

Life, Class, and Goddess Belief: The Feminine Consciousness of the Statuette of a Snake Goddess in Crete Art

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Abstract: The combination of snake and female constitutes a unique “snake-wielding goddess style”. The statue of snake-wielding goddess of Crete civilization is not only the symbol of Minoan women, but also the presentation of the matriarchal clan reproduction, female class power and goddess worship beliefs of Crete civilization, which reflects the full awakening of Minoan women's consciousness and is an important microcosm of the splendid Minoan matriarchal clan culture.

1. Introduction

The Statuettes of a Snake Goddess (Figure 1) were discovered in 1900 by the British archaeologist Arthur John Evans (1851-1941) at the site of The Palace of Minos at Knossos on the Greek island of Crete. According to the archaeological C-14 method, these sculptures belong to the Middle Minoan III period (c. 1700-1600 BCE) and have been scattered into fragments, so it is presumed that they were made in multiple firings using multiple molds, and were restored by Evans' team with metal wires, pins for support and clay for some body parts. The restoration is now mainly in the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, Crete, and the Museum of Fine Arts Boston.



Figure 1: The Palace of Minos at Knossos, Crete, Greece, unearthed a trio of the Statuettes of a Snake Goddess

2. A decorative style dominated by female aesthetic interests

The warm mediterranean climate of Crete is extremely suitable for the survival of snakes, which are abundant in Crete. The physiological phenomenon of snakes molting regularly and laying a large number of eggs is regarded as a symbol of an endless cycle and fertility, which is in line with female fertility.

The Statuettes of a Snake Goddess represent the highest level of sculpture of Minoan civilization in this period[1], with realistic and accurate modeling and delicate carving, which is a perfect combination of animal symbols of snakes and Minoan female figures. The material of the snake-holding goddess statue varies, and there are three main forms of modeling: one is a standing human figure with open arms holding a snake in both hands style; the second is a snake encircling both arms style; the third is a snake on the body or head as decoration.

The Statuette of a Snake Goddess has an exquisite female face with a high nose, thick eyebrows, big eyes, full lips, strong shoulders, neck and arms, wearing a crown or high hat, a ruffled Libyan style long pleated skirt, bare breasts, rounded breasts, thin waist and plump hips, and remarkable female features. The snake's form is mostly curved and crawling. Through the shape of the snake's head and the pattern of the snake's body, we can find different species of snakes, such as the red-headed snake and the triangular-headed snake, which show the flexibility and vitality of the snake with its many moving forms. The female figure not only shows the natural daily characteristics of Minoan women, but also has the characteristics of the personification of the goddess as the queen and priestess.

The female face of the snake-wielding goddess has the same formula as that of the women in the frescoes Parisian Woman and Flower Picking Woman in The Palace of Minos at Knossos. The Minoan women in the mural have three-dimensional facial features and exquisite makeup, as if they were fashionable women in the streets of Paris in the 18th century, with facial makeup consistent with that of the snake-wielding goddess, with red lips, thick eyebrows and large eyes, and heavily painted eyeliner and eye haloes. As early as the 3rd century B.C., the inhabitants of Crete had mastered the art of navigation and had close contact with the inhabitants of the Cyclades, as well as with the Greek mainland and the coastal areas of Asia Minor, and also reached Syria and Egypt. Eye shadow, blush and lipstick were clearly influenced by the aesthetics of ancient Egyptian women's makeup, and became a popular facial makeup for Minoan women.

Under the influence of the concept of maritime culture, the statue of the snake-wielding goddess embodies a naturalistic tendency and a free and romantic character of women's aesthetic interests. The combination of the animal image of "snake" and the female image places women in the natural world and becomes a synthesis of natural flora and fauna and the spiritual comfort of the clan. The Minoan clan lived freely and romantically in Crete, and the people who created the earliest Aegean civilization were not the later Greeks in the general sense, but the local Minoans and some tribes scattered in the sea islands, they were immigrants from Asia and North Africa [2]. The different ethnic immigrants who came by water formed a community of feminine aesthetic interests, and the worship of goddesses was generally prevalent.

The snake-wielding goddess represents the Cretan female aesthetic interest. The art style of this female aesthetic interest gradually formed a consensus among the Minoan clan, and was widely used in Cretan architecture, frescoes, pottery bottles and other art.

