

**Title:**

Dropping Ecstasy? Minoan Cult and the Tropes of Shamanism

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**Biographical Notes:**

Caroline J. Tully (University of Melbourne) holds qualifications in Classical Studies and Archaeology from The University of Melbourne and in Fine Art from Monash University. Her current research focuses on Late Bronze and Early Iron Age cultic traditions in the ancient Aegean, eastern Mediterranean and Egypt. Caroline also has a strong interest in Reception Studies, particularly in regard to Minoan and Egyptian religions.

Sam Crooks (La Trobe University) holds an MA in Aegean Prehistory from The University of Melbourne. He has published a monograph on Minoan baetyl cult in the BAR International Series and is an invited contributor to the forthcoming Cambridge Dictionary of Ancient Mediterranean Religions. His current research focuses on value and identity in Cyprus during the 3rd millennium BCE.

**Abstract:**

Cult scenes illustrated in miniature on administrative stone seals and metal signet rings from Late Bronze Age Minoan Crete are commonly interpreted as “Epiphany Scenes” and have been called “shamanic.” “Universal shamanism” is a catch-all anthropological term coined to describe certain inferred ritual behaviours across widely dispersed cultures and through time. This study re-examines evidence for Minoan cultic practices in light of key tropes of “universal shamanism,” including consumption of psychoactive drugs, adoption of special body postures, trance, spirit possession, communication with supernatural beings, metamorphosis and the

journey to other-worlds. It is argued that while existing characterisations of Minoan cult as “shamanic” are based on partial, reductionist and primitivist assumptions informed by neo-evolutionary comparative ethnologies, shamanism provides a dynamic framework for expanding understandings of Minoan cult.

**Key Words:**

Minoan, glyptic, shamanism, epiphany, cult

## Introduction

Enigmatic images interpreted as cult scenes depicted in the miniature art of stone seals and metal signet rings have led scholars to describe the religion of Late Bronze Age Minoan Crete as “ecstatic.” Said to involve the consumption of psychoactive substances, spirit possession, and visionary trance states, Minoan religion has also been identified as “shamanic” (Evans 1930, 315; Morris and Peatfield 2002, 2004; Morris 2004; Peatfield and Morris 2012). The word “shaman” derives from the Siberian Tungusic (Evenki) term *šaman*, as a noun denoting “one who is excited, moved, raised” and as a verb “to know in an ecstatic manner” (Jolly 2005, 127; Znamenski 2007, viii). First mentioned in print in 1672, by the late eighteenth century “shaman” was used to describe a Siberian religious specialist who undertook to heal or harm other humans through a dramatic public performance. The term “shamanism” however, is a scholarly construct, used to describe religious phenomena across the world which appear similar to that observed in Siberia (Hutton 2001, vii), and there is no consensus on the definition of the term (Hutton, vii; Vitebsky 2001, 161; Jones 2006).<sup>1</sup> Generally however, a “shaman” can be said to be a specialist practitioner who intercedes with the non-human “otherworld” on behalf of a human community in order to moderate relationships between that community and other-than-human beings (Harvey 2010, 30). The shaman achieves this through a combination of public performance and the altering of their own state of consciousness. While the performative aspect of shamanism appears common cross-culturally, the interior psychological state of shamans from different regions can vary. Said to work with an attendant group of spirits, shamans can be possessed by, in dialogue with, or travel out of their body to meet the spirits (Hutton 2001, 65).<sup>2</sup>

Already in the early twentieth century Arnold van Gennep warned that “shamanism” was an imprecise term as it gave the impression that it signified a type of religion when in fact it refers to a technique (1903; Bowie, 2001, 191). In the mid-twentieth century Mircea Eliade expanded the term from its original designation of a Siberian religious specialist to describe all non-Western and pre-Christian European spiritualities in which practitioners underwent altered states of consciousness (Eliade 1951; Znamenski 2009, 197). Viewed as a primordial religion characterised by “ecstatic” states, scholarship on shamanism influenced by Eliade tends to focus on the interior state of the shaman, and to use the term “shamanism” as a synonym for altered states of consciousness (Atkinson 1992, 310). Academic disciplines such as religious studies, psychology and archaeology, as well as popular self-actualisation and New Age literature, mainly apply the term “shaman” in Eliade’s transcultural, “impressionistic” manner, while most approaches to the topic by anthropologists are ethnographic and focus upon a single cultural tradition. The latter argue that the psychological component of shamanism is not its defining feature and that it should not be defined in isolation from the individual cultural systems within which it is situated (Znamenski 2009, 200; Atkinson 1992, 308).

There are however, certain tropes of shamanism that have been observed across widely dispersed cultures and through time, leading to the inference of so-called “universal shamanism,” a term positing set tropes or behavioural correlates which may be interpreted as “shamanic” such as the

symbolic importance of the center (world tree), a tripartite cosmology, the public performance of ecstatic states and shamanic ascent or flight (Atkinson 1992, 308; Díaz-Andreu 2001, 125; Walter and Fridman 2004; Znamenski, 2009, 190–1 ).<sup>3</sup> These commonalities are explained in terms of universal human proclivities; behaviours that can be exhibited by all humans with normally functioning nervous systems from all known societies and which derive from the shared characteristics of the human brain (D'Aquili and Newberg 1998; Winkelman 2004; Watson 2009, 12–13).<sup>4</sup> This study argues that the religion of Late Bronze Age Minoan Crete exhibits what may be termed shamanistic characteristics. Key shamanic behaviours – including use of psychotropic drugs, body postures, ecstatic trance, dialogue with spirits, spirit possession, therianthropic metamorphosis, communication with ancestors, and otherworld journeying within a tripartite model of the cosmos – will be analysed. Evidence for such practices, drawn from both artwork and cult sites, suggests that the religion of Late Bronze Age Crete may be understood in light of Pieter Jolly's characterisation of a shamanic culture as one that possesses “religious functionaries who draw on the powers in the natural world, including the powers of animals, and who mediate, usually in an altered state of consciousness, between the world of the living and that of the spirits – including the spirits of the dead” (2005, 127).<sup>5</sup> Rather than claiming that practitioners of Minoan religion were “shamans” however, the description “shamanistic” better serves to describe those aspects of Minoan religion that appear to fit with practices classified under universal shamanism.

