

## DIVINITY AND PERFORMANCE ON MINOAN PEAK SANCTUARIES\*

### Definitions

Most if not all scholars of Aegean religion are the products of one of the so-called Great religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam. Common to all is the emphasis on personal belief in one great deity. It is also a feature of the historical development of those religions, that the notion of belief has been increasingly intellectualised into philosophy, law, theology, dogma – all rationalising processes of debate, definition and language – the Word, the Book, the Law. Alongside this has been an increasing alienation from ritual, perceived of as merely customary enactment, meaningless or old-fashioned tradition. The notion of genuine mystical experience has been marginalised into charismatic sects, psychologised as hysteria, or deemed fit only for mediaeval saints. Whether we are individually believers or among the more doubtful, we should not underestimate the effect of this collective baggage that we bring to our interpretations and conclusions of Aegean religion.

Thus in more than a century of the study of Aegean religion relatively little attention has been paid to the definition of religion. When Renfrew wanted to define religion for his analysis of the Phylakopi shrine, he was forced to turn to anthropology.<sup>1</sup> He neatly presented a counterpoint between Melford Spiro's definition of religion as "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings,"<sup>2</sup> versus Geertz's more rambling "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence, and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."<sup>3</sup>

Renfrew's preference for Spiro's simpler definition of religion as a matter of belief in deities, was essentially a reiteration of 19<sup>th</sup> century models of religion, most fully articulated by the pioneer anthropologist and social evolutionist, Edmund Tylor. Within contemporary anthropology Spiro's and similar definitions are categorised as neo-Tylorian.<sup>4</sup> For our purposes it is simpler to refer to them as *theistic*.

For archaeologists such as ourselves, who are dependant on material sources, the images and remains of rituals, for our understanding of prehistoric religion, purely theistic models of religion present us with problems. I am not suggesting that the Minoans did not have a notion of divinity; that would be a nonsensical contradiction of the familiar images and symbols. A definition of religion, however, also defines how we perceive the function and structure of what we study, and the questions we ask of it. Because theistic approaches define the critical feature of religion as belief in supernatural beings, those beliefs are taken to be prior to ritual expression and action. There is a tendency therefore to regard ritual action as derivative and secondary; this is an analytical flaw, which undervalues the performative and creative aspects of ritual.<sup>5</sup>

\* Acknowledgements: Ideally this paper should be read in conjunction with Christine Morris's and my joint papers for the Lampeter University *BODY* conference (1998), and the Norwegian Institute in Athens *Celebrations* conference (1999). It represents a methodological counterpoint to those papers. As always I could not have written this paper without Christine's supportive and constructive criticism. Thanks too are owed to Robin Hägg, with Robert Laffineur, the organiser of this conference. He has been a constant source of support from the beginning of my career, and for that I am especially grateful.

1 C. RENFREW, *The Archaeology of Cult* (1985) 12.

2 M. SPIRO, "Religion: problems of definition and explanation," in M. BANTON (ed.) *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (1966) 85-126.

3 C. GEERTZ, "Religion as a cultural system," in BANTON (*supra* n. 2) 1-46.

4 S. TAMBIAH, "A performative approach to ritual," in *Culture, Thought and Social Action* (1985) 129.

5 TAMBIAH (*supra* n. 4) 129; F. BOWIE, *The Anthropology of Religion* (2000) 14-16, 22-25.

Secondly, insisting on attributing primary importance to deities risks making us as close-minded as another 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar, Samuel Baker. He castigated the natives of North Africa as having no religion because they did not believe in a Supreme Being.<sup>6</sup> While this is extreme, the difficulty of western scholars to think of religion in terms of anything other than belief in deities is a genuine concern in cross-cultural analysis. Victor Turner was one of the few to realise that questions about deities actually made little sense to many non-western cultures. Turner's Ndembu informants revealed the existence of the High God Nzambi; but little of their religious life and practice concerned him, because "he is so far away."<sup>7</sup>

Archaeologists do not, of course, have informants to interview, but our theistic obsession can surface in quite subtle ways. Take for example, the postures of peak sanctuary figurines: Myres called these gestures of adoration and devotion;<sup>8</sup> Rutkowski calls them gestures of supplication, or indicative of mortals addressing pleas to the divinity.<sup>9</sup> Marinatos describes the figurines as adorants, in "attitudes of self-containment or respect."<sup>10</sup> Rutkowski further refers to the structures on peak sanctuaries as the "god's habitation."<sup>11</sup> The problem with such terminology is that it collapses the boundaries between description and interpretation. What you call it, anticipates the conclusions of your analysis.

