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Aegyptiaca in Context: Amulets and magic in Pre- and Protopalatial southern Crete

ABSTRACT

As a contribution to the discussion of the value of magic in Minoan religious culture, this paper offers some reflections on the possible Egyptian influences, paying particular attention to three clay figurines from southern Crete (Phaistos and Kommos) of the Old Palace period. These objects can be connected to a local perception of the complex Egyptian religious heritage that was elaborated at a popular level with aspects linked to magical and healing practices and reflect a peculiar attitude of this period that subsequently failed.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ: Aegyptiaca, Egyptian magic, Minoan magic, amulets, Prepalatial Crete, Protopalatial Crete, Southern Crete, Mesara, Asterousia, Phaistos, Kommos, Taweret, Minoan Genius

MAGIC IN PREPALATIAL CRETE

1. The setting for the discussion by Evi Sikla for this conference¹ is at the intersection between two fields of investigation: exchange and interaction on one hand and religion on the other. For many years now, the debate surrounding exchanges of ideas and objects has extended well beyond discussions of cross dating or sources to tackle aspects such as the symbolic role of imported objects and ideas, and the transformation they underwent.² If extracting meanings from things is a complex task for archaeologists, it becomes even more difficult with religion,³ especially when, as in Minoan Crete, texts are missing or not understandable,⁴ and the different levels of religious activity (private vs. public; popular vs. elite)⁵ are difficult to determine.

¹ Workshop *Religions on the Move: Exchanges between Cretan and non-Cretan religions in the Bronze Age*. I was not able attend the workshop in person, so my paper was read by F. Blakolmer, whom I warmly thank. I thank also Dr. Sikla for inviting me to the workshop.

² Helms 1988.

³ Insoll 2011.

⁴ See, e.g., the observations by Kyriakidis for the peak sanctuaries (Kyriakidis 2005), and the scepticism of Colin Renfrew in his recent survey (2011). For a general survey of Minoan religion Gesell (1985) is still fundamental. See also Marinatos 1993, 2013; Lupak 2010.

⁵ By “private” religion we mean actions oriented towards the preservation of the well-being of the single individual or family; by “public” religion, actions oriented towards the relation between the wider social group and the gods. “Elite” religion concerns, instead, actions managed by the state, with great energy expenditure, vs. “Popular” religion, based on much humbler tools and paraphernalia (see, for the last definition, Gesell 2000, 497; see also Gesell 2011 and, for Helladic Greece, Hägg 1981).

Within this system, magic appears as an evanescent element. According to our definition, we are not referring to magic in a diachronic perspective, as a synonym for primitive religion, like animism, ontologism or shamanism,⁶ but as a distinct practice within the wider realm of ritual and religion, well defined in a recent book on Egyptian magic and amulets by Fulvio De Salvia.⁷ Magic is part of the broader “religious” context of the relationships between humans and superhuman beings, but distinguishes itself from religious attempts to formalize a representation of the cosmos by targeting the control of supernatural forces for perceived benefits. Magicians performed ritual actions, or witchcraft, with gestures, words and objects, include amulets to ward from evil forces in apotropaic fashion, and talismans to draw beneficial effects.⁸

2. Magic does not fall under the dualism of official and popular cult, as it can be performed at a state level. Moreover, magicians are not limited to interaction between humans and superhumans (gods, spirits, demons), but also among deities, humans (curses, defixiones), and even between humans and the dead, where magic serves not only to protect the living from the dead, but can also be used to assert a negative influence on the quality of one’s afterlife.

Interestingly, Egypt has played a special role in the development of magic through its sustained cultural development. Egyptians personified Magic in the form of the god Heka and Magic was allowed even at a state level. It was, however, by nature mainly oriented towards daily well-being, the protection of women and children, sexuality and fertility; in a world of precarious existence, magic practices were especially diffused at a private level.

