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Reconstructing Cult Practices from Secondary Sources in Minoan Crete

ABSTRACT

Among the scenes in Minoan glyptic are images whose iconography suggests they may be borrowed from longer narratives. By identifying specific elements that reappear several times in seals, it may be possible to reconstruct some ceremonial practices. One example is furnished by a group of images including monkeys, baskets, women, and crocuses that tie together a series of images in seals and fresco. These images, when considered together, seem to derive from one over-arching narrative that may be illustrative of ritual behaviors. If this is the case, it becomes possible to reconstruct the participants in and basic procedures of the depicted ceremony.

A two-step reconstruction of a crocus ceremony becomes possible with the close examination of both Minoan wall paintings and glyptic sources. First, the crocus stamens are gathered by female figures and/or monkeys into baskets. Then, some of the saffron-bearing stamens are offered to the seated nature goddess. This general reconstruction of a crocus ceremony serves as one example of the many ways in which wall paintings and glyptic sources are closely related and may be read together. By coupling the readings and interpretations of individual iconographic elements from both media, one gains the ability to glean larger narratives from the series of vignettes presented in Minoan art.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ: Bronze Age Aegean, Minoan, Monkey, Ape, Iconography, Trade, Near East, Egypt, Akrotiri, Reconstruction, Ritual, Ceremony, Wall Painting, Fresco, Seals

I. INTRODUCTION

This investigation will focus on the iconography of monkeys and apes in Minoan art recovered from the islands of Crete and Thera during the Bronze Age. These primates may be distinguished from one another by the presence of a tail: an ape lacks the appendage, and a monkey possesses one.

The study of monkey and ape iconography in Minoan art is important for many reasons, primary among which is the exceptional pictorial role played by the primate. In stark contrast to the other animals chosen for depiction, apes and monkeys appear to move fluidly between roles and serve a myriad of functions within art, ranging from typical animal behavior to the imitation of human activities and the participation in rituals. This study will explore the variety of roles filled by monkeys and apes in Minoan art, along with their Egyptian parallels. After a review and examination of Early and Middle Minoan figurines, monkey iconography in glyptic sources and in Minoan fresco will be considered. Finally, the possible origins of Minoan primate iconography

are considered, as well as the possible implications of the creature's history, development, and roles. These conclusions directly inform greater themes in Minoan culture, such as religion and cult practices.

II. REVIEW OF MONKEY AND APE ICONOGRAPHY

The Early and Middle Minoan ape figurines constitute the first appearance of ape or monkey iconography on Crete (Karetsou 2000, 174, fig. 156; Karetsou 2000, 184, fig. 170; Vandervondelen 1994, 175-183). The figurines first appear during the EM III period, during the early trade contact among Crete, Egypt, and the Near East (Betancourt 2008, 103; Wiener 2013, 34). This developing trade was interrupted by the large-scale dessication event that heavily affected both the Near East and Egypt (Crete experienced a drier period), but trade networks resumed and flourished afterward (Weiss et al. 1993, 995; Dalfes, Kukla, and Weiss 1997; Fiorentino et al. 2008, 51; Wiener 2013, 34). During this flowering of trade in the 2nd millennium B.C., Egyptian influences appear in Crete, including the Taweret figure, scarab beetles, and the Bes figure (Gill 1970, 405; Branigan 1973, 25-26; Weingarten 1983, 101-103; 1991, 12-14; 2005, 760; 2013, 372-374; Rutkowski 1986, 245, nos. 79, 80; 1991, 36, 56-57; Davaras 1988, 46-47, figs. 1-4, no. 14; Ben-Tor 2003; Krzyszkowska 2012, 153-156, figs. 8-9). The small white ape figurines may also be indications of Egyptian influence, due to the contemporary existence of bone, ivory, and white faience ape figurines in Egypt that represent Hedj-wer, or "The Great White One" (Petrie 1914, 43, pl. XXXVII; Patch 2011, 163-164, with additional examples in note 70; Barbash 2013, 45).

The Minoan white ivory figurines may be divided into three categories. The first and most frequently occurring figurine is posed in a crouching squat position with the forepaws on the ground between the bent and drawn-up hind legs (Karetsou 2000, 174, fig. 156). The second type, with only one extant example, features a monkey that is seated in an elongated position (Karetsou 2000, 173, fig. 154). The creature sits up, on an object, with its forepaws on its knees, and it appears posed similarly to a human sitting on a chair. The third group is composed of double figurines (Karetsou 2000, 184, fig. 170). These feature two primates that sit back-to-back in the crouching squat position of the first group. Most of the figurines in these groups are drilled with holes (like beads). Additionally, the bottom surface is sometimes inscribed with a decorative motif, so the objects were probably used as seals.

The production of white ape figurines appears to cease temporarily with the incorporation of the Great White One as one of Thoth's many attributes in Egypt (Barbash 2013, 45; Shaw 2014, 51). The disappearance of Hedj-Wer figurines in Egypt is contemporary with the EM III to MM IA periods on Crete. The small white figurines of crouching monkeys found on Crete also seem to disappear at this time). While blue and green baboon figurines are created in Egypt, representations of monkeys in glyptic art appear on Crete (less frequently occurring variations of color do exist, including pale lavender hues, see Petrie 1914, 43; Greenlaw 2005, 71. For the purposes of this investigation, all seals discussed are from Förtsch, von Hesberg, Müller, and Pini, 1958-2011 *online database*). The creatures are most commonly depicted in profile, in the seated, crouching squat position (CMS II.6 073). The front paws are no longer level with the hind paws,

but are instead raised in front of the animal, often level with the shoulders or head. Additionally, the appearance of a tail transforms the creatures from tail-less apes to monkeys.

These animals are represented with a combination of certain elements, including floral motifs (sometimes considered crocuses), female figures, and baskets (CMS III 358, CMS II.3 103). Many scenes exist in which at least one of these elements is shown with the primate. General exceptions are recognized, like the appearance of a monkey with a male figure, but the background bears floral motifs, and so at least one of the familiar elements is present in the image (CMS III 357).

Several of the elements that commonly accompany monkeys in glyptic art are also identifiable in wall paintings that feature monkeys. The Monkeys and Birds Fresco (Evely 1999, 247) and the Saffron Gatherer date to the MM III period, and feature monkeys in a rocky landscape (for the Monkeys and Birds Fresco: Evans 1921-1935, II, 431, III, pl. 22; Cameron 1968, 1-30. For the Saffron Gatherer Fresco: Evans 1899-1900, 45; 1921-1935, I, 265-266; Platon 1947, 505-524; 1959, 319-345; Smith 1965, 75-76; Cameron 1975, 460-461, pl. 84c; Evely 1999, 121; Pareja 2017, 72-73, fig. 7.1A-B). Although one of the figures from the Monkeys and Birds fresco is pictured in the familiar crouching squat, the rest of the primates appear in new poses. Forepaws are used like hands while the animals balance on hind legs, or fore- and hind legs are spread wide in a flying gallop. These dynamic creatures appear among landscapes that are populated with flora.

The remaining four monkey frescoes from Akrotiri, dated to about a century later, feature similarly dynamic monkeys. A broader variety of poses appear in these wall paintings. In the frescoes from Room 6 of Building Complex Beta, the creatures not only appear in a variety of poses (some new), but behave as monkeys normally do (Marinatos 1969, 53-54, pl. B1; 1970, 36-37, 63-64; 1971, 45-46; Marinatos 1984, 106-116; Immerwahr 1990, 41-43; Doumas 1992, 120-123, figs. 85-89; Greenlaw 2005, 71-73; 2006, 63-67; 2011, 47-51). Additionally, the individuals in this group are clearly differentiated from one another, primarily by facial features and markings.

Although fragmentary, the four monkeys from the Sector Alpha fresco are depicted in relation to a shrine and rockwork (Marinatos 1969, 53-54, fig. 43; Doumas 1992, 184, fig. 147; Morgan 2005, 37, pl. 4.2a-b). All that remains of two monkeys are the tails. The two middle figures are better preserved, and a difference in scale is easily identified between the two animals. The smaller primate appears in the crouching squat pose, and the larger creature appears posed similarly to some of the monkeys from Beta 6. Nevertheless, the presence of the shrine indicates that these primates are situated in a ritual context, whether they behave as wild monkeys do, mimic human activities, or directly participate in a ritual.

Two monkey frescoes are known from Xeste 3 at Akrotiri. The first features at least four monkeys that wield man-made objects in a rocky landscape dotted with clumps of crocus flowers (Marinatos 1969-1976, 36; Doumas 1992, 128, 134-135; Younger 1988, 66-67; Rehak 1999, 705-709; Morgan 2005, 37, fig. 1.23, pl. 4.3). These monkeys appear to mimic human behavior while engaging with a harp, sword, scabbard, gold earring, and a necklace, belt, or harness. Egyptian parallels for this scene exist in the form of ostraca, wall paintings, and figurines. The second monkey fresco in Xeste 3 is the Offering to the Seated Goddess scene, in which a monkey stands upright on its hind paws and extends its forepaws to the seated goddess with an offering of crocus

(Marinatos 1976, 30-38, pls. B-E, K, 42b-42d, 59-61; Doumas 1992, 126, figs. 122-128; Marinatos 1984, figs. 40-42, 44; 1993, fig. 213; Vlachopoulos 2008, 451-456, figs. 41.19-41.21). This animal functions as an intermediary between the human girl behind it and the seated goddess before it. In terms of the composition, both horizontally and vertically, the liminal creature is positioned as the direct line of communication between mortal and deity. When compounded with the ceremonial nature of the greater context (the building of Xeste 3), the cultic associations of the monkey wall paintings from this structure are undeniable.

The consistent combination of particular iconographic elements is of paramount importance to the understanding of the larger narrative that is constructed when one considers the imagery from wall painting and glyptic art. A general series of events are presented to the viewer that, when taken in concert, provide evidence for the possible reconstruction of a crocus ceremony. The larger scenes in fresco constitute a greater narrative from which shorter scenes, or vignettes, may be extracted and applied to glyptic art. The smaller size of the glyptic medium is conducive to the representation of smaller, pared-down scenes. Nevertheless, the most integral visual elements are present in each scene, so that the viewer cannot mistake the greater narrative from which each vignette comes. Minoans appear to divide the greater ceremony into at least two distinct yet key visual elements, including the harvesting of the crocuses and the offering of the harvest to a deity.

The Saffron Gatherers, from the adjacent wall of Room 3a in Xeste 3 (beside the Offering to the Seated Goddess), features two young women in a rocky landscape gathering crocus flowers into baskets (Doumas 1992, 152, fig. 116). This is a large-scale illustration of the first stage of the ritual, in which the key activity is the harvesting of the saffron-bearing crocuses. The scene is mirrored by the monkeys in the Saffron Gatherers fresco from Knossos, which participate in the same harvest phase of the ceremony as the girls from Xeste 3. The parallels for this preliminary step in glyptic art are visible in a number of seals. In one, a monkey holds a basket aloft for a young woman who appears to grasp a flower (CMS III 358). Another seal shows a seated monkey surrounded by floral elements, perhaps crocuses (CMS II.6 073).

The second type of scene in the narrative of the crocus ceremony is the offering of the crocuses to the deity. Once the flowers are harvested, they are offered to the nature goddess, a clear example of which survives in the Offering to the Seated Goddess fresco from Xeste 3 (Doumas 1992, 158-159, fig. 122). A close parallel exists for this scene in glyptic. One seal features the same arrangement of characters: one female figure is located at the left of the pictorial field (CMS II.3 103). A monkey stands in the center of the image, between the figure on the left and a nude female figure on the right, presumably a goddess. Although crocuses are not readily visible on the seal, the monkey appears to function as an intermediary in both images, and each one bears identical figural iconography in a similar arrangement. These scenes clearly indicate that the primate maintains a distinct role as intermediary in this type of event.

Although examples of the three-figure construction of this scene (girl-monkey-goddess) exist in both wall paintings and in glyptic, representations exist that may be short-hand for this type. One seal features a monkey seated on a campstool, with a human figure standing before it (CMS

II.8 262). This scene may be understood as the first phase of the larger offering scene: that a human appeals to the primate to transfer offerings to the goddess. Although this seal is heavily damaged, it is possible that it originally represented only one relationship in the greater offering scene. Again it seems that a young girl and monkey work together to complete the vignette.

Although not all images of primates in glyptic art strictly adhere to this narrative scheme, two possibilities exist for their divergence. First, some seals and sealings feature only one or two prominent aspects of the crocus ceremony. These visual elements may include a monkey, crocus (although crocuses are difficult to identify with precision in glyptic art due to the tiny nature of the medium), and female figures, whether human or divine. The combination of these visual elements may have constituted a mental trigger for Minoan viewers; essentially, any two or more of these elements in one scene may reference the greater narrative of the crocus ceremony.

The Offering to the Seated Goddess fresco depicts the critical event in the Crocus Ceremony. The image represents a blending of both Minoan and Egyptian elements. The context, the subject of the greater fresco program, and the style in which the work is executed are Minoan. The presence of the monkey, although adopted and adapted by the Minoans, is an iconographic element with roots in Egypt. The composition of the scene, however, does not appear to originate in either Minoan or Egyptian visual culture but rather in the Near East.

Presentation scenes may be considered characteristic of Near Eastern glyptic art (Metropolitan Museum object number 115418; British Museum object numbers 89806 and 89303). In these scenes, a female figure (often considered a goddess) accompanies or escorts a worshipper into the presence of a seated deity. A variety of scenes found in Minoan glyptic sources appear similar in composition: one or two figures approach a seated deity, sometimes bearing offerings, and sometimes in a pose of adoration. In these representations, the core elements of the scene form a clear parallel with the presentation scenes from Near Eastern seals: two figures approach a deity, seemingly in offering or adoration.

The Offering to the Seated Goddess wall painting is a large-scale parallel for the small presentation scenes in Near Eastern glyptic sources (Collon 1995, 81, fig. 60a; Aruz 2000, 10). The general theme is the same: a worshipper is accompanied by a more-sacred or more-divine figure, and both individuals appear before a seated divinity. The Minoan wall painting, however, appears to conflate the role of escort and intermediary. Although the representation of the guide-figure appears human in Near Eastern representations, the blue monkey clearly features as intermediary in the Minoan scene. Nevertheless, the monkey facilitates the exchange in a similar manner to the way that the escort facilitates the offering to or adoration of the seated deity. Essentially, the large-scale painted representation of the Offering to the Seated Goddess features a composition with roots in Near Eastern iconography, a monkey figure with roots in Egyptian iconography, and a context, subject, and style that are Minoan. This scene, in many ways, is one of Aegean confluence, in which visual aspects of separate Aegean cultural identities combine to form the core event in a Minoan ceremony.

Monkeys fulfill a unique role in Minoan art, and they usually constitute a visual reference to the supernatural realm and the power of the Seated Goddess. Although primate imagery does

exist in which the animals seem to simply behave as animals do, free of any other visual signifiers for a supernatural landscape, the majority of monkey iconography does not fit into this category. Despite the firm roots of the iconographic tradition of this animal in Egypt, the Minoans clearly both adopted and adapted the monkey to suit local ideologies and tastes.

The appearance of this creature may also often be considered a visual indicator of the presence of a nature goddess, particularly when paired with a fertile landscape, the crocus flower, and sometimes humans. Through the combinations of these visual elements, the over-arching narrative of the Crocus Ceremony may be recognized (Livia Morgan suggested that textiles be considered one of the many integral iconographic aspects of this narrative, an idea that draws many other figures and visual elements into the narrative scheme [1990, 258-263]. The broad variety of scenes that could then be included as perhaps indicative of a general “presentation scene” contain too many separate figures and visual elements for the clear and consistent reading of a greater ceremony. With too many variables, the message becomes lost. The key elements discussed here, however, are clearly closely related in a series of scenes that eliminate the variables from the visual formula that are introduced by the inclusion of textiles). Most MM and LM monkey scenes may be united as representative of distinct events that constitute the Crocus Ceremony. The climax of the rite appears in the Offering to the Seated Goddess wall painting, a scene that may represent an honorific offering, a plea for the goddess to imbue the offered saffron with heightened medicinal powers (Thompson 1949, 66, 157-163; Pritchard 1969, 294; Oppenheim 1977, 289-291; Ferrence and Bendersky 2004, 207), or an attempt to rejuvenate the seated goddess with the healing powers of the monkey and saffron (Pareja 2017, 123-124).

Finally, the influence of visual culture from both Egypt and the Near East is visible in the Offering to the Seated Goddess wall painting. The liminal blue monkey is clearly rooted in the Egyptian tradition, and the composition of the image is descended from the Near Eastern Presentation Scene. Nevertheless, monkey, human, and goddess combine in an image that is Minoan, yet is still representative of iconographic aspects of both the Near East and Egypt.

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