

## SEEING IS BELIEVING: REFLECTIONS ON DIVINE IMAGERY IN THE AEGEAN BRONZE AGE

The Aegean Bronze Age is fairly different from historical times as far as representations of divinities are concerned. There are no surely identifiable images of deities that could be recognized as specific divinities of a structured pantheon, like the Olympian gods of the first millennium, but apparently only anthropomorphic representations of universal principles such as fertility or related powers that are incorporated in what *we* call the Great Goddess or the Great Mother.<sup>1</sup> Examples include stone and terracotta figurines of the Neolithic period,<sup>2</sup> stone and gold “ring idols” of final Neolithic date,<sup>3</sup> Early Cycladic marble idols,<sup>4</sup> “snake goddesses” from the *Temple Repositories* at Knossos,<sup>5</sup> Mycenaean terracottas *phi* and *psi* figurines,<sup>6</sup> large terracotta idols of LM III and Subminoan date.<sup>7</sup> Reference to the same basic principles are given by early Greek images, before being inherited by individual Olympian deities as particular attributions -e.g. Artemis taking the prerogatives of the *ponia theron*.

A similarly negative evidence concerns in particular the cult statues, that were probably largely wooden figures, as were the *xoana* of early first millennium date, and only some parts of which have been preserved in the excavations, like the terracotta feet of the cult idol in the sanctuary at Arkhanes-Anemospilia for instance.<sup>8</sup> Such large images, though probably not the most frequent ones, had surely an anthropomorphic character that is confirmed by references to sacred garments offered to them,<sup>9</sup> like to cult statues of later Greek times.<sup>10</sup> They were probably carried in processions, as indicated by the term *te-o-po-ri-ja* in Linear B -a foreshadowing of the classical *theophoria*-,<sup>11</sup> and by fragments of wall paintings from the Cult Centre at Mycenae<sup>12</sup> and from Tiryns,<sup>13</sup> showing a small female figurine in the hand of a larger incomplete figure. Leaving aniconic idols aside, the majority of divine images in sanctuaries were probably made of terracotta or related material and of relatively large dimensions, like those excavated in cult places at Knossos,<sup>14</sup> Aghia Irini on Kea,<sup>15</sup> Phylakopi on Melos (the

- 1 R. TREUIL, P. DARCQUE, J.-C. POURSAT and G. TOUCHAIS, *Les civilisations égéennes du Néolithique et de l'âge du Bronze* (1989) 146.
- 2 K. GALLIS and L. ORPHANIDIS, *Figurines of Neolithic Thessaly I* (1996).
- 3 See lastly the catalogue of the exhibition in Athens: K. DEMAKOPOULOU, *Κοσμήματα της Ελληνικής προϊστορίας. Ο νεολιθικός θησαυρός* (1998).
- 4 *Kunst und Kultur der Kykladeninseln im 3. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (1976).
- 5 Most recently M. PANAGIOTAKI, *The Central Palace Sanctuary at Knossos* (1999) 96-98.
- 6 E. FRENCH, “The Development of Mycenaean Terracotta Figurines,” *BSA* 66 (1971) 101-187.
- 7 C. ZERVOS, *L'art de la Crète néolithique et minoenne* (1956) Pl. 765-768, 772-775 and 803-807.
- 8 I. and E. SAKELLARAKIS, *Archanes. Minoan Crete in a New Light II* (1997) 530-539 (The xoanon).
- 9 S. HILLER, “Mykenische Heiligtümer: Das Zeugnis der Linear B-Rexte,” in *Sanctuaries and Cults* 121.
- 10 On the garment of statues, R. LAFFINEUR, “La bijouterie chypriote d'après le témoignage des terres cuites: l'exemple des statuettes d'Arsos,” in *Cypriote Terracottas. Proceedings of the First International Conference of Cypriote Studies, Brussels-Liège-Amsterdam, 29 May-June 1989* (1991) 171-181.
- 11 M.E. CASKEY, “Aghia Irini, Kea: The Terracotta Statues and the Cult in the Temple,” in *Sanctuaries and Cults* 133 and S. HILLER, “Te-o-po-ri-ja,” in *Aux origines de l'hellénisme. La Crète et la Grèce. Hommage à Henri van Effenterre* (1984) 139-150.
- 12 *Das mykenische Hellas. Heimat der Helden Homers* (1988) no 152-153 (with reference to a similar scene on a sarcophagus from Tanagra: W. CAVANAGH and C. MEE, “Mourning before and after the Dark Age,” in *KLADOS. Essays in Honour of J.N. Coldstream* [1995] 46 and 49, fig. 10).
- 13 C. BOULOTIS, “Zur Deutung des Freskofragmentes Nr. 103 aus der Tirynther Frauenprozession,” in *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt* 9 (1979) 59-67 and fig. 1.
- 14 The “snake Goddesses” from Knossos: *supra* n. 5.
- 15 M.E. CASKEY, *Keos II, 1, The Temple at Aghia Irini. The Statues* (1986).

