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Virtual Reality: Tree Cult and Epiphanic Ritual in Aegean Glyptic Iconography

The canonical study of tree worship in Minoan Crete is Arthur Evans' 1901 monograph, "Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult and Its Mediterranean Relations" published in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*. This study proposed that Aegean Bronze Age religion belonged to a primitive stage of development characterised by aniconism which was believed to be the result of an inability to conceive of deities in anthropomorphic form. In addition to proposing that Minoan religion was aniconic, Evans felt that he could detect evidence of its actual evolution, characterised by the embrace of anthropomorphism. He interpreted glyptic images such as the Mycenae Acropolis Ring (Fig.1), in which a prominent human figure sits underneath a tree, as simultaneously depicting the aniconic sacred tree and a more sophisticated anthropomorphic deity (Evans 1901, 126–7). This assumption – that the presence of human figures amidst trees and stones in Minoan glyptic provided a window onto the progression from primitive cult to more advanced religion – was also proposed by Martin Nilsson in his study, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion*. Nilsson saw such images as expressing a more evolved phase of religion in which anthropomorphic deities inhabited sacred groves (Nilsson 1950, 283–4).

An assumption of an evolutionary progression from primitivism to sophistication continues to be evident into the first decade of the twenty-first century. Lucy Goodison proposes in *Holy Trees and Other Ecological Surprises* that early Minoan religion focussed initially upon "the natural world" but that this later gave way to the concept of personified divinities. Goodison interprets the tiny hovering figures in glyptic imagery as a further stage in the evolution of religious thought in which "abstract deities" were able to be conceived as independent beings which were subsequently superseded by human cult functionaries who acted as their representatives. The Mycenae Acropolis Ring is again employed to illustrate this idea; Goodison proposing that while it depicts the tree being reverently touched, cultic focus is directed to the human figure under the tree (Goodison 2010, 29–30).



Fig. 1. Gold ring from Mycenae (CMS I. 17).

According to these interpretations, images of tree cult depict the evolutionary moment between primitive aniconism and “more advanced” anthropomorphism; however these authors do not propose explanations as to why iconography from the Late Bronze Age should reflect this new cognitive event. Nor do they explain or interrogate “aniconism”, instead simply assuming an evolutionist trajectory as a result of the presumption that aniconism precedes anthropomorphism. In contrast to this Bogdan Rutkowski claimed in *The Cult Places of the Aegean* that Minoan anthropomorphic deities were contemporary with aniconic cult objects, rather than evolving from them (Rutkowski 1986, 108–9, 205). The present article agrees that Minoan cult scenes were not concerned with depicting an “evolutionary moment”, but suggests that rather than being characterised by aniconism, Minoan religion was physiomorphic, theriomorphic and anthropomorphic. This is evident in glyptic images of tree cult in which human figures engage in epiphanic ritual in the vicinity of a tree situated in rocky ground. An absence of architectural structures in such images suggests a rural or natural location and, although the wider landscape is not visible, the rocks are suggestive of mountainous terrain. The tree in such scenes is sometimes prominent, facilitating epiphany (Figs. 2–5) or being physically shaken (Fig. 6), and at other times takes a secondary position while baetylic rocks are given priority (Figs. 7–8).

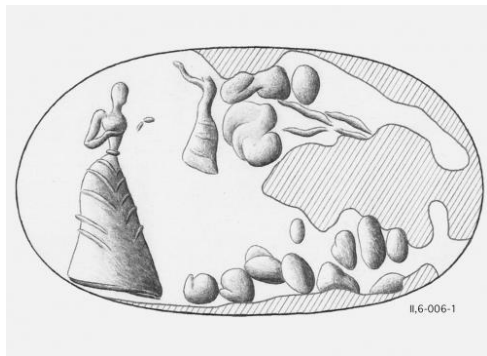


Fig. 2. Clay impression of a gold ring from Haghia Triadha (CMS II. 6. 6).

