Performing Religion: Practitioners and Cult Places in Minoan Crete

Ina Berg, University of Manchester, School of Art History and Archaeology, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL

Background

Named after the mythical King Minos, the Minoan civilisation was ‘discovered’ in Crete by Arthur Evans at the beginning of the 20th century. The island was first inhabited in the Neolithic and small hamlets and villages remained the dominant feature until the end of the Early Bronze Age. From the Middle Minoan (MM) period onwards we can witness the emergence of a more complex society, culminating in the appearance of the first palaces in Greece in the Protopalatial period (c. 1950-1750 BC). A destruction of the palaces and subsequent rebuilding marks the beginning of the Neopalatial period (c. 1750-1490 BC). The palaces formed the centre of administration, storage, religion and trade until their destruction at the end of the Neopalatial period around ca. 1490 BC (according to the conventional chronology). In addition to the actual palaces, palatial control was also exerted through a system of villas (country-houses), and religious sites, such as caves and peak sanctuaries (hill-top shrines).

Introduction

The wide variety of cult places, regional and pan-Cretan components, and changes in practices through time indicate that Minoan religion is a diverse and changing element, rather than a unified, homogenous, island-wide, theistic construct (Figure 1). The year
1988 saw the publication of Warren’s seminal paper on ‘Minoan religion as ritual action’, in which he drew attention to the central role of performance-related aspects in Minoan religion. Building on work by Matz and Nilsson, Warren defined ritual action as things done, things said or sung, and things displayed or envisioned in epiphany (1988: 13). His analysis of Minoan iconography established the existence of several different rituals: ecstatic dance rituals, baetilic rituals, robe rituals, flower rituals and processions. The importance of these rituals, so argued Warren, can only be understood in the context of achieving the epiphany of the deity, that is to “communicate with the divine or to induce the divinity to communicate with or affect the human or the material world” (1988: 13; for the wider context on ritual see Bell 1997). While it is questionable whether all rituals had the epiphany of the deity as their ultimate goal (and demonstrates Warren’s indebtedness to the neo-Tylorian view), Warren rightly emphasised the importance of the performance-related aspects of rituals. It was this particular aspect of Minoan religion which also interested Christine Morris and Alan Peatfield in their discussion of figurines from Cretan peak sanctuaries (Peatfield 2001; Morris 2001; Morris & Peatfield 2002). Usually the figurines uncovered at peak sanctuaries have been interpreted as those of worshippers, and consequently their gestures have been interpreted as those of worship, adoration and supplication (Figure 2). However, Morris and Peatfield were concerned that such a limited interpretation was borne out of our modern western religious understanding rather than those of Minoan times. Instead the authors suggested an alternative (and more active) model which regards the use of body posture and gesture as part of ritual behaviour (2002: 110). Drawing on Felicitas Goodman’s work on body postures the authors suggest that the figurines may be a visual representation and
commemoration of humans attempting to achieve or having achieved altered states of consciousness (ASC). In this scenario the body itself is regarded as a suitable vehicle into the ASC (as opposed to reliance on sounds/smells/artificial stimuli etc.) to experience the divine. The purpose, so argue the authors, was to achieve forms of epiphany of the deity.

Accepting the importance of performance aspects of Minoan religion and the ability for worshippers themselves to induce trance and thus direct communication with supernatural beings, we need to consider the role of professionals, such as priests, or laymen in the performance (and possible spiritual guidance) of such rituals.

**Religious practitioners: priests, priest-healers or shamans?**

Ever since Evans discovered the Minoan civilisation at the beginning of the 20th century priests and priestesses have been accepted as an established part of the Minoan society. Images on seals, rings, sealings and frescoes show the distinct iconography of the profession and the role division between priests and priestesses. Priests (Figure 3a and b) can be identified on account of their long robes with diagonal bands, their special hairstyle (short fringe, long hair at the back). A beard is frequently shown and many carry a curved axe or a stone mace. Images of animal heads frequently accompany priests and it has been suggested that priests are intimately connected with animal sacrifices (Marinatos 1993:131).