“Lady of Phylakopi”<sup>16</sup>, Mycenae<sup>17</sup> or Tiryns<sup>18</sup>, without specific attributes, and that cannot consequently easily be classified. Some of those, in addition, are of uncertain identification, like the well-known “Lord of Asine,” that could equally be the image of a female deity,<sup>19</sup> or the painted stucco head from Mycenae,<sup>20</sup> usually identified as the head of a sphinx, but that could well belong to a cult statue. It is in most cases impossible, moreover, to distinguish in such images found in cult places those that were intended as cult images and those that were just offerings made by worshippers. The difference is important, as emphasized by Colin Renfrew, who distinguishes various degrees of identification and interpretation: “1. Representations of anthropomorphic deities, i.e. deities which are conceived as normally taking human form; 2. Representations of abstract deities who occasionally take human form but could equally be shown as something else; 3. Votaries, that is to say the images of worshippers (whether individual or general), placed in the shrine either to give continuity of worship or as a reminder of an act of worship already performed; 4. Votive figures or offerings, made in their own right to the deity, and which might themselves represent either a deity or a human.”<sup>21</sup>

The archaeological context allows, in the most favourable cases, to get a more precise idea of the function of the images. The figures from the Cult Centre at Mycenae,<sup>22</sup> for instance, found on a bench at the end of the sanctuary, were probably intended as objects of worship for visitors. But this doesn't give them individual characters that would allow a precise identification. They could equally be images of persons from the cult staff, as suggested by A. Moore,<sup>23</sup> and there is still another possibility, according to S. Morris, that the idols from Mycenae were votive figures with funerary meaning, “either images of mourners dedicated to ancestors, if not representations of ancestors themselves as protecting *daimones*.”<sup>24</sup> This could be confirmed by the association of representations of coiled snakes,<sup>25</sup> or by the fact that the “temple” “lies in the area where earlier shaft graves were deliberately enclosed within the walls of the city, in a complicated series of building operations which indicate a strong interest in ancestors and the past.”<sup>26</sup> Other figures could be similarly identified as images of a goddess related to death, e.g. the seated female on the famous gold finger-ring from the Tiryns treasure, attended by geniuses holding a libation jug,<sup>27</sup> that S. Morris associates with the *Dipsioi* or “Thirsty Ones” of the Linear B.<sup>28</sup>

The iconographical context brings the interpretation in some rare cases to a degree of precision that appears really interesting at first sight. The “goddess” on the wall painting of Xeste 3 in Akrotiri on Thera gives the best example.<sup>29</sup> The identification as a goddess makes apparently no problem, since a griffin appears just behind the female figure -though identical hybrids appear symbolically in a protective function of the real king at Knossos and at Pylos. The monkey in front of the “goddess” is a further indication of the supernatural character of the figure. The scene, in fact, gets its real meaning from the female figures gathering crocuses depicted around: the “goddess” is a goddess of vegetation, and probably of the whole nature, if we refer to her necklaces with beads in shape of insects and ducks.<sup>30</sup> The identification remains

16 C. RENFREW, *The Archaeology of Cult. The Sanctuary at Phylakopi* (1985) 215-216 with fig. 6.4 (E. FRENCH).

17 *Das mykenische Hellas. Heimat der Helden Homers* (1988) no 167.