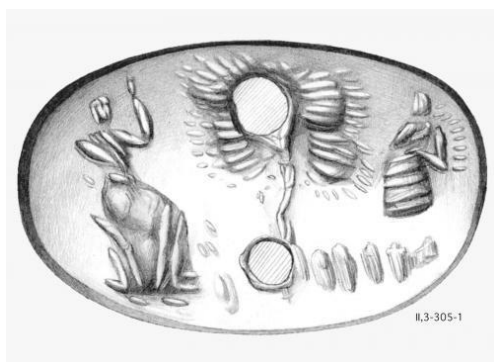


Fig. 3. Bronze ring from Kavousi (CMS II. 3. 305).

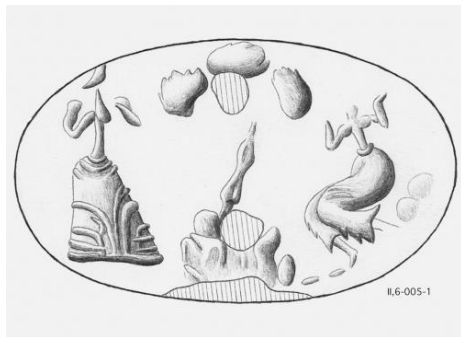


Fig. 4. Clay seal impression of a bronze ring from Haghia Triadha (CMS II. 6. 5).

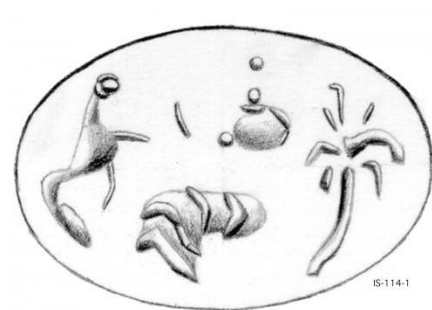


Fig. 5. Gold ring unknown provenance (CMS IS. 114).



Fig. 6. Gold ring from Vapheio (CMS I. 219).

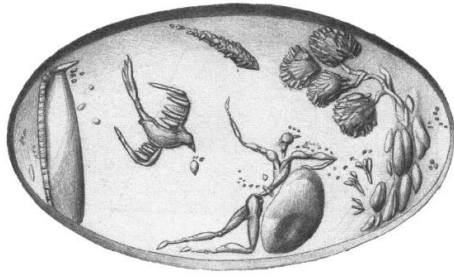


Fig.7. Gold ring from Sellopoulo (HM 1034 [Marinatos]).



Fig. 8. Gold ring unknown provenance (CMS XI. 29).

Epiphany

The main components of the images under consideration here are: human figures, epiphany, trees, and rocks. The term “epiphany” means the manifestation of a supernatural or divine reality; a manifestation or appearance of a divine or superhuman being; and a moment of great or sudden revelation. It comes via Church Latin from the Greek *epiphaneia*, “an appearing”, from EPI- + phainein, “to show”. Although *epiphaneia* implies vision, it does not only refer to clear images of the divine, but also to apparitions in dreams and dream-like situations, and both miraculous and natural phenomena.

“Epiphany” is a religious category 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 early-1980s by Robin Hägg as occurring in two different forms: ecstatic and enacted epiphany.¹ Hägg (1983) explained ecstatic epiphany as a vision seen by an individual or group of worshippers either spontaneously or through cult practices. Such an event appears in Minoan artistic media, particularly glyptic, as a small hovering human figure, animal, or object (Figs. 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8). Performed or enacted epiphany, on the other hand, is when a deity appearing to worshippers is played by a human being who acts within the ritual as the personification of the deity (Figs. 1, 4, 5, 6, 8). In Minoan scenes of performed epiphany the epiphanic figure is depicted as full size but is often seated – a position

suggesting authority (Rehak 1995). This role was probably enacted by a religious official or member of the elite. In the apparent absence of cult images, envisioned and enacted epiphany are thought to be the ways in which Minoans, during the Neopalatial period, interacted with the divine in ritual.