The reader will guess that I am not sympathetic to purely theistic models of religion. This is not so say that alternative definitions, such as Geertz's, are any less problematic. It is essentially a symbolic approach, which defines religion and ritual in relation to social processes and institutions, imbuing them with symbolic force, and operating as communicative and regulating methods. While this approach is useful for archaeologists seeking to understand the interaction of religion and society, it too has its limitations.

The problem with Spiro's theistic and Geertz's symbolic definitions is that they both emphasise the intellectual aspects of religion – the former stresses the primacy of belief in deities; the latter perceives of ritual as a symbolic rationalising process. More importantly, they underestimate the power of the experiential domain within religion – ritual action as a conduit to mystical and transcendental experience, which inspires belief, rather than being derived from it. Spiritual or mystical experience has its own rules, which are not subject to consistent processes of rationalisation.

The archaeology of religion, of which Aegean religion is such a dynamic part, is a primary preoccupation of cognitive archaeology, understanding the ancient mind.<sup>12</sup> We do well to recall that cognition is not the same as rationalisation – rationalisation is just one aspect of the cognitive process; spiritual experience is another.

### Peak Sanctuary Deities?

These methodologies and their critique do of course have serious implications for our understanding of Minoan religion. For the purposes of this paper I propose to take the Minoan peak sanctuary as a case-study, reviewing first the overtly theistic interpretations of the cult, and then applying some more performative and experiential religious models to the finds.

Back in 1903 Myres reported of the Petsophas peak sanctuary finds: "of the character and attributes of the deity, the collection tells us nothing; double-axes, serpents, and crosses, for example, are conspicuous by their absence."<sup>13</sup> With the exception of double-axes from Jouktas and Vrysinas, Myres' observation has remained true of all other peak sanctuaries. Furthermore, of the clay figurines that formed the bulk of the votive material, Myres said "the

6 BOWIE (*supra* n. 5) 21.

7 V. TURNER, *The Forest of Symbols. Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (1967) 294.

8 J. MYRES, "The sanctuary-site at Petsopha," *BSA* 9 (1902/3) 380.

9 B. RUTKOWSKI, *The Cult Places of the Aegean* (1986) 85-87.

10 *Minoan Religion* 117. See Christine Morris' paper in this volume for a more considered discussion of this issue.

11 B. RUTKOWSKI "Minoan peak sanctuaries: the topography and architecture," *Aegaeum* 2 (1988) 71-99.

12 C. RENFREW and E. ZUBROW, *The Ancient Mind* (1995).

13 MYRES (*supra* n. 8) 380.

probability ... suggests that the human figures represent not the deity but the votaries.”<sup>14</sup> Yet again Myres was remarkably prescient. Of the thousands of figurines found in 97 years of peak sanctuary exploration no fragment has been conclusively identified as a deity image.

Nevertheless this notable lack of solid evidence has not deterred scholars from speculating on the nature of an assumed peak sanctuary deity. Evans was keen to draw a connection between the remains on Jouktas and the so-called “Mountain Mother” sealing he found at Knossos.<sup>15</sup> Nilsson kept his discussion of this sealing separate from discussion of the peak sanctuaries, though he “emphatically” agreed with Evans’ hypothesis that Jouktas was the “sacred peak of the Nature Goddess.”<sup>16</sup> Nilsson further chose to infer from the animal figurines among the peak sanctuary finds an association with an Artemis-like “Mistress of Animals.”<sup>17</sup> This required him to reject Myres’ correct interpretation of the votive limbs as healing models,<sup>18</sup> in favour of a comparison with fire festivals of the Greek Mistress of Animals “in which living animals, human puppets and miscellaneous objects were thrown into the fire.”<sup>19</sup> Dietrich also favoured this sacrificial interpretation of the finds, even suggesting that they were memorials of some proto-Dionysiac human sacrifice,<sup>20</sup> but he, like Platon, envisaged a more general nature goddess.<sup>21</sup> Among excavators of peak sanctuaries, Karetsou is most cautious, reporting but not committing to her predecessors’ ideas.<sup>22</sup>

Rutkowski takes the notion of the universality of the peak sanctuary deity a stage further. Though in passing references he sometimes slips between one and many deities, in his main discussion he identifies a single all-powerful deity: “the people were convinced that the divinity of the sanctuaries had power over the whole world.”<sup>23</sup> Rutkowski’s phraseology suggests a male deity: the Minoans “attributed to the god the characteristics of the ruler of the heavens, who was lord of all atmospheric phenomena.”<sup>24</sup> Buildings were erected to emphasise “the might of the divinity.”<sup>25</sup> Votive figurines were portrayed in “supplicating attitudes, indicating that these mortals were addressing certain concrete pleas to the divinity, giving themselves into the god’s care, and reminding him of their existence and needs.”<sup>26</sup> And yet he too eventually uses the Mountain Mother sealing to identify a great goddess who endows the king with his royal powers.<sup>27</sup>

