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L'ENVIRONNEMENT NATUREL ET LA RELATION HOMME-MILIEU DANS LE MONDE ÉGÉEN PROTOHISTORIQUE

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Édités par Gilles TOUCHAIS,
Robert LAFFINEUR
et Françoise ROUGEMONT

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THE “WORLD OF PEOPLE”: NATURE AND NARRATIVE IN MINOAN ART

In the Neopalatial period landscape becomes a regular feature of Minoan art. I think of three major types of scenes with landscape: 1) unpopulated landscapes, either alone (plants and setting) or with animals; 2) populated landscapes, those with people; and 3) depopulated landscapes, where people are implied but not present.

Some Minoan scenes focus on pristine nature: plants and/or animals. Most Minoan sealstones, however, concentrate on animals. A few focus solely on the animals with no indication of setting,¹ but most seals portray animals within some kind of background landscape – a fish swimming amongst seaweed, for example, or a caprid reclining on a mountain top.² These are tame compared to the riotous Ayia Triada fresco of cavorting goats and cats hunting birds.

While most seals present a perfunctory setting, just a simple frond in the field, a very few depict a broader landscape. The most sweeping is an impressed sealing from Knossos that depicts, as if seen from afar, a stream with rocks above and a recumbent caprid below – at about 1.50 centimeters in diameter, this is a true *tour de force*.³ Other scenes zoom in to focus more telescopically on two agrimia climbing a triangular pile of rocks, a palm growing on a similar pile, or an agrimi on a mountain top.⁴ Similar in theme but more cinematic in layout are the longer frieze-like wall paintings, the “Spring” fresco from Akrotiri, the Knossos blue bird fresco, and the West House naval expedition.

Other scenes balance the two components, animals and their setting, like the felines hunting ducks by a river on a niello dagger from Shaft Grave V, or interweave them like the blue monkeys scampering among Minoan rocks as if they were trees.

So far, all these scenes are “unpopulated” – no people. Most, interestingly enough, occur on the smaller portable art forms, especially seals and ivories, as if providing a peephole into a “natural” world that you could carry with you.

A few portable art forms, like stone relief vases, and the permanent frescoes, however, place people in a landscape. Acrobats do handsprings in a field or somersaults near a palm.⁵ A crowd of men and women watch a dance near a grove in a fresco from Knossos; a woman kneels in a wild landscape in a fresco from Ayia Triada. These landscapes are “populated”.

A variation on the populated landscape is the artificial landscape with people. Trees growing from shrines provide an artificial landscape that at least on the Mochlos ring could be transported. Another convenient artificial landscape is the “mountain” on which young girls gather crocus in Xeste 3 – from their “court” dress and bare feet they must actually be in a garden, as Maria Shaw suggested; a good candidate is the rock outcrop in the east wing of Phaistos with circular holes cut into the rock.⁶ Modern production of saffron does not rely on naturally growing crocus but on plants planted in June, some 7-15 cm deep (3-6 inches) like the holes cut into the rock at Phaistos.⁷

Other scenes, however, portray people indirectly in the landscape. Since blue monkeys are not native to the Aegean, the one “adoring” a shrine at Akrotiri must have been imported – its “handler” is not depicted. Caprids lying atop masonry⁸ and lilies growing from pots as in a fresco from Amnisos both imply a person as a circumstantial agent – someone must have built the masonry and someone must have planted the lilies. Often the human agent seems just

1 E.g., CMS VII no. 236, cow suckling a calf.

2 E.g., CMS VI no. 254, and III no. 150, respectively.

3 CMS II.8 no. 376.

4 E.g., CMS VI nos. 129 and 157, and III no. 150, respectively.

5 E.g., CMS VI no. 184, and a Minoanizing fresco fragment from Tell El-Dab’a: M. BIETAK, N. MARINATOS, and C. PALYVOU, *Taureador Scenes in Tell El-Dab’a (Avaris) and Knossos* (2007) 149, Fig. 138.

6 M. SHAW, “The Aegean Garden,” *AJA* 97 (1993) 661-85.

7 M. KAFI, A. KOOCHEKI, M.H. RASHED, and M. NASSIRI (eds.), *Saffron (Crocus sativus) Production and Processing* (2006) 23.

8 CMS I Supp. no. 192.

outside the depiction, just “off stage”: an arrow in a calf’s chest, a bull leashed in a sanctuary,⁹ the harnessed blue monkey “Saffron Gatherers” in a fresco from Knossos. I think of these scenes as “depopulated”, the people are implied but have been removed from explicit view; they are a “present absence”.