Scenes of envisioned epiphany fall into three categories according to the type of hovering figure or object presumed to be the “vision”. These are human figures (Figs. 1, 2, 3); naturally floating creatures such as birds or butterflies (Fig. 7); and objects (Figs. 6, 7, 8). Hovering human figures can be female or male; they wear the same types of clothes as larger human figures in the scenes, and they are always facing or in the vicinity of full size human figures – they do not appear by themselves in a scene. Birds and insects are naturally hovering creatures, however at least in the case of insects they are often oversize, suggesting that they are not actual species. In the category of floating objects, many are unidentifiable but may variously represent a sprig of wheat or a shooting star, eyes and ears, possible cult stands, a double axe with tassels, a snake, chrysalises, rhyta, bucrania, and animal limbs. Hovering epiphanic images have been proposed to be symbols signifying the character of the ritual, the deity, the meaning of the vision, parts of words, or naturally floating phenomena such as constellations (Kyriakidis 2005).

Enacted epiphany, in which a human figure represents a deity, is primarily performed by female figures and to a lesser extent by males (Figs. 1, 4, 5, 6, 8). Most examples in Minoan art are of seated female figures, but standing females and males are also evident. The seated figures look calm and still, while the standing ones are a bit more kinetic, some may be dancing. Traditionally in Minoan archaeology, scholars have not been in agreement as to where to draw the line between humans acting as deities and actual deities, and the distinction seems to be deliberately blurred. The fact that human figures in cult scenes – whether divine or mortal – wear the same types of clothes and are often proportionally the same size (except in the case of hovering epiphanies), does not help in determining which figures may be divine and which are not. Being seated whilst other figures are standing, as well as having a prominent position within the composition, may suggest that these figures are, if not actual deities, then at least important and if human, are performing *as* a deity.

Animate Landscape

All examples of glyptic imagery featuring cult scenes occurring within landscape settings characterised by trees, rocks and flowers – and free from architecture – include either envisioned or enacted epiphany. In the images focussed upon here the epiphanic figure is closely associated with a tree situated within rocky ground. Hovering human figures appear to emerge from the tree or materialise close by it, while enacted epiphanic figures sit underneath it. Epiphanic activity set amidst a natural landscape suggests that these are not just any old trees or rocky landscapes however, but specifically numinous locations or places of power. That epiphany occurs in all glyptic images set within natural landscape suggests an animistic conception of the natural world. Epiphany in the vicinity of trees implies that the trees were numinous, animate. These

images are thus expressive of a communicative relationship between a human figure and the animate landscape.

What we have here then are images on precious metal rings of elite figures interacting with the landscape, specifically through a tree set amidst rocks, or a large boulder in the vicinity of a tree. We know they are elites because of their garments as well as the fact that the images are depicted on gold and bronze rings which would have belonged to palace and villa administrators. Epiphany involves seeing and interacting with deities, or in the case of the Minoans the animate landscape, directly and is thus a highly prestigious activity. In Homeric literature only the greatest heroes ever experience epiphanies, particularly those that are the offspring of the gods, whereas for the average human deities “always remain distant and mysterious, objects of reverence and awe” (Turkeltaub 2007, 52).

The Tree

The images examined here are close-ups of a tree within rocky ground with which human figures – primarily women – interact in a cultic situation. What is the tree’s significance? Why interact with it? As mentioned above, epiphany implies that the tree is animate. The question then becomes a matter of discerning whether the tree is just a regular unassuming tree that is considered animate – an “other-than-human person” – along with the rest of the natural world (Hallowell, 1960); whether it is animated by a numen or spirit of the tree akin to what was termed in later Greek literature a “nymph”;² by an ancestor; or whether it conceals, represents, or is, simultaneously, an anthropomorphic deity?