18 K. KILIAN, “Zeugnisse Mykenischer Kultausbübung in Tiryns,” in *Sanctuaries and Cults* 54, fig. 6-7 and *Das mykenische Hellas. Heimat der Helden Homers* (1988) no 25 and 168.

19 *Das mykenische Hellas. Heimat der Helden Homers* (1988) no 24 (“weiblicher [?] Kopf”) and lastly A.L. D'AGATA, “The “Lord” of Asine Reconsidered: Technique, Type and Chronology,” in *Asine III. Supplementary Studies on the Swedish Excavations 1922-1930*, 1 (1996) 39-46.

20 S. MARINATOS and M. HIRMER, *Kreta, Thera und das mykenische Hellas* (1973) Pl. LVI-LVII.

21 RENFREW (*supra* n. 16) 22-23 (with definition of the criteria for identification).

22 *Supra* n. 17.

23 “The Large Monochrome Terracotta Figures from Mycenae: The Problem of Interpretation,” in *Problems in Greek Prehistory* 219-224.

24 S.P. MORRIS, “Prehistoric Iconography and Historical Sources”, in *EIKΩN* 209.

25 *Das mykenische Hellas. Heimat der Helden Homers* (1988) no 166.

26 MORRIS (*supra* n. 24) 210.

27 *CMS I* no 179.

28 MORRIS (*supra* n. 24) 209.

29 C. DOUMAS, *The Wall-Paintings of Thera* (1992) Pl. 122.

30 DOUMAS (*supra* n. 29) Pl. 125-126.

on a general level, however, and the more specific interpretations that have been put forward recently are no more than hypothetical: according to G. Gesell, the crocuses would be gathered not for their whole flower, but for their styles and stigmas only, which would be an appropriate reference in relation to initiation and puberty rituals, the male counterpart of which seems to be illustrated on the wall of room 3b in the ground floor, just under the crocus gatherers.<sup>31</sup> The good conditions of preservation of the central part of the composition from Xeste 3 with the seated “goddess” brings in any case to a degree of probability missing in other painted figures that are equally detailed but much more isolated, such as the “Mycenaean Lady” from Mycenae<sup>32</sup> or the “goddess” from Aghia Triada.<sup>33</sup>

More elaborated images are attested on seals and finger rings.<sup>34</sup> They depict complex compositions, real scenes that very often refer to the cult sphere, but the meaning of which is far from easy to establish. Those images have been frequently and thoroughly discussed and it is not worth commenting on them here in detail. Suffice to remind that the divine, religious or simply human status of the figures is usually considered as resulting from their respective size, according to the principle of moral perspective, that the attributes are frequently more specific, *e.g.* the poppies in the hands of the “goddess” on the gold finger ring from the Acropolis Treasure at Mycenae,<sup>35</sup> and that the presence of astral elements, sun, moon and stars, at the top of the scene, among others on the above-mentioned finger ring from the Tiryns Treasure,<sup>36</sup> is a probable indication that the goddesses preside over something different from earth and fertility. As far as size is concerned, it is far from easy to distinguish between the deities themselves, the ministers of cult and the simple worshippers, and this had led some scholars to use for the first two the neutral designation of “V.I.P.,” with at least the advantage of avoiding a priori identifications that are too often proposed.<sup>37</sup>

Still more specific attributes appear on other categories of images, without allowing further identifications. The ears of cereals that the female figure holds in her uplifted arms on the painted panel from room 31 in the Cult Centre at Mycenae<sup>38</sup> refer again to a goddess of fertility -the equivalent of the female figure on the ivory pyxis lid from Minet-el-Beida,<sup>39</sup> with the exception of the bare chest-, but they do not suggest more than a precise designation of the figure as a *potnia siton*. They are finally not a more precise indication than the snakes in the hands of one of the “snake goddesses” from the *Temple Repositories* at Knossos<sup>40</sup> or the terracotta coiled snakes associated with the large cylindrical idols from the Cult Centre at Mycenae.<sup>41</sup> The weapons held by the two female figures on the adjoining painted panel in room 31 in the Cult Centre,<sup>42</sup> though fairly easy to identify, respectively as a sword and a spearhead or a sceptre, are not of much help, because the very fragmentary preservation of the figures do not allow to identify them with certainty as divine images, in particular as war goddesses. The presence of small nude male figures stretching out their hands towards the

