods and goddesses whose heads are of sacred animals. Marinatos believes the bird is one of the sacred animals associated with the goddess and is her celestial artifacts in the Temple Repositories and assumed to belong to her.

84 Baring, 112.

85 Goodison, 125. Other ivory and gold Snake Goddesses (Boston and Fitzwilliam Museums) are considered by most scholars to be fakes.

86 Baring, 124.
Artifacts depicting goddess images are scarce during the Protopalatial (First Palace) Period. A pottery set (Kamares ware) found in the first palace at Phaistos from this period (c. 1900-1700 BCE), consisting of a bowl and a circular pedestal-table, is a promising example of goddess images. On the bowl (fig. 9a), which measures 18.4 cm in diameter, there are three beak-faced figures with large curls for hair. The center figure, probably a goddess, has no arms or feet visible and wears a loop-fringed robe, possibly a shroud; a lily or narcissus\(^8\) blooms near the foot of her garment. Two dancing figures flank the goddess. The two dancers each wear a bell-shaped dress that is decorated in a dotted pattern and are placed higher in the scene. The center figure, in her death shroud, appears to be descending into the earth. This may represent the end of spring and reminds us of the myth of Persephone, daughter of Demeter the vegetation goddess.

A similar scene is depicted on the portable pedestal-table (figs. 9b-d) that stands about a half meter high and is 30 cm in diameter. Here all the beak-faced figures wear the same attire, a dotted patterned bell-shaped dress. They, too, have large curls for hair. The center figure may be the goddess. Her upraised arms, holding lilies, are in a position that indicates a goddess, or a priestess emulating the goddess, as identified in later images. Two dancing figures that flank the goddess-figure are similar to the dancers on the bowl. The central figure is placed higher in the scene than the two dancers that flank her, perhaps signifying she has 'risen'; the coming of spring has arrived. Around the rim of the tabletop are female dancers bending over in a gesture of picking the lilies. The significance of the lily, a common symbol associated with the goddess, is that it is a spring flower and may be

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\(^{8}\) Marinatos, (1993), 156.
construed as a seasonal determinative. The repetition of the bent-over figures may be symbolic of a cult ritual since repetition can be a feature of ritual action. Female dancers are also depicted moving around the base of the table.

The skill and artistry involved in producing these objects suggests they are more than decorative pieces. The images on these ritual objects lead us to believe they were very likely used in the circle dance ritual (see Part 2: Religion). The bowl and table were easily transported to wherever the ritual dance was performed. The beak-faced dancing females may be priestesses wearing bird masks, emulating the bird goddess. They may be performing the crane dance (geranos) to celebrate the returning of the cranes and the coming of spring: the time of regeneration.

There are two Minoan seal impressions from Zakros, Crete, dating from 1500-1450 BCE that depict the bird goddess. On one seal (fig. 10a) the figure has a bird head, her arms upraised, with a fan of feathers extending downward from her large breasts. The other seal (fig. 10b) has the bird goddess in full figure. Her head again is bird-like and her wings are spread outward from her body. She has large breasts and wears a flounced skirt. Her legs are at such an angle that she appears to be dancing, which correlates to the practice of dancing as ritual. Another seal, (fig. 11) similar to the Zakros seal, depicts the bird goddess with the head of a predator, perhaps of a hawk or eagle, her wings outspread and wearing a tiered skirt. She appears to be dancing on this seal as well. The bird goddess is depicted on

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88 Baring, 116. She identifies the flower as a narcissus thus connecting the image to Persephone.
89 Marinatos, (1993), 149.
90 Goodison, 123; Marinatos, (1993), 149.
91 Goodison, 121.
92 Branigan, 136, thinks these are 'snapshots' of dances performed on the pavement outside the tholos tombs. Baring, 116-117, believes they tell the myth of Persephone and Demeter.
92 Measuring 3.9 cm.
Another seal from Palaikastro, Crete (fig. 12) with her wings extended and flanked by two dolphins. Beside her are two waterfowl flanking what seems to be a stylized plant. In fig. 12a we see the bird goddess depicted on a seal from Routsi. Feathers fan out beneath her bare breasts and she holds two large water birds by their necks.

The Mycenaeans later preserved and perpetuated the bird goddess in small terracotta figures with cylindrical bodies and wing-shaped arms (figs. 13 and 14). These figures date from c.1400 – 1200 BCE and are stylized and simplified. The small figures range in size from 10 to 20 cm. Their faces are narrow and beaklike, with eyes on either side of the face. Striped jackets top their cylindrical skirts, and they usually have a spreading, funnel-like headdress. The striping may represent feathers. The figures have been labeled Phi (Φ), Tau (Τ) and Psi (Ψ) because of their resemblance to these Greek letters. The earliest to appear was the Phi with elbows bent and hands resting on their hips. The Tau figures held their arms parallel to the ground. The Psi appeared last and have both arms extended upward at a diagonal as though spreading their “wings”.

There are other animals, emblems and symbols associated with the goddess besides the snake and bird. According to Gadon the supreme emblem of the Minoan goddess is the labrys, the Lydian name for “double axe.” The palace at Knossos was known as the Palace of the Double Axe (after Evans) and later became associated with the labyrinth. Evans referred to one of the larger rooms in the palace as the Hall of the Double Axes because this symbol was carved several times on the walls of the light-well to the west of the room. Also at Knossos was the Shrine of the Double Axes named after a small steatite double axe.


It was known as the *labrys* from its Lydian name, and the palace of Knossos was known as the Labyrinth in the sense of the House of the Double Axe. It was only later, when visiting Greeks saw the bewildering ruins of the ancient palace, that the name came to be applied to the maze, and the sign of the maze was set upon Greek coinage. In the palace as everywhere else the symbol was displayed as frequently and conspicuously as the cross in Christian buildings.\(^{95}\)

“Labyrinth” undoubtedly stems from the word *labrys*, and the maze of multiple floor levels, rooms and passageways that comprised this phenomenal palace corresponds to the myth of the Minotaur and the labyrinth (maze) at the palace of the legendary King Minos. The Labyrinth and the Palace of the Double Axe appear to be synonymous.