In the early days of Minoan archaeology, Evans proposed the existence within Minoan religion of a wooden cult object, cognate with the biblical *asherah*, but which he thought did not represent an actual deity (Evans 1901, 104, 133). We now know from the Ugaritic texts that Asherah (Ugaritic Athirat) is a female deity, mother of the Ugaritic pantheon and partner of the chief Ugaritic deity, El. It is evident from the biblical text that Asherah was represented in Israelite religion by a wooden post or actual tree. The Septuagint interprets her name as *alsos*, grove. Just as female figures in conjunction with trees predominate in the LBA Minoan images discussed here, so female symbolism has been associated with trees and vegetation in the Levant from the Neolithic into the IA II (Ziffer 2010). In Egypt depictions of a tree goddess became prevalent in the LBA, and inscriptions name her Isis, Nut, Hathor and sometimes Neith (Keel 1998, 36–8). Asherah was also worshipped in Egypt during the New Kingdom in the guise of Qudshu (Cornelius 2004; Day 1992, 184).

Biblical descriptions of tree cult taking place “on every high hill and under every green tree” suggest that it was part of popular religion enacted at rural locations, which may have also been the case in LBA Crete. We also know that elites, such as members of the Judean royal family, participated in Asherah cult in urban places. The biblical text tells us that cultic personnel of Asherah were patronised by the queen of the northern kingdom, Jezebel (1 *Kings* 18:19), and mentions disapprovingly that the southern (Judean) queen mother, Maacah, made “a horrible image for Asherah” (1 *Kings* 15:13). Although the biblical writers tend to depict queen mothers’

devotions to Asherah in a derogatory fashion, it was probably an accepted part of monarchical religion and linked to their political role in determining kingly succession (Ackerman 1998, 142).

From Ugaritic texts such as the *Baal-Anat Cycle* we know that Asherah was the queen mother of the pantheon and that the mortal queen mother was associated with her. If Israel's monarchy retained influences from their Canaanite ancestors then, as at Ugarit, the human figure of the queen mother may have been considered an earthly counterpart of the goddess Asherah (Ackerman 1998, 154). Egyptian tree goddesses depicted on tomb walls providing nourishment to the deceased in the form of breast milk and water were also associated with royal ideology: Isis was the personification of the Pharaonic throne, Hathor personified the palace and was mother/consort to Horus, and Neith suckled pharaohs. In the palace of Zimrilim at Mari the Investiture Scene fresco depicts the goddess Ishtar bestowing the rod and ring of power upon the king whilst surrounded by both stylised artificial trees and naturalistic date palms. It is evident then that there was an association between female deities, trees and rulership in the Levant and Egypt. Let us consider then the suggestion that royal ideology can explain the scenes of Minoan elites in cultic interaction with a tree, as depicted on precious metal rings.

Mountains

While trees may have associations with female rulership, fertility, the afterlife and cosmology, they are not the only components in the images examined here. As mentioned above, the trees are situated within rocky ground which may be evocative of a mountainous landscape. That trees in rocks allude to mountains is evident in Akkadian seals and may be the case in Minoan glyptic as well (Kantor 1966). If the tree represents a female deity or numen that has associations of fertility and of queenship/royalty and may be similar to known goddesses from the Levant and Egypt, the rocky ground may in turn possess associations with the male partner of such a deity. In Ugaritic and Israelite religion mountains were associated with male deities such as El, Baal and Yahweh. El's mountain was a source of water and fertility, a meeting place of heaven and earth; it had connotations of royalty and governance, and was the place where the divine council met.