Priestesses (Figure 3c and d), on the other hand, are never depicted with animals and have consequently been linked to bloodless sacrifices and generally peaceful activities, such as the pouring of libations, taking part in processions, bringing flowers and
performing dances. Priestesses have no standard iconography (they share their iconography - flounced skirt, open bodice - with female deities and elite women) and their identification depends on the context. The dresses are painted with images from the animal world or, more frequently, from nature (especially flowers) – emphasising the connection between priestesses and bloodless nature (Marinatos 1993: 141-145).

There can be little doubt that a formalized priesthood existed in Crete during the Neopalatial period (conventionally dated to 1750-1490 BC). Klass asserts that it is typically state-level societies that employ full-time specialists who may perform elaborate processions and other rituals normally assumed incompatible with hunter-gatherer societies (1995: 66; Harris 1987: 282; James 1955). The reason we call these professionals ‘priests’ is because they are bound into a hierarchy and must follow certain instructions when conducting ceremonies. A priest, so argues Klass (1995: 66), is therefore subject to external authority – unlike other part-time practitioners. Their reliance on outside spiritual as well as secular authority becomes particularly noticeable when they are full-time specialists, unable to provide for themselves, and who, like craftsmen, need to be supported by the palaces. As we have ample archaeological evidence of craft specialists controlled by Minoan palaces it appears distinctly possible that also the priesthood was regulated and supported along those lines. If what we see are indeed ‘attached priests’, then Marinatos is possibly correct in envisaging recruits for the priesthood to come from the upper strata of Minoan society who were trained in this profession in the palaces or villas (1993: 145-146; cf Beard 1990) – though this has to remain hypothetical on the basis of current evidence. If these priests were indeed
supported by the palaces we may assume that they (exclusively?) served the palace inhabitants. This frequently observed pattern is, for example, visible in ancient Rome where priests are recruited from the patricians and appear to cater for the higher strata of society. Non-professionals, on the other hand, appear to have looked after the needs of the less privileged strata of society (Beard 1990; Klass 1996; James 1955).

Considering skeletal evidence of disease, injury and subsequent medical intervention as well as surgical instruments, Arnott has recently argued for the existence of ‘priest-healers’ (1999, 1996). Priest-healer encompasses a wide spectrum of people, ranging from the palace-based, well-trained surgeon to the untrained magic healer, witch or shaman. Arnott regards the peak sanctuaries as centres of such a healing cult as votive limbs (such as a woman with oedematous leg suffering from elephantiasis or liver cancer, a deformed hand representing leprosy or severe arthritis and a male head with a protruding thyroid gland from Traostalos (Chryssoulaki 2001: 62) have been found in large quantities. Further evidence for a healing cult comes from an Egyptian papyrus (from ca. 1400 BC) which contains two incantations in the Minoan language for exorcising the ‘Asian sickness’ (Haider 2001; Arnott 1996: 266).

In a recent paper Rehak (1999) has argued that the women depicted in the Theran frescoes had extensive medicinal knowledge of plants. Rehak specifically refers to the Vitamin A and B rich saffron which the women in Xeste 3 have been gathering and consuming (Figure 4). Other plants depicted in paintings, such as lilies, cystus, iris and myrtle, are also known for their medicinal properties. Rehak thus argues for a society in
which women control, preserve and pass on (secret?) knowledge about health. As yet there is no evidence to connect men with such activities. Bearing in mind the flower depictions on the dresses of priestesses, it seems distinctly possible that it was primarily women who had access to medicinal knowledge and functioned as healers in Minoan society. I would envisage their sphere of activity and responsibility to include both palatial (possibly overlapping with the priestess profession) and non-palatial contexts. Thus, iconographic images indicate a work division between men and women with men in charge of animal sacrifices and women concerned with bloodless sacrifices and healing activities (cf. Starr Sered 1994). Circumstantial support for this argument is provided by the Theran frescoes where males are depicted with animals but never with plants; plants are the exclusive domain of women (Goodison & Morris 1998: 128).