## **Minoan Crete**

Discovered at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Sir Arthur Evans, Minoan civilisation was named after the mythical King Minos, and initially interpreted with reference to the well-known Classical mythological tales of Pasiphae and the Bull, Ariadne and Theseus, and the latter's killing of the Minotaur in the Labyrinth (Morford and Lenardon 1985). Ubiquitous bull imagery from the palatial site of Knossos and the palace's “labyrinthine” architecture appeared to confirm the myth – but what of the reality? Crete is the largest of the Greek islands and is located in the Mediterranean on the ancient sea routes between Europe, Asia and Africa, a position contributing to its important role in the network of trade and transmission of culture throughout the ancient world (Cline 1994). First inhabited in the Neolithic period (ca.7000–3500 BCE), small hamlets and villages remained the dominant feature of Crete until the end of the Early Bronze Age (the Middle Minoan IA–IB ca. 2000 BCE). From the Middle Bronze Age onwards a more complex society emerged which culminated in the appearance of the first palaces, termed the Protopalatial period (Middle Minoan IB–IIIB ca.2000–1700 BCE). Destruction of the palaces, probably by an earthquake, and their subsequent rebuilding marked the beginning of the Neopalatial period (Late Minoan IA–B) around 1700 BCE. The Minoan palaces formed the centre of administration, storage, religion and trade until their destruction by the Mycenaeans at the end of the Neopalatial period (Late Minoan IB–II) around 1490/1450 BCE (Tomkins 2010, Manning 2010).

The Neopalatial period is characterised by the rebuilding on a more monumental scale of palatial structures destroyed in the preceding Middle Minoan II period. Increased unification across the island is centred on the palace of Knossos and management of agricultural production, surplus storage, trade in commodities, and the expansion of Minoan cultural influence within the Cycladic islands are evident (Driessen et.al. 2002; Rehak and Younger 1998). During this period Minoan palatial control was exerted through a system of villas and religious sites such as cave and peak sanctuaries. One of the most characteristic material signatures of the palatial administrative system is the seal. Seals, also known as glyptics, were used to secure and identify property, to designate ownership, and as a symbol of office or authority (Boardman 2001, 13; Krzyszkowska 2005, 21), their ubiquitous presence in Minoan Crete reflecting a sophisticated and organised bureaucracy concerned with trade and the exchange of commodities, the accumulation of property and the hierarchical exercise of authority (Weingarten 1986).

### **Seals and Minoan Religion**

Glyptic art is the most extensive body of Aegean Bronze Age representational art and consists of carved seals in the form of seal stones, engraved metal signet rings and the clay impressions (sealings) that the seals are used to produce. Seal iconography was carved directly onto stone or the large, flat bezels of gold, silver or bronze rings (Boardman 2001, 13; Krzyszkowska 2005, 12–15). Usually under 3 centimetres in size, the primary purpose of seals was identification of their owner however because of their decorative aspects they also functioned as jewellery. Stone seals were worn on the body as bracelets, necklaces, pendants or pins (Weingarten 2010, 317). The small hoops of the metal seal rings suggest that they may have belonged to people with very small fingers, perhaps young women and/or children, or been strung upon necklaces rather than worn upon fingers. When found in intact tombs, they usually lie next to the left wrist, as if worn on a bracelet or on the chest as if suspended from a necklace, however they have also been found in proximity to hands, suggesting they may also have been worn upon fingers (Müller 2005, 171; Dimopoulou and Rethemiotakis 2000, 43; Krzyszkowska 2005, 21; Rehak and Younger 2008, 159; Popham 1974, 223).<sup>6</sup>

While approximately 11,000 seals and sealings are known from the Aegean Bronze Age,<sup>7</sup> the number depicting human forms is comparatively small. The most complex and spectacular figurative scenes, interpreted as representing human and divine figures engaging in cultic activities, are engraved upon the metal signet rings (Younger 1998, x; Boardman 2001, 16; Krzyszkowska 2005, 127, 137). While 334 signet rings have been identified, only 102 are attested by extant rings, the remainder preserved only through their impression in clay sealings. As well as depicting cult activities the engraved bezels portray hunting, fighting, chariot driving and bull leaping scenes (Weingarten 2010, 322). In the absence of deciphered texts from Minoan Crete, glyptic iconography is the richest and most diverse category of evidence relied upon in the interpretation of Minoan cult.

### **Previous Research**

Early scholarship on Minoan cult claimed it involved spirit possession achieved through consumption of psychotropic substances. At the beginning of the twentieth century Arthur Evans, excavator of the palatial site of Knossos on Crete, described Minoan religion as primitive, distinguished by aniconic cult objects deriving directly from the landscape such as trees and stones which, according to an evolutionary schema, preceded the sophistication of anthropomorphic sculpture (Evans 1901; Mettinger 1995; Gaifman, 2012). Influenced by Tylorian animism, which posited that early religions were characterised by belief in the animate quality of natural phenomena, as well as James G. Frazer who argued for the universality of spirit possession, Evans proposed that the trees and stones of Minoan cult were able to be temporarily inhabited, or possessed, by supernatural beings such as spirits or deities. These possessed trees and stones subsequently facilitated the possession of the human participants who interacted with them within ritual contexts (Evans 1901; Tylor 1871; Frazer 1890).

Evans proposed that Minoan possession involved the descent of a deity in the form of a bird onto a tree or stone, thereafter possessing a nearby human cult practitioner. Trees, because they are naturally living things, were thought to function as permanent abodes of divinities, their vitality enabling them to act as conductors between the deity and the stone, or the deity and human. Stones on the other hand, not being “alive”, required human beings to ritually invoke the deity into them (Crooks 2013). Evans saw this theory illustrated in a gold ring from Knossos (Figures 1, 2) which he described as depicting “an armed God...descending in front of his sacred obelisk, before which the votary stands in the attitude of sacred adoration,” this being “the artist’s attempt to express the spiritual being, duly brought down by ritual incantation, so as to temporarily possess its stony resting place” (Evans 1901, 124).