In Hittite, Canaanite, and Israelite myth storm deities such as Teshub, Baal and Yahweh, dwell upon mountains and manifest in displays of thunder and lightning (Clifford 1972). Mountains are depicted anthropomorphically in Hittite art and are considered animate in Hittite, Canaanite and Greek myth where they were thought to be able to move, sing, feel joy, grief, and envy, to procreate, and sleep (Clarke 1997). Mountains received sacrifice along with other deities according to Ugaritic texts, and were invoked to safeguard treaties made with the kings of the Hatti and Hittites (Van Buren 1943). In both Levantine and Greek religion, mountains were sites of theophany. Like trees, mountains can also function as axes between an upper, middle and lower world. This may have been the case in Crete where mountain, rural, and cave sanctuaries suggest a tripartite division of the cosmos (Tully and Crooks 2015). Later Cretan tradition associates Mount Dikte and Mount Jouktas with the "Tomb of Zeus", a Cretan "dying and

rising” deity that underwent an “*interpretatio Graeca*” but was probably based on a Near Eastern prototype such as Baal (Evans 1901, 121; Postlethwaite 1999).

The character of Minoan religion

If trees and rocks, or mountains, represent numina or deities does this mean that as Evans suggested, Minoan religion was aniconic? Evans’ ideas on aniconism were probably influenced by both the study of classical art and early anthropology. Nineteenth century German classical scholarship maintained that the ancient Greeks did not represent their deities in anthropomorphic form. Art historians such as Johan Winckelmann claimed that Greek art gradually evolved from rough stones into fully-fledged anthropomorphic images of gods, culminating in the classical ideal. Johannes Overbeck argued that the ancient Greeks worshipped non-anthropomorphic objects such as trees, poles, stones and pillars as symbols of the divine. In this scenario trees were animate, and early Greek cult objects made of wood were indigenous forms of religious art, whereas stone worship was an import from the Semitic world. Aniconic monuments were thus situated within a timeline according to an evolutionary model that began with trees and ended in figural representation, and which was thought to correspond to the acquisition of the ability to envisage the divine in anthropomorphic form (Gaifman 2012). The art historical model was essentially the same as that proposed in early anthropology, as espoused by Edward Tylor, according to whom aniconism in religion was a form of fetishism in which spirits were believed to inhabit apparently inanimate objects (Tylor 1871). Contrary to both the art historical and anthropological schemes however, there is no evidence that the earliest Greek art was aniconic or that aniconism in art corresponded to a primitive stage of religion (Donohue 1988).

The term “aniconism” means different things in different disciplines however. According to Tryggve Mettinger, whose focus is upon ancient Israelite religion in its wider Near Eastern context, aniconism refers to cults where there is no iconic representation of the deity serving as the dominant or central cultic symbol. This includes anthropomorphic, theriomorphic or physiomorphic (in which the deity is represented as a tree or mountain) representations. Mettinger recognises two forms of aniconism: an aniconic symbol such as a stone stele which he terms “material aniconism”; and sacred emptiness as seen for example in an empty throne which he terms “empty space aniconism” (Mettinger 1995, 19). As Milette Gaifman notes however, while Mettinger’s category of material aniconism does not suggest an anthropomorphic deity, an empty throne does. In Buddhist art aniconism simply means refraining from a figural image of the Buddha but the use of symbolism to represent him such as a wheel or footprint is permitted. Islamic art on the other hand is more strictly aniconic, eschewing the depiction of any images of the living world. It is evident then that there is a spectrum of aniconicity across the different visual and religious traditions, as well as academic disciplines (Gaifman 2012, 2, 19–26, 34, 40). According to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, “aniconic” means “not shaped in human and animal form”, but aspects of the natural world excluded from this definition such as trees and mountains are definitely iconic. In what seems to be a looser interpretation of aniconism

then, trees are classified as “aniconic” but in Mettinger’s interpretation of aniconism trees would be termed “physiomorphic”.