An interesting example of the depopulated landscape occurs on the Sanctuary Rhyton. People have built the sanctuary, the altars, and the protective wall around it. People have visited it, left an olive branch on the step altar, picked some crocus – probably women therefore – and have departed.

Associating people with both animals and landscape in art implies the dichotomy, culture/nature. It is this tension that the examples of the populated and depopulated landscape concern: the “Saffron Gatherers”, the arrow in the wounded calf, the bull leashed in the sanctuary preliminary to its sacrifice. Nature may be wild but it can be tamed. That agrimia and large birds reclaim their mountain top after the women have left refers to nature’s incessant drive to reclaim the artificial landscape of culture; the populated, depopulated, and artificial artistic landscapes, however, refer to the concept of the “parádeisos”, the depicted landscape that appears to be pristine but is actually artificial and benign, even beneficent (as in a garden or zoo).¹⁰

On Prepalatial seals and on most Protopalatial vessels the natural world is small, a few spiders on Lerna sealings, some vague flowers on Kamares ware. The world of people is mostly implied, like the lyres on Lerna sealings.

People do not appear frequently on Prepalatial seals and even on Protopalatial vessels they are rare. And when people do appear, their purpose is obscure to us – they’re too uncommon for us to see patterns: on an EM stamp seal, are the man and woman having sex?¹¹ are the paisley women from Phaistos dancing in a Kamares bowl? is the incised female on a EM III jug from Malia giving birth?

But on the Protopalatial seals made by the Malia Workshop people are indeed the overt main subject. On these seals, men play board games, carry trussed agrimia, work with their dogs; men and women cook, and women make pots and cook.¹² In other words, the Malia Workshop seals create the first narratives – and these narratives are purely human: apart from some fronds, they do not include landscape at all.

The Malia Workshop seals also occasionally combine people and animals, a man and a goat or a man and a goat head,¹³ but our instinct to create narrative will translate these scenes into “hunting” or “feasting”. Similarly, we will interpret a man with a spear as a hunter.¹⁴ Or two men in a boat with fish below are obviously fishing.¹⁵

All the Malia Workshop scenes thus depict the world of people – they portray us doing something, they portray culture. The tension between people and nature, the dichotomy culture/nature, is not yet developed here.

Instead, it is seals of the next period, early Neopalatial, that situate narrative within a landscape: a fish thinks it’s sheltered in a seaweed nest but actually it’s captive as if in a fishbowl; the agrimi thinks it’s safe on a ledge above the hound whose barking will attract his hunter-master.¹⁶

9 CMS VI no. 404 and V no. 198, respectively.

10 P.P. BETANCOURT, “Recognition of Gardens and Fields in the Archaeological Record,” in F. LANG, C. REINHOLDT, J. WEILHARTNER eds, *Στέφανος Αριστείδης. Archäologische Forschungen zwischen Nil und Istros: Festschrift für Stefan Hiller zum 65. Geburtstag* (2007) 23-30. K.P. FOSTER, “The Earliest Zoos and Gardens,” *Scientific American* 281 (1999) 48-55; “Gardens of Eden: Exotic Flora and Fauna in the Ancient Near East,” in J. ALBERT, M. BERNHARDSSON, R. KENNA eds, *Transformations of Middle Eastern Natural Environments: Legacies and Lessons* (1998) 320-29. J. SCHÄFER, “The Role of ‘Gardens’ in Minoan Civilization,” in V. KARAGEORGHIS (ed.), *Proceedings of an International Symposium: The Civilizations of the Aegean and Their Diffusion in Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean, 2000-600 B.C.* (1989) 85-88.

11 CMS II.1 no. 446a.

12 CMS VI nos. 45a, 25a, 44c; II.8 no. 275; XIII no. 80; and II.8 no. 243, respectively.

13 CMS VI no. 60b and 36b, respectively.

14 E.g., CMS I 68a.

15 Prism from Malia, now lost: J. BOARDMAN, *Greek Gems and Finger Rings* (1970) Fig. 31.

16 CMS VI no. 254 and 180, respectively.

What do these narratives do for us? Let's find out. Here's a simple test (Pl. LXIXa and c): here are two seal motifs without people, a simple lily and a galloping bull. They are nice scenes, even comforting, but not terribly interesting. Now, let us add people (Pl. LXIXb and d). We are intrigued: why hold a lily? the bull-leaper looks like he's in danger.

Once Minoan art gives equal value to people *and* nature, we co-opt nature into our anthropocentric world simply because our world, that is, *the* world, revolves around us: we see the fat fish swimming amongst the seaweed and we think: it's coming out of its hiding place: we can spear it and bring it home and cook it.