Figure 1 Gold Ring from Knossos, Crete. AM1938.1127

CMS VI.2 No. 281 [Ashmolean Museum]



Figure 2 Gold Ring from Knossos, Crete.

CMS VI.2 No. 281 [CMS]

Evans later proposed dancing, chanting and the consumption of psychoactive substances as other methods through which Minoans achieved ritual possession, and suggested that it was analogous to Saami shamanism (Evans 1930, 315).<sup>8</sup> The Sacred Grove and Dance fresco from Knossos was interpreted as depicting female figures in the process of “orgiastic dance” accompanied by incantatory chanting, while the ring from Vapheio (Figure 3) depicting a female figure dancing and a male figure pulling on a tree was explained as the harvesting of psychoactive fruit (Evans 1930, 68, 142). Influenced by comparative mythology stemming from Indo-European studies, Evans suggested that this fruit was the source of “the juice...like the Soma of the Vedas, that supplies the religious frenzy, and at the same time implies a communion with the divinity inherent in the tree...” As a result of consuming this substance, the female figure is “thrown into an ecstatic frenzy by the juice of the sacred fruit...[and]... falls entranced on the shield of her male consort” (Evans 1930, 142; Ackerman 2002; Wasson 1967).<sup>9</sup> Evans sees further evidence for the use of psychoactive substances in a scene depicted on the Tiryns Ring (Figure 4), which he interprets as a group ritual in which a chalice containing the juice of a sacred tree was shared by all participants (Evans 1936, 392). In his interpretation of the scene on a Mycenaean ring (Figure 5) depicting a male figure pulling on a tree, the female figure in the image is described as “waiting for the fruit that shall inspire her ecstatic trances” (Evans 1936, 177).



Figure 3 Gold Ring from Vapheio, Greece.

CMS I No. 219. [CMS]



Figure 4 Gold Ring from Tiryns, Greece.

CMS I No. 179 [CMS]



Figure 5 Gold Ring from Mycenae, Greece.

CMS I No. 126 [CMS]

However, Evans is unclear in regard to exactly what this trance-inducing substance actually was. When describing the Mycenae Acropolis Ring (Figure 6), Evans claimed to see clusters of grapes, implying wine, however rather than a grapevine this image actually depicts a tree as is evident from its trunk and its branches laden with fruit (Evans 1936, 394–5; Tully forthcoming). Evans identifies fig, pine, cypress, and plane trees depicted in Minoan glyptic art, none of which has psychoactive properties, while grape vines do not appear in cult scenes (Evans 1901, 101).<sup>10</sup> As a result of Evans’ analysis however, terms such as “possession”, “ecstatic trance”, and “orgiastic frenzy” became prevalent in the discussion of Minoan religion, and in combination with the proposed use of psychoactive drugs, suggested that Minoan religion was characterised by complete loss of control (Nilsson 1950, 275; Warren 1981; 1990; Niemeier 1989; Cain 2001).





Figure 6 Gold Ring from Mycenae Acropolis, Greece.

CMS I No. 17 [CMS]

More recently, Christine Morris and Alan Peatfield have suggested replacing “possession” with the more general term “altered state of consciousness,” meaning a non-ordinary bodily state in which sensations, perceptions, cognition and emotions are modified, not necessarily distinguished by a loss of control (Morris and Peatfield 2004, 39).<sup>11</sup> Rather than being possessed by a being originating in a location external to the ritual participant, and aided in this venture by the ingestion of psychotropic substances, Morris and Peatfield propose that Minoan spirits or deities are experienced whilst in a trance state facilitated by particular bodily postures performed by the ritual participant. Approaching Minoan religion from the perspective of embodiment, their analysis relies on the concept of mind-body synthesis, exemplified in shamanic practice.

According to this model physical action can affect emotional and psychological states and therefore be used to access altered states of consciousness. In this analysis of Minoan religion the mind-body connection functions as both the method and the vehicle whereby communication with the otherworld is achieved, shamanic activity apparently overcoming the modern distinction between body and mind (Morris and Peatfield 2004; Huskinson and Schmidt 2010, 14).

Morris and Peatfield suggest that ecstatic states can be achieved through fasting, sensory deprivation or concentration, sound, rhythmic movement, and physical gestures. They claim that rather than being possessed, shamans are in fact entranced and that this applies in the case of Minoan cult. They subscribe to the idea that the trance state has a neurological basis and can be achieved by all humans with a normally functioning nervous system (Morris and Peatfield 2004, 36–7, 40). Physical gestures as depicted in Minoan glyptic art and figurines from peak, rural and cave sanctuaries are the proposed method for achieving the trance state (Morris and Peatfield 2002; 2004; Morris 2004; Peatfield and Morris 2012).<sup>12</sup> This idea is based on anthropologist Felicitas Goodman’s experiments with various restrictive body postures derived from ethnographic examples of shamanistic rituals which, in combination with “sonic driving” (the repetitive application of sound), produced altered states of consciousness (Goodman 1986; 1988; 1990).