3. The goddess guardian concept of territorial guarding and clan defense

According to Greek mythology, Crete was the home of the goddess Athena. The earliest records of Athena are also found in the linear script B tablets of Crete [3], and the ancient Greek language refers to her as Ἀθηναία, and the suffix na (να) in her name is peculiar to the ancient Greek language

and not all of the current Greek affixes. The ancient Greeks considered her to be the maiden goddess of the earth, the goddess of palaces and cities, the goddess of birds and serpents in matriarchal society in Crete, and so Athena was often called Πασνια in some later ancient Greek epics and prayers.

Athena is also one of the twelve main Olympic gods, the goddess of military strategy, the goddess of craftsmanship, and the god of the founding arts according to the Tantra prayer, as well as the protector of navigation, agriculture, medicine, and the goddess of courts and order. In ancient Greek legend, Athena defeated Poseidon's war horse, a symbol of war and sorrow, by beating the ground with her trident with the olive tree, a symbol of peace and prosperity, thus naming the city of Athens after the goddess Athena and making Athena the patron goddess of Athens.

The Cretan civilization holding the statue of the snake goddess is very much related to the cult of Athena, because the image of Athena is often combined with the snake, who is described in the Orphic Prayer Song as a gorgeous snake-like, thousand-changing dragon; in the Aeneas Chronicle as the protector of the snake [4]; Herodotus (c. 480-425 BC) In the Histories, Volume VIII, he describes a great serpent guarding the Acropolis in the temple of Athens [5]. Meanwhile, in Cretan mythology, owls and snakes guarded the palace of Minotaur, in which the statue of the goddess holding a shield made of sheepskin decorated with Medusa's serpent hair is one of the prototypes of Athena.

The statue of the snake-wielding goddess of Crete may represent the illusion of the goddess Athena, who has the function of a goddess of war and retains the independence of a matriarchal god in the matriarchal society of the Cretan civilization, defending the Minoan city centered on the Palace of Knossos, upholding the righteous war and wisdom to win, blessing the Minoan nation, guarding the Minoans in their sea voyages, and being the patron of peace.

4. The Cult of the Earth Mother in Female Fertility and Agricultural Harvest

The statue of the Cretan goddess of the snake exaggerates the female reproductive characteristics, signifying the idea of primitive female fertility worship, a praise and prayer for female fertility and reproduction, and also has the meaning of the mother of the earth, the mother of all things in Europa, coexisting with nature and nourishing all things.

The statue of the snake-wielding goddess was mostly excavated in the deep pit of the temple storehouse in the southern sacrificial main hall of the Palace of Knossos, a shrine used for religious rituals and ceremonies, which clearly had a religious ritual use, especially in the basement - the secret room, a place of worship to the god of the underworld. At the same time, the temple warehouse and the storage room are connected by a long corridor, and many large Minoan storage jars were excavated in the deep pit, in which olive oil and grains were stored, indicating that the sacrifice of the snake-holding goddess also represents the goddess of abundance, with the meaning of praying for a good harvest and welcoming bounty. The snake-wielding goddess dominated all life, controlled the wind and rain, and harmonized the weather to ensure a smooth and bountiful agricultural harvest.

From women's individual identification with their own fertility function to the collective identification with the population reproduction of the whole clan, it is a process of rising from individual cognition to the cultural identification and worship of collective fertility beliefs. The self-psychological and physical experience of women's fertility drives the demographic changes of the clan, and the whole clan, in turn, gains more momentum in the production and reproduction of direct life through the changes in the main body of productivity, and to some extent, influences the population flow and the flow of primitive material wealth within the Aegean Sea.

The importance of female fertility is closely related to the objective natural environment of Crete. The ancient Minoans have long relied on the conditions granted by nature to live in Europa, but sometimes it was not to be. The uncertainty of the movement of the oceanic crust brought about irregular earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic activity, and it was crucial for the clan to survive under such frequent disasters. The movement of natural objects is uncontrollable, and female fertility and reproduction to compensate for the loss of population and to strengthen the human power of the clan in the face of nature is the most direct solution that can be achieved as a subject to achieve direct artificial growth from the basic population numbers, always maintaining the population base of the clan and ensuring its long-term stability.

The ancient Minoan clan society continued to accumulate and develop in material and spirituality, and the statue of the snake holding goddess, as a product of faith, is a spiritual production combining human subjectivity and natural objectivity under certain conditions, which has the dual attributes of material symbolism and spirituality. In this way, the ancient Cretan civilization was passed on and unified into a cohesive history of Cretan civilization. In the individual and finite time of life, thus acquiring a total and infinite meaning, ensuring the immortality of the clan in Crete and the prosperity of the generations.