Nanno Marinatos dismisses all of this as speculation, citing the absence of cult images in the peak sanctuary material.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless she entertains the possibility of a male weather god, though preferring the notion of different regional sets of deities worshipped on different peak sanctuaries. This suggestion is clearly derived from her broader agenda of identifying many gods and goddesses in Minoan religion, based on Egyptian and Near Eastern polytheistic analogies.

Egyptian and Near Eastern analogies also find favour with Watrous.<sup>29</sup> He avoids the obvious perils of speculation with a close review of the excavated material. His interpretation however, draws heavily on studies of Archaic and Classical votive offerings, whose theistic assumptions, perhaps appropriate for those later periods, are encapsulated in Van Straten’s title

14 MYRES (*supra* n. 8) 380.

15 PM I, 159ff; PM IV:2 607ff.

16 MMR<sup>2</sup> 353.

17 MMR<sup>2</sup> 75.

18 MYRES (*supra* n. 8) 381.

19 MMR<sup>2</sup> 75-76.

20 B. DIETRICH, *The Origins of Greek Religion* (1974) 302.

21 N. PLATON, “Το ιερόν Μαζά και τα μινωικά ιερά Κορυφής,” *CretChron* (1951) 96-160.

22 A. KARETSOU, “The peak sanctuary of Mt. Juktas” in *Sanctuaries and Cults* 137-153.

23 RUTKOWSKI (*supra* n. 9) 88.

24 RUTKOWSKI (*supra* n. 9) 87.

25 RUTKOWSKI (*supra* n. 9) 76.

26 RUTKOWSKI (*supra* n. 9) 87-88.

27 RUTKOWSKI (*supra* n. 9) 88.

28 *Minoan Religion* 119.

29 L. WATROUS, *The Cave Sanctuary of Zeus at Psychro: A Study of Extra-Urban Sanctuaries in Minoan and Early Iron Age Crete* (1996).

*Gifts for the Gods*.<sup>30</sup> Yet again the boundary between description and interpretation collapses. Thus the peak sanctuary votives are interpreted as memorialising prayers, requests, gifts, all indicative of a hierarchical separation between powerful god and powerless human, or as symbolic of social institutions and rites of passage. Moreover Watrous' constant comparisons with Near Eastern votives blurs the distinctions between analogy and assumptions of diffusionist influence. Indeed Watrous repeats his assertion that the Minoans directly borrowed from Egyptian and Near Eastern religion, including peak sanctuaries as places to worship foreign gods.<sup>31</sup>

It will be apparent from this review that the riddle of the peak sanctuary deity has inspired a great deal of disagreement and contradictory speculation, almost all of it lacking even a single piece of conclusive evidence. Yet the thread linking it all is the theistic premise that the critical feature of religion is belief in deities. If you assume that religion is primarily about gods, then you are forced to go looking for them. It is perhaps for that reason that no one thought to follow up Myres' original observation that the common symbols of Minoan divinity are "conspicuous by their absence," with the simple question: why is that? Perhaps the obvious answer is, because they were not that important to the expression of the cult. One might thus further ask, what is it that is present in the material that might reveal the essential preoccupations of the cult.

### Peak Sanctuary performance

As has been stated in our other reports of the Atsipadhes peak sanctuary, one of the strategic goals of the excavation was the detailed recording of the spatial distribution of the votive material, in order to reconstruct the functional layout of the sanctuary.<sup>32</sup> To summarise: on the western Upper Terrace the finds were limited to the edge overlooking the eastern Lower Terrace. The finds here consisted of the canonical human and animal figurines types, mixed with sherds and pebbles. The material was densely concentrated around an earth feature, which may have held some form of object that was a focus of ritual. The pottery here included numbers of cups and bridge-spouted jars, and several rhyta, suggesting rituals of the consumption of liquid and libation. On the Lower Terrace the finds were again figurines and potsherds, but no pebbles. The density of finds was heavily concentrated in the rock clefts just below the Upper Terrace and diminished the further away from those rock clefts. Since the completion of the study of the material we have been able to refine that distribution. E.g. in the area of the rock clefts animal and human figurines are mixed together; but in the more open area of the Lower Terrace there very few animals, but many human figurines. Moreover we are able to observe distinctions in the distribution of the human figurines. Those on the Upper Terrace and Lower Terrace rock clefts are arrayed in the hands-to-torso posture familiar from the published material from other peak sanctuaries. Those in the open area however are arrayed with their arms held up and away from the torso, in a remarkable number of variations.