## **Psychoactive Drugs**

Both Evans' theory of drug-induced trance and Morris and Peatfield's hypothesis of trance naturally induced through the adoption of certain body postures may be correct. While there is no evidence that the classic hallucinogens associated with shamanic trance such as the fly agaric and psilocybin mushrooms, the peyote cactus, ergot, henbane or datura grew in Bronze Age Crete (Helvenston and Bahn 2005),<sup>13</sup> evidence suggests that the Minoans did have access to both opium and alcohol. A small limestone half capital from the Palace at Knossos, dating to the Late Minoan I period (1700–1580 BCE) may be the earliest representation of a poppy capsule in the Aegean world (Merrillees 1999).<sup>14</sup> The poppy goddess from the Late Minoan sanctuary at Gazi wears a headdress decorated with incised poppy capsules, and a clay cylinder found in its vicinity has been interpreted as a tool with which to smoke opium (Marinatos 1937, 287). Globular rhyta from Mycenaean period Mochlos featuring painted scars evoke the method of harvesting opium by scoring the pods (Niegorski 1999). In addition, the Minoan-style gold ring from Mycenae (Figure 6) depicts a female figure holding a bunch of opium poppies, gold and rock crystal dress pins in the shape of poppy pods were also found at Mycenae, and there is archaeobotanical evidence for opium at Tiryns (Collard 2008, 59; Kroll 1982; Arnott 2005). Opium consumption may have triggered an altered state of consciousness characterised by euphoria and visual hallucinations (Yaniv 2006, 28; Collard 2008, 60–61). Evidence for alcohol consumption in conjunction with ritual has been found in caves in Crete (Tyree 2001, 45) and may have functioned to produce the “frenzied” effect purported by Evans. Alcohol functions differently to opium, suppressing inhibition and facilitating commensality rather than individual reverie (Jay 2010, 81), it was also used as a “carrier substance” to which other substances were added and may have been used in this manner or as a surrogate for opium which may have been the province of a particular category of cult practitioner (Hoffman and Ruck 2004, 115).

## **Body Postures**

Altered states of consciousness can, on the other hand, be achieved through mental and physical activity without recourse to drugs as Morris and Peatfield propose and as Yogic practitioners over the centuries would attest (Wilson 2004, 88). While suggesting that Minoan body postures as represented by clay and bronze figurines from peak, rural and cave sanctuaries, and as depicted in glyptic cult scenes, can trigger visionary states, Morris and Peatfield's claims relied on ethnographic comparanda and therefore remained theoretical as no formal physical experiments testing the claim were published. In 2005 Erin McGowan moved the research forward by applying a modified form of Goodman's experimental techniques to Minoan religion in order to test whether Minoan ritual gestures are able to induce altered states of consciousness (McGowan 2006). The experiment was conducted within a darkened room approximating a cave-like environment in conjunction with sonic driving via the use of a sistrum. Each of the adopted gestures resulted in participants experiencing altered states of consciousness of varying visual and aural complexity. Morris and Peatfield, in conjunction with contemporary shamanic practitioner Robinette Kennedy, a student of Felicitas Goodman, have since undertaken physical

experiments with Minoan postures and sonic driving, including at the actual Minoan peak sanctuary of Atsipadhes, and report multisensory effects involving visions and sensations of bodily transformation (Kennedy 2011; Peatfield and Morris 2012).<sup>15</sup> While such experiments expand the range of interpretive possibility, they are delimited by our own frame of reference and cannot replicate Minoan experience.

### **Gold Rings**

Scenes depicted upon gold signet rings appear to illustrate ecstatic trance, dialogue with spirits and possession, and are traditionally interpreted as “Epiphany Scenes.” “Epiphany” is a category of religious experience well known within the study of Minoan religion. First identified by Martin Nilsson in the late 1920s, and elaborated upon thirty years later by Friedrich Matz, Minoan epiphany was further defined in the mid-1980s by Robin Hägg as occurring in two different forms: envisioned and enacted epiphany. Hägg explains envisioned epiphany as a vision seen by an individual or group of worshippers either spontaneously or through cult practices (1983, 184–5). Recently it has been suggested that, rather than depicting visions, such images represent subjective “feeling” states (Morris 2004; McGowan 2006). Such a state may be further emphasised by the depiction of figures with “aniconic” heads (Figures 3, 7, 8, 26) possibly signifying the shamanic “shift of self” involved in a trance state (Morris and Peatfield 2002, 114; Kyriakidis 2004). Envisioned epiphanic images appear as small hovering objects, birds, animals, and human figures, while performed or enacted epiphany occurs when a deity appearing to worshippers is played by a human being who acts as the personification of the deity.<sup>16</sup> In the apparent absence of cult images, envisioned and enacted epiphany are thought to be the ways in which the Minoans interacted with the divine in ritual.

### **Ecstatic Trance**

Envisioned epiphany, in which human figures perceive hovering objects, may represent the experience of entoptic phenomena.<sup>17</sup> The human optic system has the capacity to self-generate a range of luminous images independently of any external light source; these images are called entoptic phenomena and appear as incandescent, shimmering, moving, and rotating forms such as grids, zigzags, lines, dots, spirals, and curves. Entoptic phenomena can be induced by psychoactive drugs, fatigue, sensory deprivation, intense concentration, sonic driving, hyperventilation and rhythmic movement, as well as migraine and schizophrenia. Entoptic phenomena can be divided into phosphenes which derive from within the eye, and form constants which originate beyond the eyeball but within the optic system. They are distinguished from hallucinations which derive from the brain but which can occur in conjunction with entoptic phenomena (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988, 202–3). Entoptic phenomena are interpreted according to cultural expectations which may explain why some of the Minoan examples resemble recognisable objects from elsewhere in the Minoan cultural repertoire such as Cretan script signs, cult stands, double axes, rhyta and bucrania (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988; Kyriakidis 2005) (Figures 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 13, 14).



Figure 7 Gold Ring from Isopata, Crete.

CMS II.3 No. 51 [CMS]

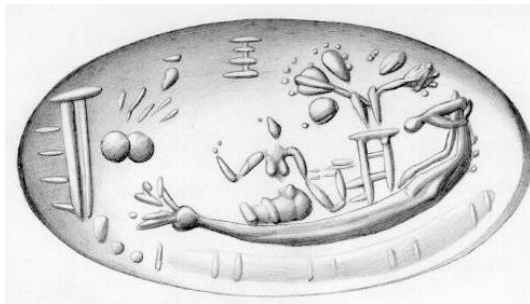


Figure 8 Gold Ring from Mochlos, Crete.