In two seal impressions (figs. 15 and 16), one from Hagia Triada and one from Zakros, we see male and female figures carrying, or in the presence of, double axes. In a drawn reproduction of a goddess figure (fig. 17), dating from c.1500 BCE and found at Knossos, we see her holding a double axe in each of her upraised arms, a pose reminiscent of the Snake Goddess holding the snakes aloft. Another reproduction drawn from a fresco at the Palace of Knossos (fig. 18) shows a female figure holding double-axes in each of her hands in the same manner. As the goddess exuded power while holding the snakes so she exudes power while wielding the double axes. Because she is flanked by worshippers, identified by their upraised hands in the gesture of epiphany, we may assume she is a goddess. These renditions may also symbolize the goddess’s dominion over life and death. The double axe was a sacred ritual instrument used in bull sacrifices. The focus of fertility was the bull, and his sacrifice renewed the life cycle.

The scenes on the Hagia Triada Sarcophagus, dating from c.1400 BCE, are

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\(^{95}\) Gadon, 96.
exemplary examples. This sarcophagus is made of limestone, covered in plaster and painted in fresco. Marinatos believes each side of the coffin represents one of the two major rituals of Minoan religion. In fig. 19, a drawn reproduction illustrates the ritual of the dead. On the left side (of center) a man is playing a lyre, a woman carries two containers, and another woman pours the contents of her container at an altar. Perhaps it is the blood of a victim being poured into a larger krater-like vase set between two tall double-axes with birds perched on top. The male figures in the middle face to the right and carry votive offerings of two calves and a small model of a ship. They approach a lone figure that faces them while standing in front of a tomb. Interestingly, this figure has no visible arms, but is wrapped in a shroud, and is much shorter than all the others. He has begun his “descent” so we may thus surmise he is the deceased and the others are involved in this ritual of the dead.

On the other side of the sarcophagus, (fig. 20), the ritual depicted is one of regeneration. In the center a sacrificial bull is tied on a table and is being bled, his blood flowing into a vessel sitting on the floor beneath his head. Two other animals (calves or goats) lay under the table waiting their turn for sacrifice. To the left of the animals stands the officiate, a woman wearing a long robe, plumed headpiece, arms extending forward with palms downward. More women dressed in long robes form a procession behind her. A man dressed in a long robe playing a flute stands behind the sacrificed bull. To the right of the bull another woman mirrors the same gesture as the officiating priestess, symbolically connecting these images. She wears a hide skirt, arms extended as though pouring a libation at the altar. Beyond the altar stands a double axe on a tall shelf, with a bird perched on top; behind it is a shrine with four horns of consecration and the sacred tree. The birds perched on top of the double axes during these two rituals depicted on the sarcophagus reinforce the association of the bird to the goddess as her celestial

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96 Marinatos, (1993), 32.
messenger. The significance of the double axe and the horns of consecration as part of the ritual are apparent by their position. The sacred tree, a symbol of regeneration, reinforces the goddess’ connection with nature.

A Mycenaean seal from c. 1500 BCE depicts the absorption of Minoan culture in a dramatic narrative form (fig. 21). In the center of the seal is the double axe, separating yet uniting the scenes on either side. The left scene shows a sacrifice. There is a row of six animal heads that look like sheep heads and, above them, a small figure covered by a Mycenaean warrior's figure-eight shield. This small figure holds a scepter or staff in his left hand and points to the severed heads with the other. This scene represents the life-taking aspect of the goddess. The counterbalancing scene on the right side suggests a corresponding life-giving aspect of the goddess, with its depiction of a prolific, fruit-bearing tree. A small female child reaches to pick the fruit of the tree.

The goddess sits to the right of the double axe, beneath the Tree of Life. Her association with the Tree of Life and the cupping of her right breast, as if an offering, signifies her nurturing power. She welcomes two priestesses by extending to them three poppy pods held in her right hand. Poppy was grown in great quantities in Crete and was undoubtedly used in rituals to elicit visions. The Snake Goddess’ trance-like gaze, as mentioned earlier, also suggests this visionary experience. The priestesses and the goddess wear similar clothing and snake-like headdresses. Between them, below the outstretched arm of the first priestess, is a small female figure ascending from earth. In one hand she holds a tiny double axe, and in the other a flowering branch. Below this figure are small shoots of vegetation. Because she has no legs, she appears to be "growing" out of the earth like the vegetation. Possibly she represents the daughter of the goddess and the emergence of new life, born from death in the principle of continuous renewal. This could be symbolic of the return of spring, and brings to mind the Greek

97 The principal of continuous renewal is when vegetation dies in winter and is born again in spring.
myth of Demeter and Persephone. That the scene appears to be a joyful one suggests this concept of rebirth after death or sacrifice.\textsuperscript{98}

The butterfly is one of the oldest symbols of transformation. When the caterpillar transforms into a butterfly it symbolizes one life being born out of another: a regeneration of life, where the soul survives death.\textsuperscript{99} Gimbutas believed the butterfly, a symbol of the soul\textsuperscript{100}, was the prototype of the Minoan double axe. The double axe and butterfly are composed basically of two triangles joined together at one of the points. The transformation of the butterfly to the double axe may have been influenced by the similarity of their shape. A seal impression from Zakros (fig. 22), dating from c. 1700 BCE, shows a goddess with butterfly wings. She appears to be naked and wearing a looped headpiece. Another example (fig. 23), dating c. 1600 BCE from Mochlos, shows a goddess, arms reaching straight up, with butterfly wings that closely resemble a double axe. On a Cretan vase from Mochlos (fig. 24), c. 1400 BCE, the goddess is half woman, half butterfly, with a stem-like columnar body, upraised arms and butterfly wings. On another Neopalatal vessel found at Hagia Triada in Crete (fig. 25), dating from c. 1400 BCE, the representation of the goddess as a butterfly is abstract enough to be taken as a double axe. These forms decorate the vase as an encircling band.