In the aforementioned review of hypothetical peak sanctuary deities, the votives are all treated as similar - symbolic of the offerer's prayer and indicative of their need or request - a somewhat passive role. The analogy is clearly Classical Greek votives. This comparison is not however without problems. Though there are many types of Greek votives, within each type there is often a great degree of standardisation. The human figurines from the peak sanctuaries are anything other than standardised; indeed much care seems to have been given over their characterisation and individualisation. If they are merely symbolic of prayer or adoration, why make them so different, particularly in relation to their postures and gestures?

30 F. VAN STRATEN, "Gifts for the gods" in H.D. VERSNEL (ed.) *Faith, Hope, and Worship. Aspects of Religious Mentality in the Ancient World* (1981) 65-151.

31 L. WATROUS "The role of the Near East in the rise of the Cretan palaces" in *Function Palaces* 65-70; WATROUS (*supra* n. 29) 82-89.

32 A. PEATFIELD "Rural ritual in Bronze Age Crete: the peak sanctuary at Atsipadhes," *CAJ* 2 (1992) 59-87.



At the 1999 *Celebrations* conference at the Norwegian Institute in Athens,<sup>33</sup> Morris and I suggested interpretations of the figurine postures in terms of accessing visionary and mystical experience. Morris further discusses some methodologies in gesture interpretation in her paper in this volume. For my part here I draw the broader conclusion that the human figurines clearly operate in a much more dynamic role than merely passive symbols of prayer. Rather, they seem to memorialise the action of peak sanctuary ritual itself. We shouldn't be surprised at this. Scholars have long argued that Minoan frescoes depicted enacted rituals. The figurines may well have been three-dimensional versions of the same.

This emphasis on the act of ritual itself immediately moves us away from purely theistic interpretations of religion, into the realms of the performative. It also goes some way to answering the question arising out of the absence of divine symbols on peak sanctuaries: what is there, is the human worshipper. Like the Ndembu told Turner, God may be far away, but we are here. The Minoans may be telling us the same.

This makes for a much more human and experiential perspective on religion and ritual. One of the definitions of humanity is *Homo Ludens* - to be human is to play. It is thus recognised that ritual is essentially a game, of which Levi Strauss remarked that ritual as game is intended to bring about union.<sup>34</sup> If we extend these notions in order to try and harmonise the theistic and performative definitions of religion, then ritual (the expression of religion) serves to bring about the union of the human and the transcendent. Furthermore the specific personalisation of the transcendent (god or whatever) becomes less important than spiritual experience itself. And indeed that identity is allowed to change as a consequence of various contexts, meanings, and social evolution.

The application of performative and experiential models of religion has profound implications for our understanding of Minoan religion, not just the peak sanctuaries. We can move away from the language of adoration, supplication, and explore more interesting possibilities such as visionary epiphany, divination, healing, altered states of consciousness. It will allow us to address too the problem of the efficacy of ritual action. Genuine mystical experience will always have a transformative effect, an immediate impression of something having worked or happened, a power that merely enacted ritual can never achieve.

I remarked at the beginning of this paper that archaeology is forced to turn to anthropology in order to define its understanding of religion. And yet anthropologists of religion concede that the emphasis on verbal explications of belief and meaning imposes a rationalising framework onto religion and the ritual process that is ultimately artificial. In the final analysis what makes religion, what makes ritual, is the doing of it. It is what the worshipper does that is of primary importance, not what he or she believes or says about it.<sup>35</sup> As archaeologists we are primarily engaged with the remains of what is done. It is this focus on the physical, the performative, experiential nature of religion that anthropology has to learn from us. Therein lies the very strength of the archaeology of religion.

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33 C. MORRIS and A. PEATFIELD, "Experiencing Ritual" (forthcoming).

34 Levi-Strauss quoted in TAMBIAH (*supra* n. 4) 128.

35 Important here too is the observation that indigenous explanations of religion in relation to anthropological interview are constantly in the process of becoming – see C. TOREN, "Sign into symbol, symbol as sign: cognitive aspects of a social process" in P. BOYER (ed.) *Cognitive Aspects of Religious Symbolism* (1993) 147-164; and also my review of the same in *CAJ* 4:1 (1994) 149-155.