I call this tendency to interpret the world anthropocentrically the "gaze". It has been invented elsewhere and at different times, but in Crete it is invented when Neopalatial art makes people and nature equal. In modern literature and psychology the "gaze" describes how society monitors ideal human behavior by making us feel self-conscious,¹⁷ but I turn the term around here: instead of a person-less society that sees *us*, it is *we* the active viewers who interpret the world as meaningful to us. And so when we take an amygdaloid with a fish on the obverse, and turn it around we spy an owl on the reverse (Pl. LXIXe): "I see you!", we say –it mistakenly thinks itself camouflaged, hiding in the only translucent brown corner of the seal carefully reserved by the artist for this purpose. It is tempting to construct a narrative: the owl does not quite see us, but we see it peering out at us from the dark (brown) night.

These concepts, the unpopulated, populated, and depopulated world and the artificial *parádeisos*, imply the dichotomy culture / nature, which is resolved, in our favor, by the "gaze" that constructs everything in the world as ours, as cultural. In our world, we know there is virtually nothing that is actually "natural". The river Seine is in an artificial channel lined by planted trees – even as far as Saint-Germain-en-Laye. The lilies in the Amnisos fresco or in one's hand are for us to contemplate, the crocus in the Xeste 3 fresco is planted for us to pluck. The Neopalatial Minoans seem to be as comfortable and manipulative of their world as we are of ours. To be sure, their world may have looked wild in places, especially in the mountains away from the coast, but most of the Minoan world was actually quite tame.

In classical terms, we might say that by Neopalatial times the Minoans had become accustomed to an "oikouménē gē" – a "world being inhabited" by people – and to the resulting gnomic concept that a world being inhabited is actually inhabitable and will indeed become totally inhabited, that is, a world that belongs to us.¹⁸

The frieze fresco in room 5 of Akrotiri's West House depicts a naval itinerary unfolding around the room like a *periplous*.¹⁹ It records towns and events along the way, then a land fraught with wonderful dangers, and a joyous homecoming. In layout, it looks exactly like the 12th c. Egyptian Turin papyrus map – in fact, it and the West House frieze fresco are almost the same height (42 and 41 cm respectively, the conventional width of a papyrus sheet). The length of the papyrus map is now 2.80 m; its original length was undoubtedly much longer – the Peutinger Tabula, an elongated view of the Roman Mediterranean, is 8 m long, the West House frieze fresco is double that, while the Great Harris Papyrus that documents the reigns of Ramses III and IV is over four times that. In other words, the ribbon-like format of the West House frieze, and its iconography, may both derive their inspiration from papyrus scroll-maps. And if so, the frieze fresco may indeed have been documenting a *oikouménē gē*, a world that was, and was still being, inhabited.

17 M. FOUCAULT, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977). J. LACAN, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book 9: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (trans. A. Sheridan, 1978) 72: "I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides". J.E. SCHROEDER, "Consuming Representation: A Visual Approach to Consumer Research," in B.B. STERN ed., *Representing Consumers: Voices, Views and Visions* (1998) 193-230.

18 E.g., XENOPHANES, fr. 41 Diels-Krantz; POLYBIUS 1.1.5; and New Testament writers (e.g., Matthew 24:14, and Luke 4:5 and 21:26). H. CANKIK and H. SCHNEIDER (eds.), *Brill's New Pauly* vol. 10 (2007) 74-75 s.v. "Oikoumene".

19 J.G. YOUNGER, "A View from the Sea," in G. VAVOURANAKIS (ed.), *The Seascape in Aegean Prehistory* (2011) 161-83.

Occasionally we characterize the Aegean world as being on the fringe of the civilized eastern Mediterranean.²⁰ I doubt the Minoans would have agreed. Near Eastern imports were common (as the Uluburun wreck implies),²¹ Minoan scribes had influenced the development of the Cypro-Minoan script,²² and Minoan artists were traveling eastward to build palaces abroad and to train local artists in Minoan fresco technique and iconography.²³ Even before the Neopalatial period, the Minoans were participating in and contributing to the known world of the eastern Mediterranean²⁴ – the unknown world actually lay far beyond the Aegean, to the hyperborean north²⁵ and to the central and western Mediterranean of Odysseus.²⁶

We can therefore trace the development of the oikouménē gē (Pl. LXIXf-h) from a glimmer of a concept in the Prepalatial period where nature (the lion) and culture (the man) dwell in separate zones; the concept gathers momentum in the Protopalatial Malia Workshop whose seals focus on people as the proper subjects for depiction, while nature, if present at all, recedes into the background. But, in the Neopalatial period, art maps human agency onto nature to create a narratology that is compelling and pervasive – culture now manipulates and interprets nature.