The complexity and development of Egyptian Magic was, especially in the first millennium B.C., behind the fortuitous diffusion of scarabs and other amulets across the Mediterranean world. A process probably brought about at a very primitive level by Phoenicians and other Levantine merchants (the Magic of the Sukh according to De Salvia), but in which women probably played an important role, given the significant association of magic with everything connected with fertilization, gestation, birth and infancy.

The role of magic in the Minoan world has received less attention than religion⁹ as it was mainly delivered through words and gestures, demonstrated by the well-known “incantation of the Keftiu” in the London medical papyrus,¹⁰ to which the two incantation bowls from Knossos (not to mention the Phaistos Disk) can be added, and has been recognized in the adoption of Egyptian apotropaic figures, such as Taweret and Beset.¹¹

⁶ See surveys in Insoll (2011) by Insoll (Shamanism), Insoll (Animism and Totemism). See also critical analysis by Gosden 2012.

⁷ De Salvia 2014.

⁸ As a consequence, magic also played a role in the production of metals: Budd, Taylor 1994; Gosden 2012.

⁹ Only a few articles refer to magic in the title: e.g. Evans 1931; Hood 1997.

¹⁰ Haider 2012.

¹¹ Weingarten 1991, 2013, 2015.

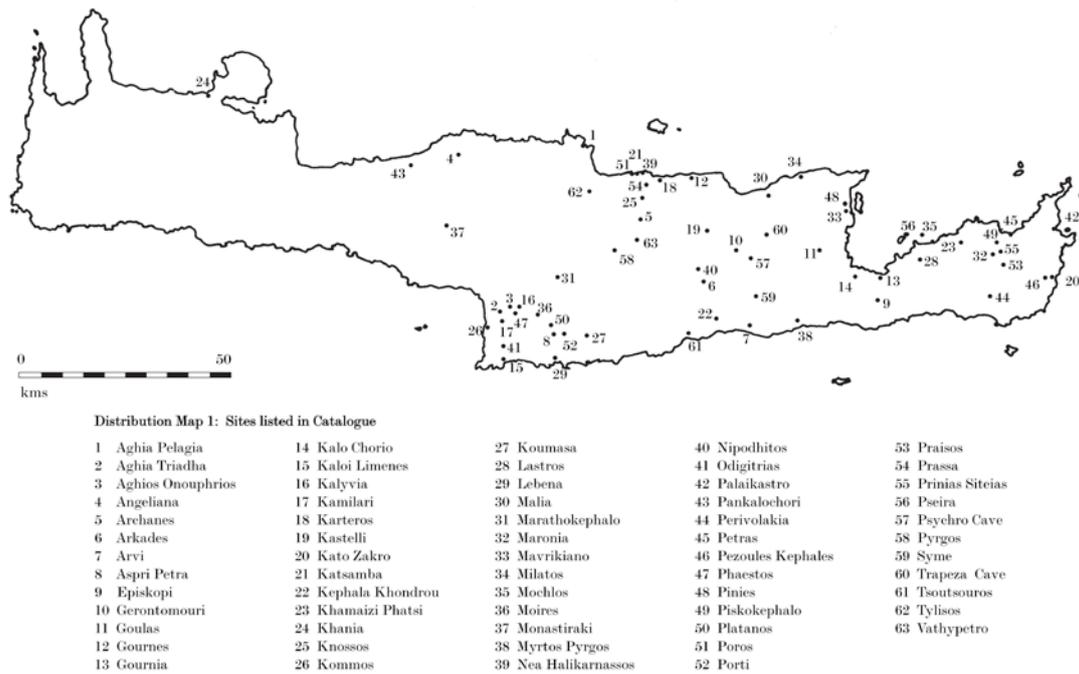


Fig. 1 Map of distribution of Aegyptiaca in Crete (Phillips 2008).