31 G. GESELL, “Blood on the Horns of Consecration?,” in *Proceedings of the First International Symposium “The Wall Paintings of Thera”*, Thera, 30 August-4 September 1997 II (2000) 947-957 (the traces of red paint on the horns of consecration above the door would not represent blood, but crocus styles suspended from the shrine). See also M. TORELLI, “Santorini, Etruria and Archaic Rome: a Comparison of Mentality and Expression,” in *ibid.* I 295-316.

32 MARINATOS and HIRMER (*supra* n. 20) Pl. LV.

33 *Haghia Triada* I Pl. 4.

34 On this, N. MARINATOS, *Minoan Religion* chapter 7 “Goddesses and Gods;” W.-D. NIEMEIER, “Zur Ikonographie von Gottheiten und Adoranten in den Kultszenen auf minoischen und mykenischen Siegeln,” in *Fragen und Probleme der Bronzezeitlichen Ägäischen Glyptik*, CMS Beiheft 3 (1989) 163-186 and “Cult Scenes on Gold Rings from the Argolid,” in *Celebrations* 165-170.

35 CMS I no 17.

36 CMS I no 179.

37 J.-L. CROWLEY, “Images of Power in the Bronze Age Aegean,” in *POLITEIA* 483-490.

38 P. REHAK, “Tradition and Innovation in the Fresco from Room 31 in the ‘Cult Center’ at Mycenae,” in *EIKQN* Pl. XVIIIa.

39 J.-C. POURSAT, *Les ivoires mycéniens. Essai sur la formation d’un art mycénien* (1977) Pl. XIX, 1.

40 PANAGIOTAKI (*supra* n. 5).

41 *Das mykenische Hellas. Heimat der Helden Homers* (1988) no 166.

42 REHAK (*supra* n. 38) Pl. XIIa.

large figure with the sword designates her most probably as the main figure, but contributes anything to the interpretation and the identification of those small figures as souls or spirits, proposed by N. Marinatos,<sup>43</sup> is not very convincing. There is no doubt, on the other hand, that the female figures depicted on one of the short sides of the Aghia Triada sarcophagus are goddesses, since they are standing in a chariot drawn by griffins,<sup>44</sup> and because of the comparison with the female figures on the opposite short side of the sarcophagus that are placed in a chariot drawn by horses.<sup>45</sup> But again, this is insufficient evidence for a precise interpretation.

Even when a figure has a more specific gesture, such as holding her breasts with the hands, *e.g.* on funerary gold sheets from the shaft graves at Mycenae,<sup>46</sup> and on a nice terracotta idol from the neighbouring Cult Centre,<sup>47</sup> the interpretation cannot exceed the general level of a basic reference to fertility.

The identification is not safer in the case of the painted limestone plaque from Mycenae with an image of a figure associated with a large figure-of-eight shield and brandishing a sword,<sup>48</sup> that has been recognized as a “war goddess” or a “goddess of the warriors” -foreshadowing Athena, the *a-ta-na* of the Mycenaean tablets. Similar figures with weapons, helmet, shield, sword and even quiver as on the well known bronze double axe from Vorou,<sup>49</sup> have been recently studied by P. Rehak, with very relevant comments, particularly on the Minoan, and possibly Knossian, origin of the type. An identification with Athena, however, remains quite uncertain, and the alternative identification as Demeter cannot be ruled out, in connection with the name *i-da-ma-te* inscribed on small gold double axes from Arkhalochori,<sup>50</sup> a possible reference to a Minoan ancestor of Demeter with warlike prerogatives<sup>51</sup> -an echo of which is attested in the Homeric Hymn, especially in the designation of the goddess as the “goddess with the golden sword.”<sup>52</sup>

What now about the marine connotations and their possible reference to a “goddess of the sea”? Such a deity would have governed the world of both the living and the dead, as indicated respectively by the images of fishes and shells associated with the “snake goddesses” in the *Temple Repositories* at Knossos<sup>53</sup> or the images of octopus close to the “mistress of the agrimi” on the gold band from Zakros,<sup>54</sup> and by the many images from funerary assemblages that relate to the sea. But the marine connotations could equally be viewed as just additional general references to fertility, in particular as hints at the fertilizing powers of water, following a suggestion of mine in a paper at the *Thalassa* conference.<sup>55</sup> Such a complementarity of the fertilizing powers of earth and water would account for the depiction of the sacred tree on ships, as well as for the examples of the *potnia* of the fish, both of which appear on Minoan and Mycenaean seals.<sup>56</sup> The latter possibly foreshadows Artemis, who was venerated in some places

43 N. MARINATOS, “The Fresco from Room 31 at Mycenae: Problems of Method and Interpretation,” in *Problems in Greek Prehistory* 248.

44 MARINATOS and HIRMER (*supra* n. 20) Pl. XXXIII.

45 MARINATOS and HIRMER (*supra* n. 20) Pl. XXXII, bottom.

46 MARINATOS and HIRMER (*supra* n. 20) Pl. 227, bottom.

47 *Das mykenische Hellas. Heimat der Helden Homers* (1988) no 167.

48 *Das mykenische Hellas. Heimat der Helden Homers* (1988) no 163.

49 P. REHAK, “The Mycenaean ‘Warrior Goddess’ Revisited,” in *POLEMOS* 227-239, with Pl. XLVIIe for the axe from Vorou.

50 N. BOUFIDES, *ArchEph* (1954) 61-74 and L. GODART, “La bipenne di Arkalochori e la Dea Madre,” in *Alle soglie della classicità. Il Mediterraneo tra tradizione e innovazione. Studi in onore di Sabatino Moscati* (1995) 1161-1169.

51 See G.A. OWENS, “New Evidence for Minoan ‘Demeter,’” *Kadmos* 35 (1996) 172-175 (*da-ma-te* on an inscribed vase from the peak sanctuary at Agios Georgios on Kythera).

52 *Demeter Hymn* 4 (... Δήμητρος χρυσαόρου...).

53 PANAGIOTAKI (*supra* n. 5).

54 L. von MATT, St. ALEXIOU, N. PLATON and H. GUANELLA, *La Crète antique* (1967) fig. on p. 171.

55 R. LAFFINEUR, “La mer et l’au-delà dans l’Egée préhistorique,” in *Thalassa. L’Egée préhistorique et la mer. Actes de la troisième Rencontre égéenne internationale de l’Université de Liège, Station de recherches sous-marines et océanographiques, Calvi, Corse (23-25 avril 1990)*, *Aegaeum* 7 (1991) 231-238.

56 C. BOULOTIS, “La déesse minoenne à la rame-gouvernail,” in *Proceedings of the First Symposium on Ship Construction in Antiquity, Piraeus, 1985, Tropis* 1 (1989) 73, fig. 4a-c.

in Greek times as Πόντια ἰχθύων or as Δελφινία -an epithet that she shares with her brother Apollo Δελφίνιος.<sup>57</sup> Such an ambivalent meaning could find a confirmation in the fact that the Cretan goddesses Diktynna and Britomartis presided over both the sea and the wild nature and that the annual renewal of nature corresponds with the annual resumption of the navigation season.<sup>58</sup>

The only distinct reference to the sea is finally the figure of the “goddess with the oar-helm” that C. Boulotis has recently investigated in a much convincing way.<sup>59</sup> Identifying the vertical pole held by a nude female figure on an amygdaloid sealing from Chania as the oar-helm, Boulotis proposes to interpret the figure, whose nudity is considered as a sign of divinity, as an ancestor of Aphrodite Εὐπλοία, Ποντία, Λιμενία or Ναυαρχίς, as an ancestor of the Aphrodite with the oar attested in Greek terracottas. But the “goddess with the oar-helm” might equally be interpreted as the precursor of Amphitrite and, before her, of the *Posidaēja* mentioned on the tablet PY Tn 316, the female counterpart of the Mycenaean Poseidon, as indicated by the epithet Ποσειδωνία associated with Amphitrite.<sup>60</sup>