Minoan images of tree cult set in natural landscapes can therefore be described as having physiomorphic, theriomorphic and anthropomorphic characteristics. While trees and rocks would fit in the first category, and hovering creatures such as birds and insects in the second, the floating figures of envisioned epiphany and the human actors in enacted epiphany would be classified in the third category. Is the tree in such images only physiomorphic however? While hovering human figures in the vicinity of the tree suggest anthropomorphic numina, if seated human figures in conjunction with the tree represent, speak, or act for the tree, then tree cult is anthropomorphic *in ritual performance*. This would seem to imply an anthropomorphic divinity “concealed” within the tree, but anthropomorphism may instead be the method by which the relationship between a numinous tree and human beings is mediated, either by ritual enactment performed by a human being or by the artistic rendering of a tiny hovering human figure. In artistic depictions then, rather than suggesting that the numen of the tree necessarily has a human form, both enacted epiphany and the hovering human figures of envisioned epiphany are *signs* of communication. Perhaps the tree-and-rock combination in Minoan cult scenes represents deities like Asherah and El (or Baal or Zeus), but in Crete they remain in their natural state as non-anthropomorphic trees and mountains while elites, possibly rulers, represent them. In this way elite humans translate, speak for, and mediate, the animate landscape.

The tree then alludes to a *type* of deity, in this case associated with rulership, but its numen remains essentially physiomorphic except during epiphanic ritual activity. Although technically “embodied” by the ritualist, and hence “possessing” human bodies, Minoan numina of tree, stone, mountain or sky did not have their own anthropomorphic form. Enacted epiphany in the vicinity of a tree was not a case of mimesis then, in which the figural image of a deity is impersonated by a ritual performer, but a type of “channeling” through the technique of ecstatic possession of a non-anthropomorphic being. That women were the ones who tended to perform this activity suggests that they were considered to have an affinity for the role.

As Blakolmer says, many features of Minoan religion do not correspond to other polytheistic religious systems in the ancient world. Consequently we need not *expect* to find anthropomorphic “deities” like those known from other ancient polytheistic societies. The archaeological evidence for monumental anthropomorphic statues in Minoan Crete is scanty and an interpretation of them as cult images is speculative. While the Linear B texts from Mycenaean Knossos, which may reflect Minoan religion, suggest a polytheistic cosmology, iconography does not provide clear images of individual deities, or necessarily of “deities” at all (Blakolmer 2010). The fact that any *potential* deities, identified by the presence of fantastic or powerful animals or unlikely events, wear the same garments as elite human beings blurs the distinction between the “supernatural” and the human realms. Minoan elites performed the sacred during ritual events, in this way becoming what Blakolmer terms “virtual deities” (2010, 56). Evans’ suggestion then, that “[Minoan] idols remained aniconic, but the Gods themselves were naturally

pictured to the minds of their worshippers under a more or less human aspect” is basically accurate (Evans 1901, 123).

In Minoan religion the lack of anthropomorphic deities is obviously not a case of primitivism in regard to artistic dexterity or a religious inability to conceive of a deity in anthropomorphic form, but rather an indication that Minoan religion was characterised by an animate, rather than anthropomorphic, natural world. Even if we take the glyptic images of hovering epiphanic figures as literal depictions of what the individual ritual participant saw, rather than as artistic signs aimed at the viewer of glyptic, in each case such forms emanate from aspects of the natural world such as trees, rocks, and sky. This suggests that Minoan religion can be described as “nature” religion that was experienced through the mediation of elite human performance.

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¹ This paper is dedicated to the memory of Robin Hägg, an inspirational researcher whose work on Minoan and Mycenaean religion(s) laid the foundations for my own. Over the years Robin was a prompt and informative respondent to emails from an unknown student in Australia (myself) and so it was with shock and surprise that I learned of his passing, as I had only very recently been in conversation with him.

² The Latin term *numen* here refers to the presence of a divine spirit or power that provides an animate quality to matter such as trees and stones and is used describe perceived sentience or agency within the natural world (Adkins and Adkins 1996, 165; Price and Kearns 2003, 378; Otto 1923).