3. Minoan magic is therefore strictly linked with Egyptian magic, which gives rise to my question of whether a similar phenomenon to the diffusion of Egyptian magic in the 1st millennium B.C. Mediterranean could be detected in the 2nd millennium B.C. from the relationships between Crete and Egypt; if, in other words, behind iconography, some artefacts were actually imported for their magical value. There is no straightforward answer to the question, as imported objects that were originally magical may have been manipulated in a totally different way, or similar and imported practices may have been attached to locally made objects (not necessarily imitations).¹²

To determine whether a different perspective is plausible, we will analyse the contexts of Egyptian imports in southern Crete (Asterousia and the Mesara) in the Pre- and Protopalatial ages, starting from the enormous work of J. Phillips. In her catalogue of Aegyptiaca in Crete, she attributes 147 items out of 518 (28.37%) objects to Mesara sites, with known contexts from Crete. The majority can be dated to the end of the Prepalatial period (MMIA) and the neopalatial phase. Far fewer are attributed to the Protopalatial and Postpalatial periods.

Prepalatial contexts (Fig. 1) are located along the southern coast, to the south of the Asterousia (Kalo Limenes, Lebena), along the roads crossing the Asterousia towards the Mesara plain (Moni Odigitria, Koumasa) and in the Mesara plain (Platanos, Ayios Onouphrios, Ayia Triada).

¹² A similar approach has been used by Kopanias (2012) regarding cylinder seals imported from the Near East to Mainland Greece. His conclusion is that, also according to their state of preservation, seals could have been imported as pure raw material (very worn seals), as gifts, as prestige symbols and “as valuable amuletic jewels” (Kopanias 2012, 400).



Fig. 2. Heraklion Museum. Figurine from Phaistos, Room CV (Photo Carinci).



Fig. 3. Heraklion Museum. Figurine from Phaistos, Room XCVIII (Photo Carinci).

This distribution might imply that diffusion commenced with the two harbours of Lebena and Kaloi Limenes.

The objects all come from tholoi, principally including stone vases and scarabs (or scaraboids), followed by pendants and theriomorphic seals. The distribution is not homogeneous: stone vases prevail in Ayia Triada and Platanos, and scarabs in Ayios Onouphrios and Moni Odigitria. Scarabs, moreover, are more widely diffused (Kaloi Limenes, Koumasa, Papoura, Lebena). In the case of scarabs and scaraboids, it is not always easy to distinguish between imported objects and local products, but this does not directly impact the questions at hand.

Scarabs only represent a very small percentage of the known Prepalatial seals, which led Phillips to question “why was the scarab form adopted in Crete?” (124). According to her, the main reason was functional: “an ideal short, flattish shape” with few weak points and ample space for adding designs (125). We would like to turn our investigation elsewhere. Scarabs, as pointed out by the author (111), were initially used as amulets, and only later as “seals” from the beginning of the XII Dynasty: “whether scarabs and other stamp seals served any purpose other than amuletic before this period is questionable”. We therefore suggest that the fortune of scarabs, as in the 1st-millennium Mediterranean, was linked to their magical properties and hence should not be associated with other seals (scarab impressions on clay are very rare and later in date (CMS VIII, 2, 720, from Knossos), but with other amuletic objects such as pendants, also in this case, Egyptian.

At the same time, however, we would like to widen the discussion to the other seals as well. Scholars have mainly investigated their sphragistic and economic role, especially as antecedents of their later palatial use, or their value as personal emblems. Much less attention has been paid to their possible exclusive or partial use as apotropaic devices. From this point of view, if, for example, we examine the impressions set all around the body of the pithos from the Protopalatial house at Ayia Triada, we must ask ourselves whether it is an assertion of property or an indication of quantity, as I suggested some years ago, or do these impressions somehow protect the content in the same way crosses on storage jars did in the Christian period?