A pithos from Pseira, Crete, from the sixteenth century BCE (fig. 26), is elaborately decorated to depict regeneration. There is a double axe-shaped butterfly with a head comprised of concentric circles emerging from a small pillar, which may represent the tree of life. Bulls' heads and plants flank this figure. Between the horns of the bulls' heads are stylized lily-headed butterflies, again abstracted enough to resemble double axes. The Minoan butterfly appears in Mycenaean art as well. Stylized butterflies decorate a vase from the Mycenaean acropolis (fig. 27), dating from the fifteenth century

\textsuperscript{98} Baring, 114-5.
\textsuperscript{99} Baring, 73.
\textsuperscript{100} Gimbutas, 275.
BCE. These images become more abstract and geometrical with time and become frequent motifs throughout the Proto-Geometric and Archaic periods of Greece.  

The bull could easily have been the masculine counterpart to the goddess' female power. The bull is the foremost sacrificial animal but was not a deity. The bull and the horns of consecration are seen throughout Minoan culture. The bull, a sacred animal and symbol of potency, participated in many of the rituals in anticipation of the power of the goddess who would bring fertility and well being to the earth and its people. His embodiment of the raw, animal power of nature, exemplified in the Cretan ritual of bull leaping, may have been performed to invoke blessings from the deity. A poem that has survived through the centuries in Crete may give us a clue as to the significance of the bull leaping ritual:

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Leap for full jars
And leap for fleecy flocks
And leap for fields of fruits
And for hives to bring increase!
Leap for our cities
And leap for our sea borne ships
And leap for our young citizens
And for the goodly Themis!
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There is some thought that the bull-leaping games were part of the Harvest Festival and this ritual celebration culminated in the celebration of the Sacred Marriage by the High

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101 Gimbutas, 273-275.
102 Marinatos, (1986), 11.
103 This bull leaping ritual is depicted on a fresco discovered at the Palace at Knossos. The myth of the Minotaur is undoubtedly based on the Knossian bull-leaping games. As stories are told and passed down through time they are embellished and take on supernatural phenomena: hence, the half-man half-bull who devours young men and women in the maze at the palace of King Minos. We know the Palace at Knossos was a cult center where bull games took place. We also know from the palace ruins that it appeared to be maze-like. And the term labyrinth stems from the word for “double axe” which were also discovered in the palace in abundance.
104 Keller cites Harrison, (1913), 116-117. In later Greek religion, Themis was goddess of social justice and harmony and was the daughter of the Mother Earth Goddess.
Priestess and her consort.\textsuperscript{105}

The horns of consecration are the most ubiquitous symbol of Minoan religion and help us identify the shrines and altars in the iconography.\textsuperscript{106} The importance of the bull and its horns dates back to the Neolithic cultures of Old Europe and Çatal Hüyük, Anatolia. One concept of the bull as "son" of the goddess is seen at Çatal Hüyük where the goddess is shown giving birth to the bull as her child.\textsuperscript{107} As son, the Cretan bull may have been the visible image of the goddess' regenerative power. The horned altar dates back to ancient times, before Minoan civilization, and the double axe is frequently placed between the horns. The frieze around the courtyard and along the walls at the Palace of Knossos was formed by horns. They were also on the rooftops of household shrines, and on altars flanked by the goddess' double axes.

On a sardonyx seal stone from Knossos c. 1500 BCE (fig. 28),\textsuperscript{108} a goddess is shown wearing a crown of two sets of bull's horns on her head with a double axe inside the curve of the horns. Two griffins flank her. A seal impression from Zakros (fig. 29) shows a ram’s head topped by two sets of horns and flanked by two swan-like birds. Also from Zakros is a stone rhyton that depicts a mountaintop shrine (fig. 29a) with mountain goats, rocks and crocuses growing on rocky terrain. The horns of consecration top the various levels of the tripartite shrine. The niches represent altars used for communication with the divinity.\textsuperscript{109}

\textsuperscript{105} Keller.
\textsuperscript{106} Marinatos, (1993), 5.
\textsuperscript{107} Baring, 83.
\textsuperscript{108} 3 cm in diameter.
\textsuperscript{109} Marinatos, (1993), 119-121.
A model found at the peak sanctuary of Petsofas (fig. 29b) is in the shape of two large horns, one placed inside the other. There are three doorways with the center one topped and flanked by sacred horns. The significance of the horns of consecration and the bull cannot be overstated. Numerous bull figures found in caves and tombs reinforce the concept that bulls symbolized the promise of regeneration. "The complementarity of the male and female principals continued to evolve as a fundamental aspect of the goddess religion."110

Other animals and plants appearing in goddess iconography are goats, griffins, daemons, lions, dolphins, monkeys, crocuses, and lilies. The relationship between some of the animals and the goddess is one of harmony, even affection; she is depicted caressing or feeding them as they submissively flank her. She does not seem to force them into submission; they are submissive of their own volition for she is the goddess of animals and wild beasts, the precursor of Artemis. On a seal-impression from Chania (fig. 30) and one from Armenoi (fig. 31) the goddess appears to be feeding a goat or goat-like animal. On a gold ring from Mycenae (fig. 32) the seated goddess, calmly holds the leash of a griffin, a combination of two aggressive animals, the lion and the eagle, and embodying the power of both.111 Interestingly, the griffin offers no resistance, but rather he sits there as if by choice. That the griffin’s function as a divine guardian or attendant of the goddess seems apparent. Another seal (fig. 33) shows the goddess and griffin in what appears to be affectionate play. A Mycenaean seal (fig. 34) shows the goddess riding on the back of a griffin, again giving us another example of the harmonious relationship between goddess and beast. What is intriguing is the griffin is a fantasy creature that may

111Baring believes the griffin is a composite of three animals: lion, eagle and snake.
be representing a place beyond the everyday world. Besides the griffin and daemons, all other animals, birds and plants associated with the goddess are real. Perhaps these fantasy beasts, especially the daemons, say something about the changes in the Minoan religion once the Mycenaean influence began.