CMS II.3 No. 252 [CMS]

### Dialogue with Spirits

Entoptic phenomena can appear in diverse forms including animals, people, and monsters (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988, 202–3). Minoan glyptic provides examples of hovering insects, birds, and human figures. Birds and insects are naturally hovering creatures however in the case of insects they are often oversize (Kyriakidis 2005, 147) (Figures 9, 10, 13, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29). Hovering human figures are small, they can be female or male, wear the same flounced skirts and kilts as larger human figures in the scenes, and are always facing or in proximity to full size human figures (Figures 1, 2, 6, 7, 11). Hovering anthropomorphs never appear alone in an epiphanic scene. It has been suggested that they are small because they are far away rather than hovering, however many examples have downward-pointing feet suggesting that they are not standing on the ground, and when they have long hair it is depicted as curving upwards suggesting that they are descending through the air. The figures may represent ancestors, numina, spirits or deities. These images then may be interpreted as scenes of imminent *enstasy* – the arrival of spirits for the purpose of interaction with a human being (Huskinson and Schmidt 2010, 7). The anthropomorphic figures, creatures and objects may have been both seen and

heard, as suggested by the eye and ear on the Ashmolean Ring (Figure 11). If depicting an act of communication between a human figure and a spirit being, it is likely that such images represent the subjective state of the human practitioner rather than a performance for an audience.

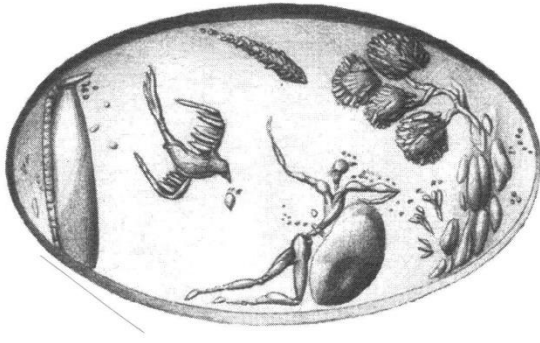


Figure 9 Gold Ring from Sellopoulo, Crete  
HM 1034 [Heraklion Museum]

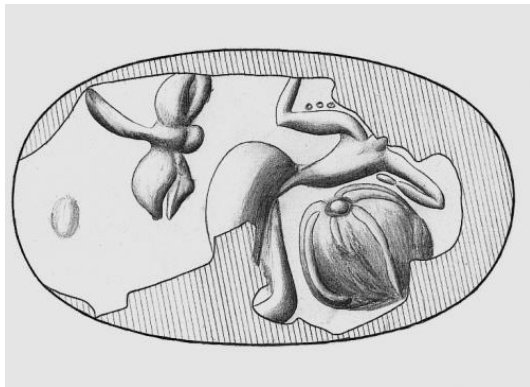


Figure 10 Clay Sealing from Zakros, Crete.  
HM 1154. CMS II.7 No. 6 [CMS]



Figure 11 Gold Ring, unknown provenance.

AM 1919.59 CMS VI No. 278 [CMS]

### Possession

While images of envisioned epiphany can be interpreted as depicting the ecstatic trance state and the enstatic dialogue with spirits, scenes of enacted epiphany can be read as representing the state of possession in which the supernatural being has entered into the body of the human figure. Enacted epiphany is primarily performed by female figures and to a lesser extent by males. Most examples are of seated female figures, a position interpreted as a sign of authority (Rehak 1995),<sup>18</sup> but standing females and males are also evident (Figures 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 24). The seated figures look calm and still, while the standing ones are more kinetic; some may be dancing. While the envisioned epiphanic deity may only be seen or sensed by one person, the enacted epiphanic figure is meant to be seen. Rather than depicting the subjective state of envisioned epiphany during which the practitioner sees and communicates with supernatural phenomena, in scenes of enacted epiphany the human figure communicates with other humans as a representative of the supernatural being. Possession thus functions as a system of communication in which elite figures mediate between the numinous and mortal worlds (Huskinson and Schmidt 2010, 2–9).



Figure 12 Gold ring Thebes, Greece.

CMS V No. 199 [CMS]



Figure 13 Gold Ring from Archanes, Crete.

HM 989 [Heraklion Museum]



Figure 14 Gold Ring, unknown provenance.

CMS XI No. 29 [CMS]

### **Therianthropic Metamorphosis**

While gold rings are a prestige artistic medium, images engraved upon stone seals may have represented shamanistic activity undertaken by lesser elites. Depictions of composite figures on glyptic from Zakros consisting of female figures in conjunction with parts of birds, goats, cows, deer, lions and trees (Figures 15, 16, 17, 18, 19) have been interpreted as “imaginary creatures,” “monsters” and “demons” (Hogarth 1902; Weingarten 2009). It has been suggested that the artist responsible for their creation may have suffered from schizophrenia (Gill 1981, 85–6). These hybrid figures may reflect a spectrum of human activity ranging from masked and costumed people engaged in a performance, to the subjective experience of therianthropic metamorphosis as part of a trance state (Simandiraki-Grimshaw 2010, 94; Krzyszkowska 2005, 152). Some images depict the complete disintegration of both the human and the animal and may represent the liminal stage in the process of transformation between human and animal forms (Figure 19). Like enacted epiphany as depicted on gold rings then, such images depict the enactment by a human of another non-human being, most commonly birds and animals. In contrast to the entoptic phenomena characteristic of envisioned epiphany however, these hybrid images may

portray the *interior* experience of an intense trance state that could have been induced by any of the methods classified as shamanistic including drug use, intense mental concentration or physical activity.



Figure 15 Clay Sealing from Zakros, Crete.

CMS II.7 No. 126 [CMS]



Figure 16 Clay Sealing from Zakros, Crete.

CMS II.7 No. 145b [CMS]



Figure 17 Clay sealing from Zakros, Crete.