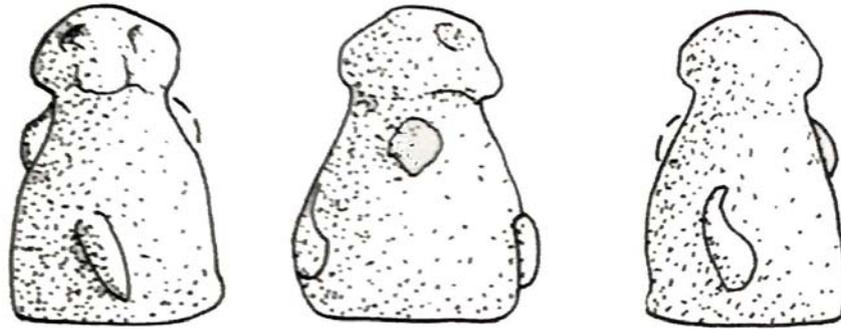


Fig. 4. Figurine from Kommos, Building T (drawing: Phillips 2008).

MAGIC IN PROTOPALATIAL CRETE

4. For the Protopalatial phase, the number, typology and quantity of Egyptian items and Egyptianizing features change considerably. Only few scarabs and 4 imported Egyptian vases (from Tholos B of Ayia Triada and Kommos), can be dated to this period. Egyptianizing elements appears, instead, in the Archivio di Cretule from Phaistos, and include the already known ape motif and the newly introduced Taweret / Minoan Genius, whose adoption has been thoroughly studied by Weingarten.

We would like to concentrate our attention on three figurines which have been linked with Egyptian culture: two from Phaistos (Figs. 2 and 3) and one from Kommos (Fig. 4). All of them are MMIIIB in date. The figurine from Kommos comes, unfortunately, from a mixed context in the area of Building T;¹³ those from Phaistos were found in Room XCVIII of House A¹⁴ and Room CV, House I,¹⁵ within a peculiar installation which has been variously interpreted.¹⁶

Only the figurine from Kommos is free-standing, the other two being appliqués of lids for a small vase, such as a pyxis. Two



Fig. 5. Heraklion Museum. Bridge spouted jar from Malla, Quartier Mu (Photo Carinci).

¹³ Shaw, Shaw and Bennet 1996, 301, nr. 39, pls. 4.40.39, 4.44.39; Phillips 2008, 172, nr. 344.

¹⁴ Levi 1976, 560, fig. 886, pls. 163h and LXIXd-e; Phillips 2008, 223, nr. 452; Caloi 2013, 267, SF 60, pl. XLII; Carinci 2013, 279.

¹⁵ Levi 1976, 607-609, pls. 163a and LXIXa-b; Phillips 2008, 223-224, nr. 453, 356; Carinci 2013, 279-280; Baldacci 2017, 184, nr. 72, pls. 23, 115.

¹⁶ Baldacci 2017, 49-71.



Fig. 6. Heraklion Museum. Scarab from Platanos (CMS II, 1, 283).

elements are shared by the three figurines: the squatting posture, the prominent ape-like (a mixture of human and animal) facial features and, for the two figurines from Phaistos, their being applied to a small vase. The female breast and the use of white paint on some parts of the body is well defined in the figurine from Room CV (Fig. 2), which looks more “human”, while that from Room XCVIII

(Fig. 3) shows less naturalistic features, vaguely recalling the features of an ape, but with the same white paint, indicating a female figure. An elaborate headdress is shared by both, a hat or wig with a pigtail. The red hue of the example from Room XCVIII could point to a kind of dress. Much more schematic is the Kommos example (Fig. 4) covered with black paint (the lack of white paint can be meaningful), which has in common with the Phaestian figurines only the squatting posture and can be labelled as an ape, in a shape similar to ape representations in the theriomorphic seals.