Another example of this Mycenaean influence is seen in a large gold signet ring from Tiryns, dating from the fifteenth century BCE (fig. 35). The goddess sits on a throne while four daemons approach, each carrying a libation jug to fill the cup she holds. These creatures appear to be lions standing upright wearing textured robes. The daemons are fiercer than lions. They are superior to animals and man, but are subject to the divine. Nilsson believes they are made of the stuff of gods, though they are not gods themselves. The skill of the execution of this ring leads us to believe a Minoan artist or an artist trained in the Cretan tradition was the creator.

The lion is the most powerful beast in the animal kingdom and therefore deemed the guardian to the goddess. On a ring impression found at Knossos dating from c. 1500 BCE (fig. 36), the goddess stands atop a mountain holding a scepter, with arm outstretched in a gesture of command and authority. Behind her to the left is a large shrine of bulls' horns stacked on top of each other like floors or levels of a building, possibly representing the palace at Knossos. The lions, her guardians, flank her on either side. Also on the seal, to the right of the goddess is a male figure. He stands facing her with his back arched and an arm raised in salutation, as if he is shading his eyes from the luminosity of her divine presence, as Baring suggests.

113 We see a rendition of this scene in the Lion Gate at Mycenae, although the Mycenaean lions are flanking
On a seal impression from Knossos (fig. 37) the goddess sits on a tripartite platform, flanked on either side by her lion guardians. Another gold ring impression, this one from Mycenae (fig. 38), shows two lions flanking a column (pillar) on which hang sacred garments associated with the goddess. Marinatos suggests the symmetrical arrangement of the goddess flanked on either side by the lions emphasizes monumentality. The ring impression emits the message of power rather than one of affection or interdependency.\(^{114}\)

Dolphin images were also used in association with the goddess, perhaps the goddess of the marine world. Because of speed, size and intelligence, the Minoans may have attributed special powers to the dolphin, similar to the lion and griffin.\(^{115}\) On the seal from Palaikastro (fig. 12) dolphins flank the bird goddess. On another seal from Knossos (fig. 39) a goddess holds a dolphin to her bosom, more an image of affection rather than power. A seal from Aidonia has a female figure, very likely a goddess figure, because she appears with upraised arms, flanked by two dolphins. Certain Minoan floors decorated with marine life, especially dolphins, belong to shrines.\(^{116}\)

The goddess is placed in a natural environment whether she is seated on a rock, under a tree or, on a manmade structure. Frescos from Acrotiri on the island of Thera (Santorini) offer much information about the goddess. One of the frescoes (figs. 40 and 41) comes from the sacred mansion called Xeste 3. The goddess sits on an elevated pillar.

\(^{114}\) Marinatos, (1993), 153.
\(^{115}\) Marinatos, (1986), 48.
\(^{116}\) Marinatos, (1993), 156.

\(^{117}\) Goodison, 127.
tripartite platform with a griffin to her left and a monkey on her right. The monkey is bringing her an offering of stamens. She wears a dress decorated with a crocus motif. Her earrings and necklace are ducks and dragonflies. Her hair is up in tiers with a bun on top and spiral locks in front, reminiscent of snakes (fig. 42). There are girls, or young women, involved in the ritual of gathering crocuses and bringing them in baskets as offerings to the goddess. There are a number of interpretations of this particular fresco: the most likely is that it could be illustrating the female rites of passage and cycle of renewal and growth. The fresco also shows that saffron was economically important and valued for its medicinal, culinary and dyeing qualities. Given the focus on the stamens, perhaps this goddess is not only presiding over ritual but also over economic activity – the harvesting of a highly valuable commodity. 117

On the ground floor, there was another ritual scene, possibly one of initiation, involving three females, each representing a different age group and all barefoot (fig. 43). This is referred to as the Adyton Fresco. The figure on the right is a young girl; she has a shaved head with scalp locks and no breasts. She appears to be unveiling her face as she looks backwards towards a shrine. A pillar, the column of life, composed of red lilies and red spirals topped with the horns of consecration from which blood is dripping, decorates the altar. Perhaps the blood of a sacrificial victim had been poured over the horns. We may assume the middle female figure is older because her hair is fully grown and she has larger breasts; one is exposed beneath her right armpit. The knot of a scarf replaces the more youthful forelock. She sits on a rock touching her head as if in pain. Her right hand touches her wounded foot while a crocus blossom falls to the ground as if dropped,

118 Marinatos, (1993), 208-209.
probably when she was hurt. The third female figure is the oldest. Her hair is long, without a forelock, and her breasts are fully developed. She carries a necklace as an offering probably to be deposited in the adyton. Marinatos interprets this fresco as one showing a festival to the goddess:

On the occasion of a festival to the goddess, girls were sent out to the hills to collect large numbers of blossoms for the divinity. This exodus from the city corresponds to the period of seclusion that we so often meet in rites of passage. But this excursion was also an ordeal because, if the girls were required to be barefoot, sooner or later they would get bloody feet. Walking on wounded feet causes pain – which is precisely the purpose of the ordeal: to teach endurance of pain and familiarization with one’s own blood. The cause of the wound of the initiate in the adyton fresco can thus be linked with the crocus gathering depicted on the level above.¹¹⁸

In fig. 44 we see another example of the symbolic relationship between the goddess and the crocus. The crocus motif decorates these small, faience, votive robes and girdles from the Temple Repositories at Knossos (where the Snake Goddesses were discovered). These may represent or make reference to the ritual performance of offering a robe to or actually robing a deity.¹¹⁹ In frescos from Thera and Knossos there seems to be a definite link to the cult of this goddess. For instance, the landscape scenes with rivers, mountains, monkeys, birds, crocuses and other plants from Knossos, House of Frescos (fig. 45) and also from Thera (c. 1500 BCE), are linked to this goddess cult. The energy exemplified in the plants and animals represent the energy of the goddess.¹²⁰ The landscape is her domain.