The ancient Minoans connected humans with the earth and the universe through the snake-wielding goddess, and found a balance between humans and nature through sorcery rituals, and the Cretans relied on nature for survival and reverence, and nature returned the favor to the Cretans through the abundance of crops.

5. Social class and political power of women in matrilineal clans

The Palace of Knossos was nothing more than a temple complex inhabited by all its inhabitants, including the king, queen, courtesans, male servants, etc., all performing various ritual duties, with the queen being the great goddess, the Sovereign Woman [1]. The serpent-wielding goddess was the expression of theocracy in the matriarchal society of the Cretan civilization, where the secular power of the monarchy belonged to the same goddess as the religious power, thus explaining why there are no paintings in the frescoes of the Knossos Palace that can be regarded exactly as the king himself. [1].

The snake-wielding goddess was a priestess of Crete who presided over the religious rituals of the Minoan clan, and was highly respected for her religious status as a priestess and her political status as the queen of the Knossos palace. Combining the themes and artistic characteristics of the wall paintings of Knossos Palace, we can find that there are far more female figures than male figures, and the costumes, accessories and backgrounds of female figures are more luxurious than those of male figures, which further shows that the social status of Cretan women is more noble than that of men, and the beliefs of the goddesses also widely influenced the field of political places, realizing the hybridization of matriarchal politics and beliefs of the goddesses, with The women who had the highest religious authority also had an equal amount of political power.

The Cretan civilization was a clan system with matrilineal calculation of descent and inheritance of property, children followed their mothers. Under the primitive society with limited living era, the clan society was the basis of Minoans' survival, and blood relations were the bond that held the clan members together, protecting each other and dividing the work according to gender and age. Young and strong men took on tasks such as hunting, fishing and defense against wild animals; women took on the heavy tasks of gathering food, barbecuing food, sewing clothes, raising the young and old; the elderly and children from engaged in auxiliary labor.

In terms of the course of history, where animal husbandry dominated during the obscurity of ancient societies, there was inevitably a transition from matriarchy to patriarchal patriarchy. Before

the establishment of male ideology during patriarchal civilization, an ancient and long matriarchal era prevailed in which goddess beliefs carried primitive thinking about fertility and death, survival and extinction, creation and overthrow. Later, as nomadic invasions brought about male domination and wars of conquest, warlike male gods began to replace the earlier goddess worship, reducing the goddess to a subordinate deity and opening the era of patriarchal culture's patriarchal politics.

The city of Mycenae, located in the Peloponnese in the northwest of Crete, is close to mainland Greece, and Crete is connected to Mycenae by the waters of the Aegean Sea. The economic trade by sea led to cultural exchange, which led to the formation of Mycenaean art with patriarchal culture and politics.

In the early stages of its development, Mycenaean culture was heavily influenced by the more advanced Minoan civilization, and many important components of Mycenaean culture were borrowed from Crete by the Achaeans, such as some rituals and religious ceremonies, frescoes, water supply and drainage facilities, clothing styles for men and women, weapon styles, and linear script. However, because of the gender switch of the dominant regime, Mycenaean patriarchal art presents a different aesthetic interest than Cretan matriarchal art, and from Heinrich Schliemann's (1822-1890) archaeological excavations of the Mycenaean homeland, it appears that Mycenaean art tends toward a formal, violent battle-ridden patriarchal rigid art style that initiated the development from Cretan matriarchal art culture to The Mycenaean patriarchal art and culture is a heroic era.

6. Conclusions

The Statuette of a Snake Goddess of the Cretan civilization is a combination of "snake" animal symbols and female figures, and Minoan women have already realized their identity in this matriarchal clan society. From the point of view of aesthetic interest, women's aesthetic interest is free and unrestrained under the concept of naturalism and sea; from the point of view of clan development, the external fertility characteristics of women are exaggerated, emphasizing the ability of Minoan women to reproduce and ensure a good agricultural harvest to ensure the clan's longevity; from the point of view of clan guardianship, the goddess of guardianship is the existence of the earth mother's power, which has a primitive mystery and a sense of sacredness; from the point of view of matrilineal political lineage, the goddess of guardianship is the existence of the earth mother's power, which has a primitive mystery and a sense of sacredness. The Minoan matriarchal clans formed by the association of tribes around the Aegean Sea were connected by blood, and the Minoan nobles, as the clan exploiting class, consolidated their rule and deified the image of the ruler with the help of this belief in goddess worship.

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