All three objects have been traced back to an Egyptian influence by Phillips¹⁷ and Carinci.¹⁸ It is possible that the wig-like headdress could be reminiscent of similar features in heads of Hathor or sphinxes,¹⁹ and the best comparison for the Phaistos figurines is another item from *Quartier Mu* in Malia (Fig. 5), an appliqué on a bridge spouted jar²⁰ found in House B, together with other objects of Egyptianizing type, in a context which can be interpreted as the treasury of a sanctuary.²¹ Poursat proposed a connection between the Mallia example and the *Gravidenflaschen* of the New Kingdom,²² a hypothesis further discussed by Phillips.²³ Budin speculated that these Minoan figurines were the source of inspiration for Egypt.²⁴ The topic of prototype and copies is out of our concern here, and we will simply say we must consider a direct link with the *Gravidenflaschen* impossible, due to chronological reasons, but common Middle Kingdom prototypes cannot be excluded.²⁵ For our figurines a derivation from Egyptian prototypes can be suggested, probably reaching the Mesara via Malia.²⁶

¹⁷ Phillips 2008, 172, 223-224, 308; Carinci 2013, 280.

¹⁸ Carinci 2000, 31-37; Carinci 2013, 280.

¹⁹ Carinci 2013, 284.

²⁰ Poursat, Knappet 2005, 221, nr. 638, pl. 23, 37c.

²¹ Poursat in Detournay, Poursat, Vandenaabeele 1980, n. 170, 118-119, fig. 167; for the context, 116-122; Karetsou 2000, 58, nr. 35; Phillips 2008, nr. 378; Dubcova 2016, 271.

²² Poursat, in Detournay, Poursat, Vandenaabeele 1980, nr. 170, 119.

²³ Phillips 2008, 451-452, 378

²⁴ Budin 2011, 274-275; Carinci 2013, 282.

²⁵ Carinci 2013, 283-284; Dubcova 2016, 270, note 64.

²⁶ Carinci 2013, 280.



Fig. 7. Heraklion Museum. Triton shell plaque from Phaistos, Room 64
(Photo: Karetsou 2000; drawing: G. Merlatti, in Carinci 2000).

5. The interpretation of our figures as parturient is not probable. Women in labour are represented in a naturalistic way in Egyptian coroplastic and painting,²⁷ and not as grotesque figures, while they are rare in Crete.²⁸ The squatting position is instead frequent in the iconography of apes, already adopted by the Minoans in the Prepalatial period.²⁹ It recurs on two- and three-dimensional figures, such as theriomorphic seals. The divine nature of the ape is clear and becomes stronger in the later period, with a connection with the female world (see e.g. Akrotiri).³⁰

Some features, such as the prominent belly, the flat and pendulous breast and the animal traits remind us of the already mentioned Taweret. A direct link must be excluded, however, since Taweret is never represented in a squatting position, but a connection with the “World of Taweret” can be admitted. In the scarab from Platanos, Tholos B (Fig. 6),³¹ a baboon is represented with Taweret, while squatting baboons appears with Taweret on the “magic knives” of the Middle Kingdom.³² The most plausible interpretation for our figurines is, therefore, that they played an apotropaic or protective function, such as amulets or talismans. Their meaning can be further refined if we look to the objects they were applied to: in Mallia it was a bridge spouted jar found in a ceremonial context, but in Phaistos it was a pyxis, and this suggests a link with the female world. The connection between monkey-like beings and cosmetics for women

²⁷ Wegner 2009, with extensive bibliography,

²⁸ Some figurines from Peak Sanctuaries can be mentioned, e.g. Rutkowski 1991, 91; see also Kyriakidis 2005, 157. For a general review of the questions concerning motherhood in the Aegean Bronze Age, see Hitchcock, Nikolaidou 2013, 509.

²⁹ Carinci 2005, 85-116; Greenlaw 2011, 7-41.

³⁰ Greenlaw 2011, 53.

³¹ CMS, II, 1, nr. 283; Ward 1981, 70-73; Weingarten 1991, 4, tav. 4.