The lily too was not just a decorative motif, but also one of symbolic significance, similar to the papyrus and lotus of the Egyptians. On a gold seal ring (figs. 46a, 46b) found in a tomb at Isopata, near Knossos and dating from c. 1450 BCE, we see an epiphany scene showing a goddess, priestesses and a child in a field of lilies. The goddess

¹¹⁹ Goodison, 125.
¹²⁰ Gimbutas, 190.
is the central figure and appears to be descending to earth among snakes and lilies. The two priestesses on the left and the priestess on the right have their arms raised in the gesture of epiphany. All the figures are similarly dressed in a multi-tiered skirt with their breasts bared.

Lilies appear on other Minoan seals and frescos. In fig. 47 a goddess smells lilies that are placed within the horns of consecration set on top of an altar. She is the divinity because she is enjoying the fragrance of the flowers that adorn her altar. If she were a worshipper, she would be portrayed as offering the lilies. A goddess stands in a meadow of flowers, holding a staff and flanked by birds in fig. 48.

Marinatos mentions a seal impression that shows a hand offering a lily as well as some frescoes from Amnissos and Thera that have lilies as the only subject matter. A fresco from the Hagia Triada (fig. 49) shows a goddess seated on a platform supervising a scene of flower gathering by her female attendants. Among the plants depicted in the fresco are crocuses and lilies. Birds, goats and felines, perhaps domestic cats, also populate the landscape, the domain of the goddess.

In the Ring of Nestor (fig. 50) the many images of the goddess are combined in a scene of regeneration. A peasant found the Mycenaean ring, c.1500 BCE, in a beehive tomb at Pylos in the Peloponnese. The scene may represent what the Minoans and early Mycenaeans believed was afterlife. The Tree of Life dominates the scene and it grows from a mound covered with young shoots of vegetation. The lateral branches seem to divide the scene into the underworld below and afterlife above. The narrative begins at the lower left with a bird-headed priestess, her arms upraised, apparently blocking the entrance to a male figure. Baring suggests the figure is an intruder and is not being allowed to pass through the rites of regeneration. Two figures, a man and a woman, seem

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121 Marinatos, (1993), 152.
122 Marinatos, (1993), ix; although eminent authorities in the field have defended the genuineness of this ring, Marinatos continues to believe this ring is a forgery.
to have "passed" and are being beckoned by another bird-headed priestess to the right of the tree. Two other bird-headed figures face right, toward a griffin, a divine attendant, seated on a pedestal. Baring believes the griffin is a composite image of bird, lion and snake. These represent the three dimensions of sky, earth and water beneath the earth, and are the three aspects of the Great Goddess of Neolithic Old Europe.¹²³

The figures facing the griffin have their arms raised in the sign of epiphany. To the right and apart from the griffin stands a goddess figure with flounced skirt and an upraised left arm, seemingly pointing to the scene above her. Her right arm points toward the griffin. The line of her gestures leads the viewer to the next scene, which may symbolize the importance of the goddess as the connection, the one with the power, who allows the travel from the underworld to the afterlife. At the base of the tree is a dog-like animal that is reminiscent of the dog from Old Europe that guarded the Tree of Life, and perhaps anticipates the dog Cerberus, who guarded the underworld and belonged to the goddess of the underworld, Hecate. The small tubular shaped objects appear to be new shoots of vegetation waiting to sprout.

In the top right scene sits a large lion, disproportionate in size to all of the other figures. His size tells us he has a "god" connection. The lion’s size symbolizes the power of the goddess. He guards the entrance to the final quadrant where the mysteries of the goddess lie. On the tree are branches of ivy, a symbol of immortality.

The couple emerges into a fourth quadrant with arms upraised, as if they had reached their transformed state in the afterlife. The goddess sits to the left of the couple, seemingly in conversation with another figure. Above the goddess are two butterflies, and above the butterflies are two objects appearing to be the corresponding chrysalises: a reinforcing symbol of life after death that also corresponds to the couple. Evans believed that after death the couple was reunited by the "life-giving power of the goddess,

¹²³ Baring, 110.
symbolized by the chrysalises and butterflies."¹²⁴ This goddess wields her power over life, death, and rebirth.

In the iconography on many gold rings and seal impressions the goddess figure is not shown inside shrines but rather in a natural environment, sometimes sitting under a tree or on a rock. On one seal-impression from Knossos (fig. 51) she is lying on a bed of waves, her head resting on one hand while the other arm lies across her narrow waist. She is bare-breasted and wears the flounced skirt. Since the sea plays such an important part in Minoan culture, perhaps this Cretan goddess is transported from the sea by the waves.

Sometimes she is shown sitting on a tripartite platform that is placed in a natural setting, as seen in a seal impression from Knossos (fig. 52). A worshipper offers her a vase, perhaps a libation, while the other worshipper walks away. The scene is set in nature as a rock formation projects downwards above the figures. Some scholars believe inverted landscapes in Minoan art indicate depth; therefore the inverted rock formation may indicate mountains in the distance.¹²⁵ Another interpretation has the setting within a cave, and the rock projections may be stalactites. Behind the goddess is an altar topped with the horns of consecration, another indicator that this scene is about the goddess and Minoan cult ritual.

As mentioned earlier the tree is also a goddess symbol. The Cretans may have worshipped the tree as an image of the goddess; it symbolized birth, death, and regeneration. Trees seem to mark sacred areas. In fig. 21 the goddess sits beneath a tree while female adorants bring her floral offerings. Trees are the common focal point in sacrificial iconography: they often mark the place of sacrifice as well as sacred ground (fig. 20). On a gold ring from Mochlos (fig. 53) a dragon shaped boat, a divine vehicle by its design, carries not only the goddess but also a tree that appears to be set upon a tripartite platform. They approach the shrine on the right, indicated by the direction the

¹²⁴ Baring, 128.
dragon’s head faces. The goddess bringing the tree may signify that once she and the sacred tree arrive together, the rituals may begin.

In other examples, we see the rituals taking place in the presence of the sacred tree and the goddess. A gold ring from Mycenae (fig. 54) from c. 1500 BCE shows what appears to be a tree-shaking ritual. The goddess stands in the center, bare-breasted, wearing the typical Minoan attire, with her hands on her hips looking toward the altar where a male attendant seems to be either shaking or uprooting the sacred tree. On the opposite side a female attendant bends over a table, head upon her folded arms as if she were weeping. This emotional tree-shaking ritual seems to be a common theme. An interpretation by Baring identifies the male figure as the son-lover of the goddess. The son-lover, or ‘year-god’, uproots the tree, symbolizing his own death at the end of the growth cycle. The ritual of uprooting the tree may represent the death of all vegetation and the end of the growing season. The goddess and the other attendant mourn this loss.