Scholars have argued that there is an apparent lack of trance and possession rituals in societies with full-time priests because they need to refer to an external authority (if trance occurs it is most likely that the priest will undergo possession alone while in other circumstances bystanders can join in the experience). Laymen and healers, on the other hand, have no outside authority and can communicate with the supernatural directly, frequently through dance, trance and possession rituals (Klass 1995: 81; James 1955). Minoan iconography has ample examples of images interpreted as depicting dance sequences (mostly several women) and trance rituals, as well as rituals involving dressing in specific robes. There even exist large stone-built circular platforms at Knossos which have been interpreted as dance floors (Warren 1987: 38). And, as mentioned above,
Morris and Peatfield have argued that the figurines found at peak sanctuaries portray people while attempting to achieve an altered state of consciousness (2002).

If we accept the evidence of trance rituals in Minoan Crete and if we agree that peak sanctuaries may have functioned as places where healing cults and trance rituals took place, it appears likely, for reasons outlined above, that (palatial) priests were not involved in performing these rituals. This implies that we need to consider priest-healers or other non-professionals as guiding the worshippers on those occasions.

Not only do we need to consider who performed those rituals but we also need to bear in mind who or what was the object of worship. As Marinatos and Peatfield have pointed out, there is a complete absence of cult images at peak sanctuaries (Marinatos 1993: 119; Peatfield 2001: 53). This lack of any evidence makes it difficult to believe in ritual involving personified deities. However, the fact that essential ingredients of every peak sanctuary are the mountain, rock fissures and niches (and deposition of figurines in concentrated in these areas), forces us to consider a more inclusive understanding of sacred cosmology – one that goes beyond divine persons and recognises the sanctity of natural places and objects.

**Sacred places and sacred nature**

Images and artefacts of natural objects and animals are regularly found in Minoan Crete. Despite their abundance, scholars continue to support the idea that Minoan deities were in control of nature and animals. Studies are still heavily influenced by Arthur Evans’
Victorian view of Minoan religion as centred around a nurturing Mother Goddess with a young, male consort. Religion is hereby viewed in terms of western religious experience, in particular our belief in the existence of one or more supreme deities who are in control of nature (Peatfield 2000: 144). Nature itself can provide a setting for and can function as an instrument to the epiphany of a deity but is rarely seen as divine itself. However, anthropologists have long recognised that conceptions of nature are socially constructed and that therefore our modern dualism should not be projected back onto the past (Descola 1996: 82). Without wanting to deny the existence of personified deities, I wish to explore a more encompassing, nature-inclusive cosmology which acknowledges the possibility of a divine status for places, materials and animals.

Since Evans’ book on the Mycenaean tree and pillar cult, scholars have accepted that nature has played an important part in Minoan religion. The most vocal proponents of such a view are Goodison and Morris (Goodison 1989; Goodison and Morris 1998). The two authors have argued that not all images can be explained with reference to personified deities but frequently depict rituals focusing on “the natural world: sun, animals and plants” (Goodison & Morris 1998: 120). Nature is hereby regarded as a vehicle for the epiphany of a deity and may embody the divine, but is not regarded as divine in itself – a view exemplified by Coldstream’s words in his inaugural lecture at Bedford College, London, in 1977: “a Minoan Goddess may dwell in a tree, a pillar, or in a shapeless lump of stone” (quoted in Goodison 1989: 10).

Anthropological research has long recognised that many religions are cosmotheistic:
“[T]hey believe that all natural parts of the world have a human-like life force. In such a belief system, plants, animals, rocks, etc. are conscious and wilful; they must be treated with proper respect.” (Carmichael et al. 1994: 6)

Fieldwork by anthropologists primarily among hunter-gatherers has led to a replacement of the old nature-society dichotomy by a monist one. Descola and Hviding, for example, have argued that the Achuar Jivaro of the Upper Amazon and the native inhabitants of the Marovo Lagoon in the Solomon islands “do not see organisms and non-living components of their environment as constituting a distinct realm of nature separated from human society” (Descola & Palsson 1996: 7). These cultures do not perceive plants, animals and human as separate categories. All form part of the social domain and are interacting constantly with each other. Bird-David explains that the Ojibwa and Nayaka, by interacting with animals and winds, perceive them as subcategories of an all-encompassing category of ´person´ (1999: 71-73). This reciprocal, social relationship has been called animism. Animism is a way of understanding the ´we-ness´of the relationship between humans, animals and nature; it is a way of relating. Humans, animals and nature become animate through relating with each other in a constant process of shared creation (Ingold 2000: 113).