³² Stuenkel 2008, nr. 86, 147;

is well attested in Egypt: in the Old Kingdom some vases represented monkeys with a newborn in their arms, in the Middle Kingdom, a group of vases in the so-called blue marble, used for cosmetics, were decorated with monkey figures along the walls, and another group of later unguentaria were shaped as monkeys.³³ The grotesque figurines at the top of the pyxides should enhance the protective qualities of the material they contained, devoted to the female world.

An interesting comparison can be found in a small plaque, cut from a triton shell (Fig. 7), unfortunately found in a mixed context in Phaistos (Area of Portico 64),³⁴ which probably decorated, in this case also, a pyxis. It is decorated with a procession of four genii or hybrid beings with animal heads and curve-edged sceptres, dressed in long garments. It is a local product, but the processional composition and the formula human figure/animal head seem to be a Minoan elaboration of an Egyptian theme.

All these items should be considered as part of the wider phenomenon of reception and re-elaboration of iconographic models based on prototypes inspired by external influence, in this case Egyptian ones. This phenomenon has been present since the Prepalatial period, but becomes particularly lively in the final phase of MMII, as attested in the Archivio di Cretule of Phaistos, at Mallia and at Knossos.³⁵

However, in the case of Taweret, the ape, the sphinx or the griffins, the iconographical transfer resulted in the creation of stable and widely diffused iconographic formula. In the case of the squatting figures, as well as in the case of Beset,³⁶ it did not know any further development, and was limited to a short period of the Protopalatial phase.

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CONCLUSIONS

6. To go back to our question, from the data discussed above it seems probable that, in southern Crete, the sphere of magic or of “popular piety”, as suggested by Weingarten for the Taweret motif, played an important role in the contacts between Egypt and Crete in the Prepalatial period up to the Protopalatial phase, with exchanges carried on at a popular level. At the end of MMII, however, a change can be detected, with palatial elites trying to shape a court ideology based on the model of the already existing palatial ideologies outside Crete, from Egypt or the Levant. Still in MM II, however, the two levels, elite and popular, are interchangeable. The Minoan genius could be developed starting from popular piety, as suggested by Weingarten, but is quickly attracted to the elite sphere, whereas the squatting figure, elaborated in an elite context in Mallia, is adopted in a communal context in Phaistos. From MMIII onwards, contacts with Egypt are mainly developed within the international court ideology

³³ Terrace 1966, 57-63, 60, nr. 1 pl. XX, fig. 17· Arnold 1999, 446 s. nr. 178a-c· Craig Patch, Eaton Krauss, 2011, 108, nr. 89· Greenlaw 2011, 18, fig. 25.

³⁴ Carinci 2000, 35, figs 1-2· Karetsou 2000, 160 nr. 137· Dubcova 2016, 266.

³⁵ Dubcova 2016, *passim*, with references. On the transmission of Egyptian iconographic motifs in Minoan art· see also Warren 2005, Phillips 2006, Coburn 2008.

³⁶ Weingarten 2013· Weingarten 2015.

and Egyptian imports are represented now by high-level objects, in precious material, found almost exclusively in official or palatial contexts.

The reason for this situation must be sought, in our opinion, in the different sphere of interaction. In MMII Phaistos, the reception of naturalistic motifs and, above all, the appearance of imaginary animals, such as the sphinx and the genie, mark a dislocation with tradition and the assimilation of aspects of Egyptian and Oriental elite iconography, and have served to emphasise further qualitative differences between a Phaistian elite and the wider populace. The two Phaistian grotesque figurines come, on the contrary, from non-palatial contexts, with a mixed private/public nature. House A was a private house; House L was a meeting place, similar to the Crypte Hypostyle of Mallia, and has been interpreted by us as a meeting place for social groups not belonging to the palace. The presence of our figurines adds a new insight into the range of performed activities, also including magic or healing practices. The later development, however, signed the dissolution of these social groups in the new order of the Neopalatial era, with the consequent decline of their beliefs and practices, and, on the contrary, the stabilisation of a new iconographical world.

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