On a gold ring from Archanes, Crete (fig. 55), dating from c.1500-1450 BCE, we again find the goddess standing in the center of the scene. Here her arms are placed differently. One arm hangs down while the other is bent at the elbow with the hand pointing upwards. She faces the shrine where the male attendant appears to be pulling the tree towards him. On the opposite side another male figure is draped over a large rock or pithos in what may be interpreted as a pose of sorrow or dejection; he is in mourning.

From Vapheio, Laconia, a gold ring (fig. 56) shows the goddess as central to the scene. One arm is bent at the elbow, as in fig. 55, while the other arm extends as if pointing to the sacred garment that lies draped over a shield-like object. On the opposite side a male figure seems to be reaching for the bent over tree, alluding to the ritual of tree shaking. In all three of these rings the stance of the male figure shaking the tree is similar:

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126 Marinatos refers to the central female figure in figs.54, 55, 56 and 58 as a high priestess rather than as a goddess. I refer to her as a goddess because of her size and her central position in the scenes.
127 Baring, 135.
arms up, legs bent as if in motion.

In fig. 57 a kneeling male figure is draped over a large rock immediately below a tree that appears to be growing from a mound of rocks. The worshipper raises one arm. This may be a gesture of appeal, as if summoning the divinity, or it may be a gesture of epiphany. Perhaps the tree embodies the divine.\(^{128}\) The bird flying into the scene from the right, possibly symbolizes either the presence of the goddess, her forthcoming, or is acting as her messenger.

A less active scene is portrayed in fig. 58. This seal impression from Hagia Triada shows three female figures standing abreast, facing the sacred tree shrine. The central figure is the goddess, established by her size, flanked by two smaller female figures, her attendants. The goddess and the attendants place their hands on their hips, as did the goddess in fig. 54. The iconography on the gold rings and seal impressions is significant because it reinforces the belief that important cult rituals took place in the natural environment and that the tree marked the sacred area.

Goddess figures were discovered from the final stage of Postpalatial Crete, dating c. 1450-1050 BCE. These figures wear cone-shaped hats (or crowns), surrounded by poppies, the horns of consecration, birds, double-axes, or snakes. The Minoan goddess has been replaced. The familiar goddess symbols from earlier periods now appear as attachments to the headpiece to individualize each goddess, evidence for polytheism in Postpalatial Crete. Five of these goddess figures were found at the Gazi shrine near Knossos in north-central Crete (figs. 59, 60a and 60b). The symbols attached to the crowns of these figures from Gazi are birds, horns and poppies.\(^{129}\) Several of these figurines, with snakes entwined around their arms, were found at Kannia also.\(^{130}\)

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\(^{128}\) Goodison, 130, "The prominence of objects like stones and trees in art and in the archaeological record suggests that as well as being a vehicle for summoning a divine presence, they might be thought of as embodying the divine. As Nicolas Coldstream has phrased it, 'a Minoan Goddess may dwell in a tree, a pillar, or in a shapeless lump of stone'."

\(^{129}\) Goodison, 130-131.

\(^{130}\) Marinatos, (1993), 226.
The trim waist and well-shaped hips are replaced. The female figure of the ancient
goddess crudely emerges from a wheel-thrown tubular shaped lower body, as if growing
from a tree: the symbol of regeneration, commenting on her origins. The sensuously
engorged breasts are nonexistent. In their place are small breasts that no longer represent
nourishment. Although her bulging eyes continue to allude to the drug-induced trance
reminiscent of the Snake Goddess, and her stance remains the same with arms upraised in
the gesture of epiphany and the manifestation of the divine, the sensuous Minoan nature
goddess is gone.

\[^{131}\text{Gadon, 95}\]
CONCLUSION

When Sir Arthur Evans first discovered the Snake Goddess figurines at Knossos, scholars began reading the goddess images in many ways. Some argued for the belief in one Great Goddess, and more recently some argue for the belief in multiple goddesses. Evans admitted the possibility of multiple goddesses although he was unable to distinguish them in the iconography. What he did see was a connection between the goddess and nature in all its manifestations.

Marija Gimbutas, European archaeologist, also saw the connection the goddess had with nature. Her monolithic Great Goddess was the feminine force that embodied the entire life process as the giver of life, death, and rebirth. She traced the images of the Great Goddess back to the Paleolithic “Venuses” and figurines from Neolithic Europe and Anatolia as well as from Minoan Crete.

Nilsson argued for multiple goddesses and gods. Marinatos points out that a shortcoming in Nilsson’s work, *Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and Its Survival in Greek Religion*, is apparent in the title, which “betrays his interest in Greek rather than in Minoan-Mycenaean religion.” Nilsson was looking for the origins of Greek religion and sought it in Minoan and Mycenaean religion. With this in mind, it is understandable that the Greek pantheon of multiple gods and goddesses influenced Nilsson’s concept of Minoan and Mycenaean religion thus transferring this multiplicity from the Greeks onto the Minoans and Mycenaedians.

Marinatos’ iconographical analysis confirms Evans’ contention that “there is an

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essential unity in the symbolism which connects the goddess with nature in all its manifestations." But, she ascertains that polytheism did exist. The goddess was several deities; this being confirmed in the multiple Postpalatial goddess idols discovered at Gazi and Kannia. Marinatos continues:

Yet, the paradox that multiple deities interchange and share attributes is ultimately not as disturbing as one might think. As in the case of Egypt, our understanding of the religious mentality can be enhanced if we see art as a meta-language, which does not simply duplicate information retrievable by texts, but rather supplements it by pointing beyond it. Indeed, image may be a more primitive and therefore a more direct means of communication than written language. The iconography of the female Minoan deity points unambiguously to a concept of primary importance: a nurturing goddess of nature. She portrays an important Minoan perception, the essence of the goddess, which can be established independently of the issue of the One or the Many.