Neopalatial art makes clear that the Minoans knew who and where they were: their proper subject, indeed our proper subject, lies in “a world of people”, a world that is known and inhabitable. The wilderness can be tamed with leashes and collars, shrines and gardens. But against this tamed, apparent wilderness the Minoans placed themselves as the proper human subject – the goddess with her griffin and the girl with her blue monkey occupy center stage in the upper fresco from Xeste 3, but our focus is actually on the girl and through her we adore the goddess: “The proper study of Mankind is Man/Placed on this isthmus of a middle state”²⁷.

John G. YOUNGER

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- 20 E.g., P.N. KARDULIAS, M.T. SHUTES (eds.), *Aegean Strategies: Studies of Culture and Environment on the European Fringe* (1997).
- 21 C. PULAK, “Uluburun Shipwreck,” in E.H. CLINE (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Bronze Age Aegean (ca. 3000-1000 BC)* (2010) 862-76. E. CLINE, *Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea: International Trade and the Late Bronze Age Aegean* (1994).
- 22 J.-P. OLIVIER, *Édition holistique des textes Chypro-Minoens* (2007).
- 23 M. SHAW, “A Bull-Leaping Fresco from the Nile Delta and a Search for Patrons and Artists,” *AJA* 113 (2009) 471-77, esp. 474. Cf. J. CROWLEY, *The Aegean and the East. An Investigation into the Transference of Artistic Motifs between the Aegean, Egypt, and the Near East in the Bronze Age* (1989).
- 24 Middle Minoan pottery in Egypt and the Near East: P.P. BETANCOURT, *The History of Minoan Pottery* (1985) 67-68, 112.
- 25 Hyperboreans were said to have lived far to the north or north east of Greece (Hdt 4.32-36; Wikipedia, “Hyperborea”, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyperborea>, updated 21 January 2013, accessed 30 January 2013). Hyperboreans have long been associated with amber: Ap. Rhod., Argon. 4.604-10 (cf. Hesiod, Cat. Women fr. 40a); J. BOUZEK, “The Amber Route, Apollo and the Hyperboreans,” in I. GALANAKI, H. TOMAS, Y. GALANAKIS, R. LAFFINEUR (eds.), *Between the Aegean and Baltic Seas: Prehistory across Borders, Aegaeum* 27 (2007) 357-62.
- 26 No Middle Minoan pottery in Italy and no Italian pottery in Middle Minoan Crete: BETANCOURT (*supra* n. 24), 112, cf. 135.
- 27 A. POPE, “An Essay on Man,” epistle II.1.1-2, first published in 1733.

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- Pl. LXIXa *CMS* II.8 no. 285 (abbreviated), a sealing from Knossos. Drawing courtesy of the *CMS*.
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Pl. LXIXc *CMS* II.8 no. 285 (entire), a sealing from Knossos. Drawing courtesy of the *CMS*.
Pl. LXIXd *CMS* V no. 580, a lentoid from Kazarma, with added bull-leaper (adapted from *CMS* I no. 152). Drawing courtesy of the *CMS*.
Pl. LXIXe left: *CMS* VI no. 257a with fish; right: *CMS* VI no. 257b with owl. Drawings courtesy of the *CMS*.
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Pl. LXIXg *CMS* VI 34a. Drawing courtesy of the *CMS*.
Pl. LXIXh *CMS* II.6 no. 161. Drawing courtesy of the *CMS*.



a



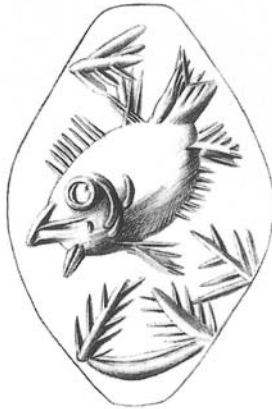
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d



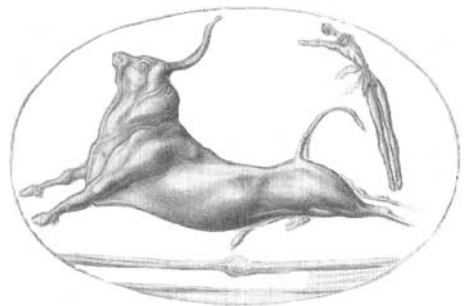
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