CMS II.7 No. 177 [CMS]

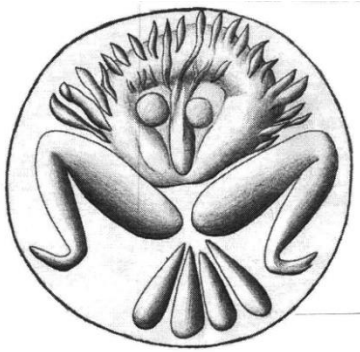


Figure 18 Clay sealing from Zakros, Crete

CMS II.7 No. 119 [CMS]



Figure 19 Clay Sealing from Zakros, Crete.

CMS II.7 No. 170 [CMS]

Another type of typically Cretan therianthropic metamorphosis involves the human-bull hybrid known from Greek myth as the Minotaur. Half bull, half man, glyptic images of Minotaurs date to the Mycenaean period on Crete (1490–1300 BCE) and may have been inspired by the earlier Neopalatial images – and actual practice – of bull leaping (Figures 20, 21, 22, 23). Like scenes of bull leaping, Minotaurs in glyptic art usually appear in contorted poses signifying exaggerated movement (Schlager 2008; Krzyszkowska 2005, 207; Simandiraki-Grimshaw 2010, 96). Minotaur imagery may have evoked ideas concerning the mastery of animals. Successful mastery over the bull, symbolised by the athletic and dangerous activity of bull leaping, may have brought with it a symbolic merging with the powerful male animal and appropriation of its qualities of strength and virility, this amalgamation represented as a bull-man hybrid. The later Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur in the Labyrinth also incorporates shamanistic tropes

including the use of a rope or thread to symbolise a spirit path, a symbolic *katabasis* or journey to an “Underworld”, and a bird (crane) dance (Morford and Lenardon 1985, 413–25).



Figure 20 Gold Ring Knossos, Crete.

AM 2237. CMS VI.2 No. 336 [Ashmolean Museum]

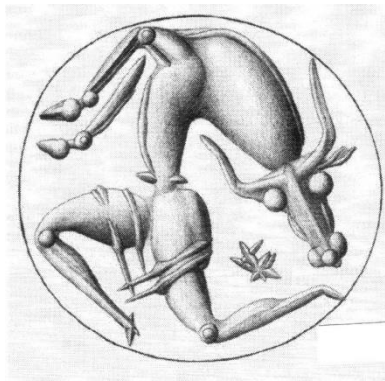


Figure 21 Stone Seal from Phaistos, Crete.

CMS III No. 363. [CMS]

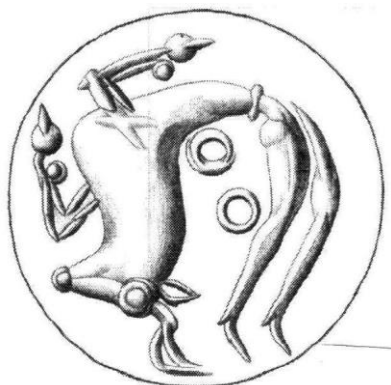


Figure 22 Stone Seal from Chania, Crete.

CMS VS3 No.150 [CMS]

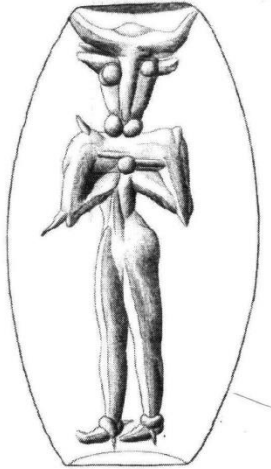


Figure 23 Stone Seal from Chania, Crete.

CMS VS3 No.154 [CMS]

The Labyrinth may refer to the multi-roomed Minoan palace at Knossos, the killing of the Minotaur by Theseus symbolising Mycenaean domination of Crete in the Late Bronze Age. Theseus was the son of Poseidon, a deity worshipped by the Mycenaeans (Weilhartner 2012). In the myth Theseus triumphs over Zeus' son, King Minos of Crete, by killing the "monster" within Minos' palace.<sup>19</sup> Both Poseidon and Zeus were represented by bulls, the former impregnating Minos' wife Pasiphae by proxy, perhaps symbolising a human and spirit-animal sexual alliance or a marriage alliance between a Mycenaean *wanax* (ruler) and the Minoan queen of Knossos. Ioan Lewis (2003) defines shamans as people who welcome "possession" as an aspect of sexual and/or marital relationship with otherworld persons.

### **Tripartite Cosmology**

That the Minoans perceived a tripartite vertical cosmology, characteristic of shamanic conceptions of the world (Eliade 1989, 259),<sup>20</sup> is suggested by the location of Minoan cult sites upon mountain peaks, in rural earthly domains and within subterranean caves. As mentioned above, gestures represented in clay and bronze figurines found at such sanctuaries may reflect physical techniques performed during ritual in order to induce an altered state of consciousness. Such gestures also appear in the glyptic repertoire which, in addition, depicts cult scenes interpreted as occurring at peak, rural and cave sites (Figures 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 14, 25, 27). The importance of these locations was emphasised by the use of architectonic structures representing mountains such as tripartite shrines, stepped altars and openwork platforms upon which female figures sat, sometimes alternating with trees (Figures 12, 13, 24), and architectural structures

such as Lustral Basins and Pillar Crypts found within palatial buildings and thought to have evoked an association with cave cult (Preziosi and Hitchcock 1999; Hitchcock 2007; Crooks, Tully and Hitchcock, in press).



Figure 24 Clay sealing from Chania, Crete.