Goodison and Morris suggest that the “shaping of the goddess exclusively in terms of ‘nature’ and ‘fertility’ may mask exploration of other ‘non-biological’ functions.” They agree with Marinatos in that the figurines from Gazi and Kannia, with the goddess symbols from earlier periods now attached to the headpiece to individualize them, give strong evidence for polytheism in Postpalatial Crete. “The multifaceted image of the Minoan goddess – grasping snakes, flanked by fierce creatures, summoned by her worshippers – is one of enduring beauty and power, but she is not alone.”

In our Judaeo-Christian-based monotheistic belief system it seems natural to assume the Great Goddess was one multifaceted deity. How we see our God today parallels how we think the ancients may have seen their goddess – in all of nature, controlling life, death, and regeneration (or resurrection, if you will). We need to be mindful of the religious practices

133 Marinatos, (1993), 165.
134 Marinatos, (1993), 166.
135 Goodison, 132.
136 Ibid.
among other cultures that might have influenced the Minoans. Upon studying the culture of these people we find that polytheism was practiced in Egypt and the Near East. We also know that all followers of Abraham practiced monotheism perhaps thousands of years before the existence of the Minoans. Was there an influence there? Perhaps. That is the quandary.

Although polytheism seems to make the most sense, if we look at the early Minoans as indigenous people of Crete, with their own hieroglyphics and Linear A writing, monotheism may be more correct. Linear A, a native and still not deciphered script of Crete,\(^\text{137}\) may be indicative of a goddess cult that likewise developed in isolation from the rest of the Mediterranean cultures. These early Minoans, in their isolation, may have practiced monotheism, worshipping their goddess of nature, when the Anatolians or others migrated to Crete. Without substantial written record nothing is certain. What we have are images, and these images are the evidence of goddess-worship in Minoan and Mycenaean religions.

The typical fertility goddesses from Old Europe with their large belly, buttocks, and pendulous breasts were replaced with a new concept of fertility goddess: one whose sexuality seems to be separate from her fertility. The iconography of the Minoan goddess depicts her as sensuous and feminine with her small waist and well-proportioned body. She is not a Mother Goddess in the sense of childbearing; nowhere does she appear giving birth to or holding a child. This new ‘fertility’ goddess is associated with nature’s life process of birth, death, and rebirth and associated with agriculture: planting and harvesting. Her cult rituals were celebrated within the natural settings of peak sanctuaries and caves, and beside

\(^{137}\) Linear A has been found on other Aegean islands.
tombs and springs.

As an agriculturally based society, it follows that the Minoan goddess was connected to the earth. The Minoans lived with whatever the nature goddess dealt them. Kindness and approval was shown to them in their fruitful and abundant harvests. Brutality was shown to them when massive earthquakes toppled their homes and religious centers. Looking at this goddess in terms of nature does not limit her to being some wood nymph tiptoeing through the tulips. She controlled the entire life cycle of birth, death, and regeneration. The rituals portrayed in these cycles are illustrated in the goddess iconography. The circle dance, celebrating spring, a time of birth and renewal, is skillfully depicted on the Kamares ware pedestal-table and bowl (figs. 9a-9d). The bull and his sacrificial ritual associated with death are portrayed on the sarcophagus from Hagia Triada (figs. 19, 20). The Snake Goddess figurines (figs. 5-7b) wield their power over the snake, a symbol of regeneration.

Interpreting the ancient art of the Minoans is not an easy task. As Goodison so pointedly states, “…images are not an artistic code which once deciphered, will neatly reveal their secrets.”\(^{138}\) There are a number of goddess-related symbols: water, trees, snakes, birds, bulls and their horns of consecration, double-axes, butterflies, flowers, sea creatures, and fantasy beasts. What secrets might these images reveal? In the goddess iconography, whether beasts flank her, she sits under a tree or on a tripartite platform, her appearance remains constant: a shapely feminine figure.

On seal impressions, gold rings, in frescos, and as figurines, the Minoans and Mycenaeans depict their goddess with symbols from nature. These images illustrate how

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\(^{138}\) Shlain, 36.
they honor her with the celebration of spring and its onslaught of new life after death, and at harvest, a time when the toilers of the land redeem the fruits of their labors. Some of the goddess iconography portrays her with dominion over the sea. By providing food and a trade route, the goddess expands the Minoan and Mycenaean cultures, and for this they honor her. The goddess iconography points to a goddess whose domain is nature in all its aspects.

Goodison, 126.
Fig. A: Clay model of the circle dance from tholos tomb at Kamilari. c. 1450-1300 BCE.

Fig. B: Clay model of circle dance with woman in center playing the lyre. c. 1400-1100 BCE.

Fig. C: Venus of Willendorf (Austria). 4 ¼ inches high. c. 28,000-23,000 BCE.

Fig. D: Woman holding a bison horn. From Laussel (Dordogne, France). 18 inches high. c. 23,000-20,000 BCE.

Fig. E: Seated goddess from Çatal Hüyük. 2 inches high. c. 5900 BCE.

Fig. F: Anatolian goddess giving birth, from Çatal Hüyük. 20.3 cm high. c. 6500-5700 BCE.

Fig. 1: Snake goddess as vessel, from Koumaza, Crete. 14.45 cm high. c. 2300 BCE.

Fig. 2: Snake goddess from Petsofas hill sanctuary. c. 2100-1800 BCE.
Fig. 3: Snake Goddess from Knossos. 10.9 cm high, c.1600-1150 BCE.

Fig. 4: Terracotta headress from Kophina. 7 cm high. c. 2000-1600 BCE.

Fig. 5: Snake Goddess or priestess from the Temple Repositories, Palace of Knossos. 34.2 cm high. c.1600

Fig. 6a: Drawing of Snake Goddess, (Fig. 5.)

Fig. 6b: Drawing of the back of the Snake Goddess from Knossos.