Because animistic relations connect plants, animals and humans, this does not imply that their co-existence is without power-struggle and stresses. Palsson has distinguished
between three kinds of human-environment relations: orientalism (predation), paternalism (protection) and communalism (reciprocity) (1996, also Descola 1996). Predation denotes a relationship in which humans are masters over nature and exploit its resources. Humans are also in control in a paternalistic relationship but here their intention is to protect nature. Communalism describes a state in which humans neither control nor protect nature but coexist. All three types of relationships can be found among societies broadly classified as animistic, although Palsson argues that predation and paternalism may be found more regularly among agriculturalists (1996, also Descola 1996: 95). However, we have to recognise that orientalism and communalism are only extreme poles of a varied and changing spectrum, with most societies occupying various points along the range – such as the Cree where we can find expressions of communion as well as domination (Brightman in Palsson 1996: 77). Whichever form of interaction is favoured, it appears that "the relationships between humans and their land are modelled on the social bonds among distant relatives characterised by respect and formality" (Palsson 1996: 71; emphasis in original).

The concept of animism has been primarily explored in relation to hunter-gatherers because those who “hunt and gather for a subsistence generally have an extremely close and intimate knowledge of the landscape and its plants and animal inhabitants, on whose continuity and regeneration their life depends” (Ingold 2000: 111), and much has been said about the relationship between hunter and wild animal prey as a dialogue between two equals in the same world; however, I do not see hunter-gatherer life as substantially different from prehistoric agriculturalists. While not relying on hunting and gathering to
supply the majority of their subsistence needs, they frequently continued to supplement their diet of cultivated cereals, pulses and domesticated animals with hunted animals and gathered plants. Naturally, one would assume that the relationship agriculturalists have with their domesticated plants and animals is slightly different, it could nevertheless be explained within the framework of, for example, paternalistic animism. Indeed, Vitebsky has provided an example of a sedentary cultural group, the Sora, whose beliefs can be classified under the heading of totemism/animism (1993).

Evidence of a special relationship with nature can easily be found in Minoan Crete. Examples encompass the whole Bronze Age. For a better (non-exhaustive) overview I have subdivided the next section into several (not exclusive) headings: a) baetyls, b) caves, stalagmites and stalactites, c) water, d) mountain, rock and stone, and e) animals.

**Baetyls:**

Baetyls are natural, rounded stones which are a common theme on gold rings and have also been identified in the archaeological record (Sanctuary at Phylakopi, area Rho at Vasiliki, Central Court at Mallia, outside the palace at Gournia, peak sanctuary at Traostalos). Illustrations on seals and frescoes suggest that these stones are found in the open-air and may be near built structures (Warren 1988, 1990; La Rosa 2001). Frequently humans have sunk down in front of the stone or lie draped over them in a gesture that could be interpreted as that of prayer or adoration (Figure 5). In some instances baetyls are the subject of libations (Evely 1999: 62).
Warren and others have interpreted the stone as a place for ritual activities whose aim was to gain communion with the deity through locating “the power of the divinity within the stone” (Warren 1988: 18). Thus the stones are regarded as a medium through which the divinity can manifest itself but they themselves do not carry divine status. However, recent excavations at Ayia Triada have revealed two well preserved baetyls of MMIA-II date only 2m apart from each other. Given their proximity to communal tombs in MMI, the excavators have interpreted these stones as “a sort of Minoan ‘weeping wall’, remembering…their dead” (La Rosa 2001: 223). By MMII, the baetyls have lost their funerary connotation and are then used as a vehicle for epiphany as paralleled in the seal depictions (La Rosa 2001: 225). While interpretations are difficult to substantiate, the Ayia Triada examples nevertheless indicate the analytical potential inherent in baetyls: functions may have changed over time and they may symbolise past ancestors, divinities, or be divine in themselves as representations of mountains.

_Caves, stalagmites and stalactites:_

The number of caves with evidence for ritual is estimated to lie between 12 and 36. Caves are without doubt sacred sites in Minoan times. Frequently, caves are visible from the nearest palace or settlement and have provided evidence of offerings. The most prominent features of several caves are stalagmites/stalactites (around which walls (temenoi) were erected as in the Cave of Eileithyia at Amnisos, Figure 6), and offerings have been found scattered around them (e.g. at Melidoni and Psychro; Warren 1987: 32; Tyree 2001). Bradley points out that some of these stalagmites and stalactites may resemble living beings. Some were manually enhanced, others were rubbed smooth or
had fragments taken away. Two caves – one dated to the Minoan period - have provided us with examples of Bronze Age rock art, including images of humans, wild animals, birds and fish (Burkert 1985: 24).

Water (springs, rivers, the sea, shells):

Pools in caves received many offerings (for example the subterranean lake inside the Psychro Cave had seal stones, bronze pins, knives, rings and figurines found in it), and the mountain shrine of Kato Syme (Lasithi mountains) was built near an abundant spring (Jones 1999). Shells have been found in tombs and a conch shell trumpet was part of the ritual paraphernalia at the sanctuary of the Phaistos palace, two shells were found at the Sanctuary at Phylakopi and one at Petras near Siteia (Goodison 1989: 36, 89). Shells have been found among the offerings at Juktas and at Traostalos (Chryssoulaki 2001: 63; Karetsou 1987: in Goodison). Ritual vases are sometimes made in the shape of a shell (Knossos and Zakros) (Goodison 1989: 89).

Mountains, rocks and stones:

Early Minoan tholos tombs have preserved a great number of amulets made of a large variety of materials (bone, steatite, ivory, copper). The simplest amongst these are plain pebbles or smoothed and engraved stones, interpreted as amulets possessing magic qualities (Branigan 1970: 94).

It is estimated that 25 ‘real’ peak sanctuaries existed. Peak sanctuaries do not necessarily lie at the top of a mountain but in location where there was intervisibility between the settlement and the sanctuary (and possibly other sanctuaries), thus creating an intertwined
‘sacred landscape’ (cf. Shaw 1999). These sanctuaries appear to mark the realm of ‘wilderness’ as they are found beyond the limits of the settled land (Bradley 2000: 101). Initially, peak sanctuaries were bounded by and included natural features such as outcrops, natural terraces, fissure or rock formations (Bradley 2000: 101; Nowicki 2001: 32). Rural peak sanctuaries, i.e. those not directly linked to palaces (e.g. Traostalos), contained large numbers of unworked pebbles which had been gathered in nearby lowlands (Chryssoulaki 2001: 60). It is noticeable that the distribution of finds within the peak sanctuaries is limited to areas with natural features, e.g. fissures, rock clefts, niches, rock terraces. It appears that animal or human figurines were deposited in separate areas; the same is possibly also the case for male and female figurines (Bradley 2000:106).

Caves, springs and mountains have often been marked as sacred sites. Inhabitants of northern Scandinavia linked sites together through a mythical narrative and in Greece, Pausanias singled out many springs, mountains, caves and trees as sacred sites (Bradley 2000: 5, 22; Carmichael et al 1994). In Minoan times, the location of peak sanctuaries and images of mountain tops in Theran frescoes appear to indicate the special significance of mountains (Morgan 1988: 31-33). Over time – possibly connected to the emergence of the palaces - these sacred places were altered through buildings. Springs and caves too received new structures, including altars and temenoi (Bradley 2000; Rutkowski 1986: 76). Such elaboration and formalisation creates a permanent fixture in the landscape, and is paralleled by the emergence of a formalised priesthood in the palaces.
**Animals:**

Amongst amulets from Early Minoan tholos tombs are animal figurines (Figure 7); the most common types include apes, pigs, cows, birds and hedgehogs. Branigan (1970: 94) has interpreted these amulets as talismans ensuring the well-being of the animal. The inclusion of apes and hedgehogs makes this interpretation less convincing. An alternative interpretation can be suggested through drawing upon the work of Ingold who discusses Inuit carvings of animals. He argues that the act of carving these animals – the holding in mind – is of greater importance than the final product. These ‘embodied thoughts’ act like ever-present memories - are fastened to the clothing and carried around (Ingold 2000: 126). Instead of prayer to a higher authority for well-being they are here regarded as a constant reminder of an ongoing reciprocal relationship between human and animal - eventually finding their way into the tomb with the human.

That animals played a major part in Minoan life can be seen in early prism seals. Animals are the most frequent motif (70% animals: 30% humans) (Goodison 1989: 49). It appears that animal figurines deposited in sacred caves (especially among rocks and boulders) antedate those of humans, and are found from MMI-II onwards while human figurines only make their appearance in MMIII-LMI (Tyree 1974: 175). Animals include bull, pig, boar, ram, goat and bird. It should also be noted that traces of animal sacrifice have only been found in caves with animal figurines though not all caves with animal figurines have animal sacrifice (Tyree 1974).

**Conclusions:**
Conventional interpretations for each example given above highlight the importance of these places and materials as a medium for a person’s communion with a deity through locating the power of the divinity within the object or place (e.g. Warren 1988: 18; Rutkowski 1986: 47-72). Thus stones, stalagmites and animals are regarded as a medium through which the divinity can manifest itself but they themselves do not carry divine status. While this is a valid explanation for a religion based on personified deities, it becomes less convincing when allowing for a religion to be constituted of several aspects, including animistic features. Animism is one religious orientation which can perceive animals, stones, rivers, mountains, etc. as divine themselves, and not merely a dwelling place for a personified deity. Such a belief system can sit side by side with a belief in divine persons as has been demonstrated by Vitebsky with reference to the Sora (1993). However, there is frequently a need for intermediaries (witches, shamans, etc) between humans and nature whenever the human-environmental relationship is out of balance. These intermediaries, such as the priest-healers discussed above, can communicate directly between the two spheres through trance, dance, possession and music (cf. James 1955).

There is no denying that personified deities were part of a Minoan religion. But the evidence presented here suggests that animal images and votives preceded those of humans/divine persons and existed alongside deities during the Neopalatial period. The use of natural features, such as caves, mountain tops, pools for ritual activity and the occurrence of pebbles at peak sanctuaries and pebble amulets in tholos tombs hints at a religious belief that regards nature itself as divine.
I suggest that we should recognise at least two distinct levels of Minoan religion: palatial and non-palatial. Palace religion has been argued to rely on a formal priesthood and is most likely based at the palaces. Non-palatial segments of Minoan society most likely relied on non-professionals such as healers, shamans or witches for their religious welfare who functioned as guides for those experiencing ritual activities.
Bibliography:


Illustrations:

1. The distribution of major types of cult site in Crete (Dickinson 1994: fig. 8.2. 
   Reproduced by permission of Cambridge University Press).

2. MMI-II figurine from the peak sanctuary of Petsophas (Reproduced by permission of 

3. a) Sacerdotal figure on seal (after Marinatos 1993: fig. 88b); b) Head of a priest and 
   animal on a two-sided seal (after Marinatos 1993: fig. 90); c) Priestess (?) in 
   flounced skirt carrying a garment and a double axe on seal (after Marinatos 1993: 
   fig. 115); d) Small faience robe from temple repositories, Knossos (after Marinatos 
   1993: fig. 111).

4. Sketch of Crocus Gatherers and goddess on tripartite structure. Xeste 3, Akrotiri, Thera 
   (after Marinatos 1993: fig. 213).

5. Baetyl with figure lying draped over it. Serpentine seal 80/1129. Knossos, 
   Stratigraphic Museum Site (after Warren 1990: fig. 140).

6. The Cave of Eileithyia. Amnissos. Plan and section of the cave (after Rutkowski 1986: 
   fig. 31).