CMS VSIA No. 176 [CMS]

### **Communication with Ancestors**

Glyptic scenes in which human figures kneel before and clasp large baetylic stones (Figures 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 25, 26, 27) may represent communication between the mortal world and the realm of the ancestors (Crooks 2013) – possession by ancestors, deceased shamans, other dead humans or animals being a characteristic of shamanism (Eliade 1989, 82–3, 339–344; Hutton 2001, 40, 59, 72–3, 116). Minoan baetyls can have funerary associations and may have acted as abodes for the dead. In images featuring baetyls the human figure either leans their head upon the baetyl as though asleep (this pose has also been interpreted as mourning [Persson 1942, 88]) or faces away from it toward other full-sized human figures or tiny hovering figures, creatures or objects. Images in which the human figure presses their head against the baetyl (Figure 26) may indicate verbal or silent communication with the numen of the stone, while those in which the human figures look away suggest that the baetyl itself is not the focus of the activity, but rather that it is one part of a more elaborate ritual sequence. Evidence of food and liquid offerings in the vicinity of actual baetyls however may indicate that cultic attention was directed toward the stone itself (Crooks 2013). Enacted epiphanic figures may represent ancestors or chthonic deities, while swooping birds – as Evans suggested – may signify a deity in ornithomorphic form. Ritual activity oriented around the stone may have invoked the ancestors as intermediaries between the human and superhuman realms (Crooks 2012; Crooks 2013, 7, 15–19, 42, 58), or facilitated the possession of the human participant by a deity or ancestor, baetylic numina thus functioning to transform human actors into sites of manifestation for otherworld beings (Keller 2002).



Figure 25 Clay Sealing from Ayia Triada, Crete.

CMS II.6 No. 4 [CMS]



Figure 26 Stone Seal from Knossos, Crete.

Str. Ex. No. 80/1229. [Warren]

### **Journey to the Otherworld**

The traversal of the three cosmic realms – sky, earth and underworld – by the Minoans may have been achieved through interaction with a sacred tree; a tree, column or pillar functioning as a conduit between the domains being a common trope of shamanism (Eliade 1989, 259–74).

Minoan glyptic imagery portrays human figures clasping and apparently vigorously shaking trees (Figures 3, 5, 13, 27), two examples occurring in conjunction with a kneeling human figure hugging a baetyl (Crooks 2013, 55). In each instance of tree-shaking the legs of the figure are depicted with bent knees and sometimes with one leg kicked backwards. This posture is suggestive of energetic activity and has been interpreted as indicating a frenzied state characteristic of some forms of possession (Marinatos 2009; Tully forthcoming). Tree shaking may have been a technique through which ritual practitioners travelled out of their bodies in an ecstatic trance state in order to interact with the other-than-human beings resident in the upper or lower worlds linked by the tree (Huskinson and Schmidt 2010, 7; Walsh 2001, 33).

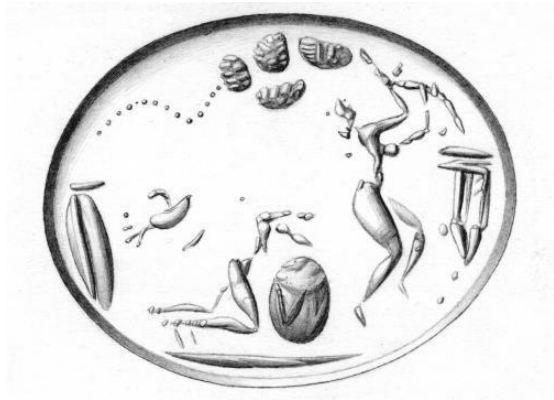


Figure 27 Gold Ring from Kalyvia, Crete.

CMS II.3 No. 114 [CMS]

Sacred trees feature in many images of Minoan ritual and were evidently an important component of Minoan cult sites (Tully 2012). That a cosmic tree was part of the Minoan conception of the world is suggested by the tree depicted on the Ring of Nestor (Evans 1925; 1930; Pini 1988; Krzyszkowska 2005, 334–5; Marinatos 2011) (Figures 28, 29). This ring depicts a very large, centrally positioned tree, its vertical trunk and horizontal branches dividing the scene into a quadripartite composition. Supernatural and powerful animals such as the Minoan Dragon, griffin and lion, bird-headed women, and the fact that some human figures sit or stand on the tree's branches, suggest that this is not a realistic scene but rather a mythical space or concept. That it was specifically an Underworld scene was suggested by Evans on the basis of the two butterflies in the upper left of the scene which he interpreted as “souls” (1930, 151). Whether the image depicts a celestial or chthonic location, the fact that a huge tree structures the entire scene suggests that the Minoans conceptualised a place characterised by a supernatural tree which may have been conceived of as an axis mundi. Such a tree may symbolically correspond to the physical trees at actual cult sites which may have facilitated transportation to otherworld locations through ritual.



Figure 28 Gold Ring, unknown provenance.

AM 1938.1130 CMS VI.2 No. 277 [Ashmolean Museum]

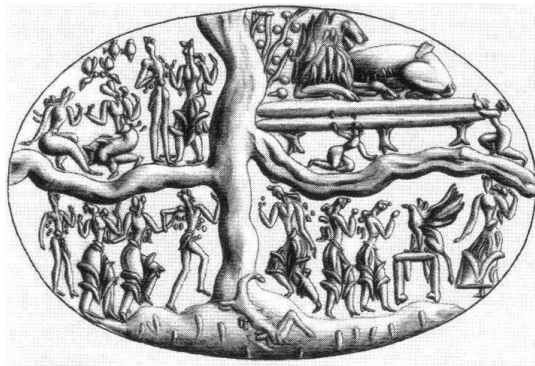


Figure 29 Gold Ring, unknown provenance.

AM 1938.1130 CMS VI.2 No. 277 [CMS]

## Conclusion

The evidence presented in this paper has shown that Late Bronze Age Minoan religion appears to exhibit characteristics that can be described as shamanistic. Examination of activities classified under the rubric of universal shamanism, such as the consumption of psychoactive drugs and the enactment of special physical postures as methods for achieving trance, has confirmed claims that Minoan religion ought to be examined in light of shamanic tropes. The further re-figuring of traditional Minoan epiphany scenes and images of human-animal hybridity in light of shamanistic concepts, activity and phenomena such as ecstatic trance, dialogue with spirits, possession, therianthropic transformation, a tripartite cosmology, communication with the dead and traversal of other worlds, provides compelling evidence for the existence of shamanistic elements within Minoan cult. Further research, particularly the archaeobotanical identification of psychoactive plants in Bronze Age Crete, and the refinement of experiments with Minoan

postures, may shed more light on this fertile area of research. The present study develops current understandings of the cult of Late Bronze Age Minoan Crete in light of shamanistic practices.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Piers Vitebsky (2001, 161) suggests that the term "shamanry," like wizardry, could be used for the shaman's activities, "shamanship" could describe the shaman's professional quality, and the plural "shamanisms," be used because of the lack of a unifying ideology.

<sup>2</sup> Graham Harvey (2010, 31) questions the focus upon the psychological state of the shaman and the utility of the term "spirits," suggesting instead that shamanism is characterised by relationality in which a shaman negotiates communal wellbeing between humans and other life forms within their environment.

<sup>3</sup> General theories of shamanism cannot be anything other than artificial however. In proposing a "universal shamanism," disparate practices from vastly different regions are disassociated from their larger cultural contexts, re-combined and presented as unified components of an over-arching "shamanism." Psychotropic drug use for example, often considered a universal shamanic phenomenon, is characteristic of New World shamanisms but less so of Old World types. Hence the appropriateness of using the term "shamanistic" to indicate the presence of characteristics that appear *like* those known from various shamanic cultures, rather than the more definite "shamanic," when referring to the model of "universal shamanism."

<sup>4</sup> Watson (2009, 12–13) defines universals as "relatively stable human characteristic of innate or 'hard wired' biological structure, including species-typical architecture of perceptual information-processing mechanisms and other relevant aspects of neuroanatomy."

<sup>5</sup> While we are presenting a new way of interpreting these Minoan cult images, it remains one possibility among other equally plausible ones.

<sup>6</sup> Popham (1974, 223) suggests that the rings may have been worn between the first and second knuckles of the finger, making them easier to stamp impressions with.

<sup>7</sup> The seals and sealings are published with bibliography in the *Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel* (CMS) series.

<sup>8</sup> The Saami, whose traditional territory is northern Scandinavia spanning modern-day Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, practice a form of shamanism similar to the canonical Siberian type (Hutton 2001, 137).

<sup>9</sup> It is generally agreed now that the object on this shield is a sacral knot rather than a mourning figure.

<sup>10</sup> Evans did identify Crocus in the Knossos Linear B tablets, a plant reputed to have narcotic properties, see note 13, however did not suggest that it might be psychoactive.

<sup>11</sup> "Altered State of Consciousness" is usually abbreviated to the acronym "ASC" and, according to Atkinson (1992, 310), has been the buzz-word in interdisciplinary studies on shamanism since the early 1980s.

<sup>12</sup> Loeta Tyree (2001, 41–2) endorses Morris and Peatfield's interpretation of Minoan gesture and Altered States of Consciousness in regard to figurines, in this case, from caves.

<sup>13</sup> An African variant of the sea daffodil (*Pancratium Trianthum*), a plant depicted in Minoan fresco, glyptic and ceramic decoration, is used as a psychoactive substance by the Bushmen from Dobe, Botswana, however the Aegean

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version (*Pancratium Maritimum*) does not appear to have such properties (El-Hadidy, El-Ghani, Amer and Hassan 2012). Saffron is another plant depicted in Aegean art; the Cretan variety is *Crocus cartwrightianus*. Safron, the predominant part in oil of saffron, deriving from *Crocus sativa* was used as a medical narcotic in the ancient Mediterranean (Emboden 1979, 49). Saffron may have been used medicinally on Crete (Day 2011, 371). Henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*) is mentioned in the Ebers Papyrus ca. 1500 BCE (Helvenston and Bahn 2005, 41). Sabine Beckman (pers. comm. 19/10/14) identifies two Cretan varieties of henbane, *Hyoscyamus albus* and *Hyoscyamus aureus*, and has observed datura growing in Crete although it is most probably a late import. We do not know what level of alkaloids the henbane varieties contain and whether they were used in the Bronze Age however. Minoans may have been familiar with mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*), the blue lotus (*Nymphaea caerulea*), and hemp (*Cannabis sativa*), mild psychoactive plants that grew in Egypt (Manniche 1989, 129–10, 132). Beckman has suggested that mandrake may be one of the best candidates for a Minoan hallucinogen (unpublished presentation given at the 9th International Congress of Ethnobiology in Canterbury, 2004). Another potential candidate for a psychoactive plant possibly used in Minoan Crete is ivy (Sherratt 2004, 330).

<sup>14</sup> The most ancient evidence for opium poppy use comes from the Mediterranean, specifically Italy (Merlin 2003, 302).

<sup>15</sup> Contemporary Western shamanic practitioners, also termed “Neo-Shamans”, mainly derive their practice from anthropologist-turned-shamanic-teacher, Michael Harner, and his method of “Core Shamanism” which teaches that anyone can enter an altered state of consciousness or trance and progress to activities such as divination and healing (Harner 1980; Atkinson, 1992; Wallis 1999). Morris and Peatfield have apparently been working with Kennedy on Minoan gestures since 1998 (Kennedy 2011, 20–1; Morris and Peatfield 2002, 116; 2004, 53) however only mention their own physical experiments explicitly in Morris and Peatfield 2012, 241.

<sup>16</sup> Or is the human being “played” by the deity? Mary Keller (2002) suggests that possessed humans are played like an instrument by ancestors, deities and spirits.

<sup>17</sup> Kyriakidis (2005) has suggested such floating objects are astronomical constellations.

<sup>18</sup> The rocks and constructed openwork platforms that female figures sit upon may be symbolic of mountains, further enhancing the idea of authority (Crooks, Tully and Hitchcock 2015). The Knossos throne features a “baetylic” back that also may evoke a mountain (Crooks 2013, 53).

<sup>19</sup> The Minotaur was also, technically, a son of Poseidon. In the Skoteino cave near Knossos rock protuberances are carved to resemble monstrous animals. Paul Faure interpreted this as the original Labyrinth (Burkert 1979, 91).

<sup>20</sup> While Siberian shamanism envisions a three-layered cosmos, not all shamanic conceptions of the world are tripartite (Vitebsky 2001, 17).