Fig. 7: Snake Goddess or priestess from the Temple Repositories, Palace of Knossos. 29.5 cm high. c.1600 BCE.

Fig 8: Drawing of a stella depicting Qu-du-shu, a naked Egyptian deity. New Kingdom.
Figs. 9a–9d: Clockwise, the above illustrations show the Kamares ware bowl and table set found at Phaistos dating from the First Palace Period, c. 1900-1700 BCE.

Fig. 10a: Seal impression of Bird Goddess from Zakros. 3.9 cm high. c. 1500–1450 BCE.

Fig. 10b: Seal impression of Bird Goddess from Zakros. 4.7 cm high. c. 1500–1450 BCE.

Fig. 11: Seal impression of Bird Goddess from Crete.
Fig. 12: Bird Goddess depicted on a cylinder seal from Palaikastro, Crete.

Fig. 12a: A seal from Routsi showing the Bird Goddess.

Fig. 13: Mycenaean terracotta figurines, "Phi" and "Psi".

Fig. 14: Mycenaean terracotta figurines ranging from 10 to 20 cm in height. "Psi", "Tau", and "Phi".

Fig. 15: Seal impression from Hagia Triada.

Fig. 16: Seal impression from Zakros.
Fig. 17: Goddess with double axes from Knossos. c. 1500 BCE

Fig. 18: Drawing from a fresco at the Palace of Knossos showing a female figure (goddess?) holding double axes.

Fig. 19: A drawn reproduction of the death cycle side of the sarcophagus from Hagia Triada. Dates from c. 1400 BCE.

Fig. 20: The regeneration side of the sarcophagus from Hagia Triada. C. 1400 BCE
Fig. 21: Mycenaean gold ring seal dating from c. 1500 BCE depicting a goddess and her attendants.

Fig. 22: A seal impression from Zakros dating from c. 1700 BCE showing goddess with butterfly wings.

Fig. 23: Goddess with butterfly wings shaped like double axes from Mochlos, dating c. 1600 BCE.

Fig. 24: Late Minoan vase, c. 1400 BCE, from Mochlos. Depicts half-woman/half-butterfly with stem-like body.

Fig. 25: Late Minoan vase, c. 1400 BCE, from Hagia Triada. Butterfly-winged Goddess appears as double axe in a band around the vessel.

Fig. 26: A sixteenth century BCE pithos from Pseira decorated with double axe shaped butterfly flanked by bull’s heads and plants.

Fig. 27: A fifteenth century BCE vase decorated with stylized butterflies that resemble double axes, from the Mycenaean acropolis.
Fig. 28: A sardonyx seal stone, 3 cm in diameter, from Knossos, c. 1500 BCE.

Fig. 29: A seal impression from Zakros.

Fig. 29a: A drawn rendition of a stone rhyton from Zakros that depicts a peak sanctuary.

Fig. 29b: A model found at the peak sanctuary of Petsofas in the shape of bull horns.

Fig. 30: A seal impression of the goddess feeding a goat from Chania.

Fig. 31: A seal impression from Armenoi depicting a goddess feeding a goat-like animal.

Fig. 32: The goddess holding the leash of a griffin on a gold ring from Mycenae.
Fig. 33: A seal showing the goddess and a griffin in affectionate play.

Fig. 34: A Mycenaean seal showing a goddess riding a griffin.

Fig. 35: Mycenaean gold signet ring from Tiryns, dating from the fifteenth century BCE. Shows the goddess being approached by daemons.

Fig. 36: A ring impression from Knossos dating from c. 1500 BCE, shows goddess on top of mountain flanked by lions.

Fig. 37: Seal impression from Knossos shows goddess seated on tripartite platform flanked by lions.

Fig. 38: A Mycenaean gold ring impression showing two lions flanking a column.

Fig. 39: Seal from Knossos showing goddess holding a dolphin.
Fig. 40: Detail of the north wall fresco from building Xeste 3, Akrotiri, on the island of Thera. c. 1600-1500 BCE.

Fig. 41: Drawing of frescoes on the north and east walls from Akrotiri, depicting the goddess and attendants gathering crocuses.

Fig. 42: Detail of goddess figure from fresco at Akrotiri.

Fig. 43: Adyton Fresco on the ground floor of Xeste 3, Akrotiri

Fig. 44: Small faience robes and girdles from the Temple Repositories at Knossos.

Fig. 45: Reconstruction of the paintings from the House of frescoes at Knossos.
Fig. 46a: Gold seal ring found in a tomb at Isopata, near Knossos, dating from c.1450 BCE.

Fig. 46b: Drawn rendition of Isopata ring.

Fig. 47: Drawn rendition of a Minoan seal found in the Peloponnese.

Fig. 48: A seal impression from Knossos.

Fig. 49: A reconstructed fresco from Hagia Triada showing the goddess in her domain.
Fig. 50: A seal impression referred to as the Ring of Nestor, from Pylos, dating c.1500 BCE.

Fig. 51: The goddess lays on a bed of waves on a seal impression from Knossos.

Fig. 52: In a seal impression from Knossos, the goddess is seated on a tripartite platform in a natural setting.

Fig. 53: Goddess carrying a tree in a boat on a gold ring from Mochlos.

Fig. 54: A gold ring from Mycenae from c.1500 BCE showing “tree shaking” ritual with goddess in center.

Fig. 55: Drawing of a gold ring impression from Archanes, Crete, dating from c.1500-1450 BCE, showing “tree shaking” ritual with goddess in center.
Fig. 56: Drawing of a gold ring from Vapheio, Laconia showing tree ritual with goddess in center.

Fig. 57: Drawing of a gold ring from Sellopoulo tomb at Knossos, c.1500-1400 BCE.

Fig. 58: Drawing of a seal impression from Hagia Triada showing goddess in center standing before a tree shrine.

Fig. 59: Goddess from Gazt shrine with crown of doves and bull horns, c.1400-1200 BCE.

Fig. 60a: Goddess from Gazi shrine wearing crown of poppies, c.1400-1200 BCE.

Fig. 60b: Another view of fig. 61a.


Homer. *The Iliad* Translated by Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago


