THE LANGUAGE OF GESTURE IN MINOAN RELIGION*

"The body is man's first and most natural instrument." So wrote Marcel Mauss in 1935 in his seminal paper on the 'Techniques of the Body.'[1] He stressed that even the most basic bodily actions, such as techniques of walking, eating and sleeping, were learned and socially constructed. This is a now familiar argument in the massive literature devoted to reading and deconstructing the Body in its many different incarnations, ranging from the controlled body, the consuming body, the sexually constructed body, as well as the classificatory and symbolic body. Mauss also made brief reference to his belief that there were bodily techniques "at the bottom of all our mystical states" and that these deserved socio-psycho-biological study. This call to engage with the importance of profound bodily experiences seems to have gone largely unheeded. More recently, however, anthropologists have begun to explore how specific embodied practices may direct and shape varieties of religious experience, showing that this can be a fruitful area of study.[2]

Modern religions privilege metaphysical theories over ritual action, but the immersion of the body in ritual practice is amply documented across a wide range of religions: the extreme denial of the body through fasting and self-mutilation in ascetic traditions; the body as an expressive vehicle for entering altered states in shamanic traditions and possession cults; and the use of gesture and posture through which the worshipper formally engages in communication with the divine. Embodied practices are always sited within specific relations, those between individuals or groups, and those of social or cosmological structures.[3] They are also both symbolic and symptomatic or expressive. Thus in discussion of the simple act of kneeling in prayer Roy Rappaport notes that the posture moulds the body within a structured environment, so that it does not merely express an inner state but actively "generates a body identified with subordination."[4]

The depiction of individuals engaged in ecstatic activities such as pulling trees and hugging stones leaves little doubt as to the importance of embodied practices within Minoan ritual as recognised by Evans and others. More recently, Morris and Peatfield have developed this line of argument further, arguing that the experiential dimension of ritual action can be more widely recognised in the Minoan material record.[5] We have suggested that certain aspects of the physical experience of ecstasy or the altered state are iconographically represented in the distorted/disappearing heads of otherwise elegant human figures on some gold rings. The phenomenon of heat rising into the head, the feeling of the head opening or exploding is one of the most commonly reported bodily experiences in descriptions of trance states.

1   M. MAUSS, "Body Techniques," in M. MAUSS, *Sociology and Psychology. Essays by Marcel Mauss* (trans. B. Brewster) (1979; first publ. 1935) 104.
2   T. ASAD, "Remarks on the anthropology of the body," in S. COAKLEY (ed), *Religion and the Body* (1997) 42-52. P. STOLLER, *Sensuous Scholarship* (1997).
3   E.g. C. BELL, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992) ch. 5 (The ritual body); J. BLACKING (ed.), *Anthropology of the Body* (1977).
4   R. RAPPAPORT, *Ecology, Meaning and Religion* (1979).
5   C.E. MORRIS and A.A.D. PEATFIELD, "Feeling through the body: gesture in Cretan Bronze Age religion," in *Thinking through the Body. The First Lampeter Workshop in Archaeology, May 1998* (forthcoming); C.E. MORRIS and A.A.D. PEATFIELD, "Experiencing Ritual" in *Celebrations. Conference at the Norwegian Institute in Athens. June 1999* (forthcoming).

Artists across a wide range of cultures have responded to the challenge of representing this specific physiological response within the altered state by depicting distorted, disappearing and transforming heads.

The rich variety of bodily postures represented in Minoan art implies the existence of further areas of developed embodied practice though the use of an elaborate ritual language of gesture. The complexity of gesture as a mode of communication is easily illustrated by reminding ourselves of the striking cultural differences in gesture performance across the world. Apparently similar gestures may have quite different meanings in different places; a gesture may have a strong significance in one place but be without meaning elsewhere – for example, a foot pointing to the head in Thailand is considered insulting. The choice of left or right hand is a common signifier of meaning – for example right palm on left palm is a greeting and begging gesture in one African group, but reversal of the hands – left over right is an insult.[6]

This paper addresses some of the problems and challenges of studying Minoan gestures and shifts discussion towards a more theorised approach which locates gesture as embodied practice in which symbol and symptom, body-learning and body-sense are mutually entwined. I propose to discuss a number of issues with the help of anthropological and sociological approaches to the body. These are:
1. the vocabulary through which we discuss gesture.
2. problems of categorising gesture and dealing with images rather than living gestures.
3. the application a concept adapted from sociological studies in non-verbal communication, that of "asymmetry of performance."

The vocabulary of gesture

Perhaps surprisingly, given the long-standing interest in Minoan gestures, the language used to discuss gestures has remained varied and unsystematic. Useful contributions in this area have been within the typological studies of bronze figurines.[7] No comparable study has been made for the much larger and more varied corpus of clay figurines. Most recently, Michael Wedde has made a careful study of gestures on seals and gold rings, which goes a long way toward creating a more systematic vocabulary as a basis for description and analysis.[8] There is, however, a well established tradition of referring to gestures using a more evocative vocabulary – examples include "gesture of adoration" (used as early as Myres in relation to the Petsophas figurines) and "gesture of supplication."[9] Such terminology collapses description and interpretation; the gesture is defined in terms of its *presumed* function and the details of the bodily posture are frequently glossed over. In addition, a range of different postures are usually subsumed within these categories, a strategy which implies/presupposes that these bodily differences are unimportant in and of themselves. Such assumptions should certainly be tested. We might even ask ourselves whether they do not in fact project or map onto Minoan ritual behaviour Christian notions, such as those promoted by St. Augustine, that the exteriority of the body in prayer was unimportant except in so far as it hindered or fostered the inner state. It is interesting to note that prior to this, bodily practice in early Christian prayer - a standing posture and orientation to the East – was considered to have cosmological significance.[10]

6   E. GOODY, " 'Greeting,' 'Begging' and the presentation of respect," in J.S. FONTAINE (ed.), *The Interpretation of Ritual* (1972).

7   C. VERLINDEN, *Les statuettes anthropomorphes crétoises en bronze et en plomb, du IIIe millénaire au VIIe siècle av. J.-C.* (1984); E. SAPOUNA-SAKELLARAKI, *Die Bronzenen Menschenfiguren auf Kreta und in der Ägais. Prähistorische Bronzefunde. Band* I, 5. (1995).

8   M. WEDDE, "Talking hands: A study of Minoan and Mycenaean ritual gesture – some preliminary notes," in *MELETEMATA*.

9   J. MYRES, "The sanctuary-site at Petsofa," *BSA* 9 (1902/3) 368; B. RUTKOWSKI, *The Cult Places of the Aegean* (1986) 87-8; B. RUTKOWSKI, *Petsophas* (1991) 52-6.

10   A. LOUTH, "The body in western Catholic Christianity," in COAKLEY (*supra* n. 2) 117.

With reference to a vocabulary of gesture, I fully agree with Wedde that we should avoid mechanistic or punch-card typologies.[11] I suggest that we could build on existing work by developing descriptions which engage more actively with the physical or bodily expression of the gesture. For this we may usefully adapt terms used by sociologists who record current gestural practices in interaction rituals within the field of non-verbal communication.[12] Their concepts of *kinesics* (gesture and movement), *proxemics* (spatial interaction between individuals), and *haptics* (touching) are potentially useful. So too is their use of terms for arm movements which designate their relationship both to the gesturing body itself and who or what it interacts with. Thus arm designators are described using terms which include: symmetrical/asymmetrical; partial or total arm extension, divergent from, parallel to or convergent with the front or sides of the body. We are testing the usefulness of such terminology for the gestures of peak sanctuary figurines from Atsipadhes.

Defining gestures

The identification of a "gesture" and its significant elements depends on modern observation and categorisation. For example, in the hand to forehead gesture (the so-called Minoan salute), the attitude of the other arm is frequently deemed to be unimportant, yet it may do one of several things: be held straight down by the side of the body, be bent upwards to touch the chest, or cross the body to touch the opposite shoulder. It seems to me unwise to start from the premise that any *distinctive* aspect of the posture was insignificant or meaningless for the Minoans, even if its possible significance remains ultimately beyond our interpretative grasp.

Our study of gesture is also affected by the fact that we are studying *gestures as images* which differ fundamentally from real or living gestures. Most obviously, art arrests movement and isolates the bodily posture from its full context.[13] In the context of the study of "living gestures" the actions are understood to be a medium of communication between individuals or a group. For the purposes of discussing Minoan ritual gestures in art we should introduce some additional participants into the loop of communication and interaction. First, we should take into account that the gesture is directed to the transcendent, which may be depicted, symbolised, or remain invisible and merely implied by the gesture itself. Second, we may consider the gesturing individual in terms of their communication with their own body; in other words, to explore if and how the gesturing body generates the appropriate bodily state such as respect, supplication, altered states. Outside this communication loop, but nonetheless implicated in the action, is the ancient viewer of the object or image, for the arrested image (unlike the transient living gesture) addresses itself to and communicates with yet another audience, the viewers of the image. All of these relationships or contexts are potentially meaningful and deserving of systematic study.

The "living gesture" would have been part of a wider set of ritual movements, which a Minoan viewer could have completed from his or her own cultural knowledge. It is also likely that at least some of the bodily practices frozen for us in art were integrated with other aspects of ritual action such as music, chanting, or the spoken word. Within the field of non-verbal communication such gestures would be termed *illustrators*. Whatever their original context, we have no choice but to treat the silent Minoan images as *emblematic* gestures, that is gestures separate from the spoken word.[14]

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11   WEDDE (*supra* n. 8).
12   E. GOFFMAN, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour* (1967); R.A. HINDE (ed.), *Non-Verbal Communication* (1972); A. KENDON (ed.), *Non-Verbal Communication. Interaction and Gesture. Approaches to Semiotics* 41 (1981).
13   E.H. GOMBRICH, "Ritualized gesture and expression in art," in *The Image and the Eye. Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (1982) 63-77.
14   D. EFRON, *Gesture, Race and Culture* (1972); KENDON (*supra* n. 12) 31.

The artistic medium also has an impact on our ability to describe and categorise gestures. As Michael Wedde has already noted in his study of seals and rings,[15] the small scale and style of the drawing can leave us unclear as to the exact attitude of the body; and the representation of a three-dimensional body as a two-dimensional image can result in ambiguity when we try to translate the arrested image into a living body. Thus it may, for example, be difficult to decide whether partially extended arms in a two-dimensional image are positioned in front of or alongside the body.

Figurines have the advantage of occupying three-dimensional space, but we may still wish to weigh up whether the different materials - in particular, bronze and terracotta - affect the gestural representations in any substantive way. The right hand to forehead gesture, so prominent in bronze, hardly ever appears in terracotta. How should we interpret this? Was the gesture simply too awkward to execute in clay? Or are more complex issues of chronology, social status, and significance of gesture to be brought into play? And to reverse the perspective, are convergent gestures (with the arms touching the body) well represented in clay figurines because they present less of a manufacturing challenge or was it because such gestures were appropriate and meaningful within particular contexts, such as peak sanctuaries? The idea that such gestural differences or preferences are a function of the limitations of the clay medium can be discounted. Although the best known clay figurines have convergent gestures – for example, the well-known Petsophas males with both arms raised to chest level – divergent gestures with the arms held in a range of positions away from the body are more common than is usually realised, probably because they are more prone to breakage. Female figurines from Petsophas, for example, hold both arms *extended*, and held upwards and in front of the body.[16] The Atsipadhes peak sanctuary figurines show clearly the existence of a fairly complex range of such open or divergent gestures in the terracotta repertoire (Pl. LXXXa-c).

Asymmetry of performance

The final section of my paper applies an analytical structure borrowed from the field of non-verbal communication – that of *asymmetry of performance* – to the study of Minoan gestures. The underlying principle is that asymmetry of performance in interaction rituals is directly related to disparities of status between individuals and groups, and that it should be observable in the embodied practice, irrespective of cultural variations, and independent of specific understanding of the full nuances of the particular gesture. The field of non-verbal communication concerns itself primarily with interaction rituals in face-to-face behaviour in ordinary daily life, but also recognises that gesture is important within socially significant discourses such as liturgical ritual.

Asymmetry of performance can be expressed in a number of ways.
Posture: the dominant figure is elevated or seated while the inferior individual may stand, bow, kneel; or prostrate himself. The overall structure is of above/below; up/down.
Approach: the inferior individual makes the approach and moves towards the dominant one; that is, he or she seeks to open and establish interaction.
Gesture: specific gestures will be used in association with posture and approach.
Size: in art the dominant individual may be even further emphasised through depiction at a larger scale.

An Egyptian scene in which the god Osiris and the rising sun are worshipped by Nakhte and his wife (Pl. LXXXd) may serve to illustrate a fully developed example of this structured asymmetry in which posture, approach and gesture are used to establish a frame for a focused encounter. *Posture*: the god is seated on a raised dais; the humans stand. *Approach*: the god sits,

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15   WEDDE (*supra* n. 8).
16   MYRES (*supra* n. 9) pl. XX.

the humans move towards him to greet him respectfully and to initiate interaction; *Gesture*: the humans raise both arms, bent at the elbow, upwards to face level. Typically the palms face outwards towards the deity. Postures of kneeling and prostration are also widely found in Egyptian art; these further emphasise the asymmetry of the relationships.

Structurally similar ritual performances can be identified in Minoan art where the worshipper initiates interaction/communication with the divine by approaching either a more dominant individual (larger, higher, seated) or a ritual symbol (especially horns of consecration).[17] It is notable that kneeling and prostration are not represented. In place of the *single* gesture primarily associated with this type of ritual performance in the Egyptian (and indeed later Greek) examples, we find a *cluster* of Minoan gestures, which all revolve around the general pattern of arm bent at the elbow and raised in front of the body. The gestural variation lies in the angle of the raised arm: this spans an arc from slightly divergent from the body (as is typical in the Egyptian examples), to parallel to the body, and then convergent with the body when the hand (now closed in a fist) may be close to or actually touch the forehead. This *cluster of gestures* is used to signal the worshipper's interaction with the transcendent, but there is no obvious correlation between the different gestures and the different recipients and symbols to which the gestures are directed. Structurally it may be useful to view them as a group of gestures of greeting or salutation, while recognising the probability that they embody symbolic and expressive differences, which are not directly recoverable from the images themselves. Perhaps the hand to head gesture, where the head is actively involved in the posture by being tilted back or bent forward, signals greater intensity or culmination of interaction, but this remains conjecture.

Taking these gestures as a cluster it is striking that none of them seem to be represented amongst the very large numbers of clay figurines from the peak sanctuaries. Conversely, the various gestures typical of the peak sanctuary terracottas are not represented in the type of scenes discussed above, in which the gesture, together with approach and posture, is expressive of the *asymmetry of performance* through which the worshipper greets and engages with the divine. But what, if any, significance should we attach to this observation that gestures, which are usually all lumped together under the general interpretative category of "gestures of worship" or "adoration," appear within distinctive, non-overlapping physical and iconographical contexts? The question merits more extensive analysis than is possible within this short paper. One possibility is that the differences are in part chronological; the majority of peak sanctuary terracottas are Protopalatial, while many of the relevant scenes of interaction on rings and seals are Neopalatial. If so, the more explicit and visible expression of hierarchy in the religious domain in the Neopalatial period may have mirrored and legitimised asymmetrical or unequal relationships in the human world.

If the sole or primary purpose of the peak sanctuary figurines is to communicate "it worships," "it offers prayers," why so many different gestures? It is worth stressing here that gender seems not to be the underlying explanation. For example, the notion that the arms to torso gesture is strongly gendered is unfounded.[18] Both male and female figurines perform this gesture, and similarly the open postures represented in the Atsipadhes material are not gender specific. At present only the gesture of the arms hugging the body, one arm across the waist, the other crossing up to the opposite shoulder, seems to be restricted to females.

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17 E.g. *MMR*² figs. 64, 84-86.

18 *Minoan Religion* 117 identifies this gesture as "mostly male" in relation to terracotta peak sanctuary figurines. Cf. L. HITCHCOCK, "Engendering domination: a structural and contextual analysis of Minoan Neopalatial bronze figurines," in J. MOORE and E. SCOTT (eds), *Invisible People and Processes* (1993) calls this a "predominantly female gesture" using only bronze figurines, which provide a sample size of thirteen. It is essential that the much larger data set of clay figurines are systematically recorded and taken into consideration in future discussions of the relationships between gender and gesture.

If we accept the premise with which this paper began that 'specific embodied practices may direct and shape varieties of religious experience,' then it seems reasonable at least to suggest that the different gestures depict purposeful ritual performances. Bodily practices, including specific gestures and postures, may have been involved in generating mystical states for purposes such as divination and healing, areas in which performance gains meaning through profound bodily experience.

Christine MORRIS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Pl. LXXXa   Anthropomorphic clay figurine from Atsipadhes Korakias peak sanctuary. Male figurine with arms raised forward and up. Ht. pres. 13.7 cm (RM 6891).
Pl. LXXXb   Anthropomorphic clay figurine from Atsipadhes Korakias peak sanctuary. Male figurine, left arm outstretched to side. Ht. pres. 11.7 cm (RM 6784).
Pl. LXXXc   Anthropomorphic clay figurine from Atsipadhes Korakias peak sanctuary. Figurine, arms curving round in front of the body. Ht. pres. 4.2 cm (RM 6908).
Pl. LXXXd   Nakhte and his wife adore the rising sun-god Re as well as Osiris attended by Maat. (Book of the Dead, early 19th dynasty; British Museum 10471).

(Drawings by Jenny Doole)