Aphrodite is also hinted at by the “goddess with doves” on a gold plaque from the shaft graves at Mycenae,<sup>61</sup> as well as by the figure reclining on a scale network on a clay sealing from Knossos,<sup>62</sup> an extraordinary foreshadowing of the *Anadyomene* Aphrodite, if the scale network has here the usual meaning of conventional representation of the sea waves. Such an isolated document, however, inspires some hesitation and inclines to cautious interpretation. It appears similarly dangerous, for instance, to identify the terracotta figurines of *kourotrophos* as images of the goddess Eileithya, even if her name is attested in the Linear B documents.

The association of several figures in one representation hardly allows a better understanding of the images. The question, of course, has to be addressed in connection with the famous ivory triad from Mycenae.<sup>63</sup> The association of two female figures with the image of a male child immediately evokes the Eleusinian triad. This is a certainly a possibility, even though the name of Demeter is not attested as such in the Linear B tablets. But triads are not unknown in earlier times, *e.g.* in the Early Cycladic sculpture<sup>64</sup> -as well as twins,<sup>65</sup> and there is no certainty at all that the three figures on the Mycenaean ivory are deities and not just images of a human family group.

The above examination of the iconographic evidence proves rather negative and this might be disappointing. But I think that such a negative statement is essentially the result of the absence of precise designations of deities in the contemporaneous written sources. The situation of Minoan Crete appears rather unfavourable in this respect, with largely undeciphered documents, whereas the Mycenaean religious context is able to receive substantial enlightenment from new epigraphical finds and their interpretation. This has been recently emphasized by the wonderful finds from Thebes on which Louis Godart and Anna Sacconi will report later in the present conference.

Those finds confirm the unexpected benefit that the interpretation of iconographic sources can get from the existence of written sources, and, by comparison, the extreme fragility that is the normal fate of a history of religion without texts.

The benefit, however, is only partial and the certainty is far from absolute. The main reason is that the two categories of complementary testimonies do not appear on the same place and that it is necessary to compare the evidence from various sites. To take just the above

57 BOULOTIS (*supra* n. 56) 60.

58 BOULOTIS (*supra* n. 56) 60.

59 BOULOTIS (*supra* n. 56) 55-71.

60 *Schol. Od.* quoted in BOULOTIS (*supra* n. 56) n. 72.

61 BOULOTIS (*supra* n. 56) 63. On Aphrodite with doves, see V. PIRENNE-DELFORGE, *L'Aphrodite grecque* (1994) 415-417. On the Mistress of birds, see lastly D. LENZ, *Vogel Darstellungen in der ägäischen und zyprischen Vasenmalerei des 12.-9. Jahrhunderts v. Chr. Untersuchungen zu Form und Inhalt* (1995) 44-72.

62 *PM IV* fig. 925.

63 H. WACE, *Ivories from Mycenae 1939 - The Ivory Trio* (1969).

64 *Kunst und Kultur der Kykladeninseln im 3. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (1976) no 258.

65 G.St. KORRES, “Διπλά θεότητες εν Κρήτη καὶ μυκηναϊκῇ Ἑλλάδι,” in *Πεπραγμένα του Β' διεθνούς κρητολογικου συνεδριου Β'* (1968) 107-119.

example, texts excavated in Thebes are to be confronted with images found in Mycenae and Tiryns -because there are no images in Thebes relating to that aspect of religion-, with the inevitable uncertainties that such a confrontation implies. Conversely, images from Mycenae and Tiryns have to be interpreted in connection with texts from Thebes -because there are no texts in Mycenae relating to that aspect of religion-, with similar limitations. Such a situation, *mutatis mutandis*, is the same as the one that would exist if historians of Greek religion had to use *e.g.* texts of Peloponnesian origin in order to interpret the material aspects of Attic religion and cults. One realizes here to what extent the study of the prehistoric religion of the Aegean is still in its infancy.

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