

## “WE ARE WOMAN”: GIRL, MAID, MATRON IN AEGEAN ART\*

On the Tiryns Treasure ring (Pl. XXXIIIa), a woman sits on a throne, her feet on a footstool, and lifts a chalice to four Taweret with their usual ewers standing before her; behind her is a bird (probably meant to be an impressive bird, a hawk or eagle). I assume the woman is a goddess: consensus has it that seated women flanked by special animals (like the woman in the upper fresco in Xeste 3, Akrotiri) should be goddesses.<sup>1</sup> The presence of the bird is reminiscent of the birds that swoop down on men embracing a boulder (an *omphalos*) on two gold rings.<sup>2</sup>

Taweret was a childbirth goddess imported from Egypt where she is a female hippopotamus with sagging breasts, wearing a crocodile on her back. In Crete, she slims down and sometimes has the head of a lion.<sup>3</sup> For the Akrotiri goddess (Pl. XXXIIIb), Paul Rehak had pointed out that her youth as well as her maturity are both emphasised (she wears the ankle-length robe of an adult, but her breasts are not fully developed, and her hair combines the loose locks of a maiden with the long tress of an adult). She also wears more jewellery than any other woman in Aegean art.<sup>4</sup> That she is flanked by special animals, a blue monkey and a griffin, leashed to the real window as if she and it had just arrived (compare the Archanes ring with circular bezel that shows them in flight),<sup>5</sup> and that she is surrounded by girls in a mountainous setting – all may identify her as Artemis.<sup>6</sup>

The Tiryns ring also combines a depiction of the sun and a crescent moon above what I have termed a “heaven line”<sup>7</sup> that also includes asterisms (stars, shooting stars, or comets) or wheat ears. The acute form of the crescent moon suggests that the time of the month is very near the New Moon. The presence of the Tawerets here reminds me that Hippocratic authors recommended that the best menstruation came at the time of the waning of the moon.<sup>8</sup>

The sun and crescent moon appear together rarely in Aegean art,<sup>9</sup> most notably on the Mycenae Treasure ring too (Pl. XXXIIIc). Here, the woman sits beneath a tree, holding a bunch of poppy buds; behind her, a girl touches the tree, an action that occurs several times on gold rings, but is usually performed by men or women:<sup>10</sup> this is the only child – and the only girl – who does this. In front of the seated woman stands another girl along with two mature women, all holding lilies. Above these two women is a small figure carrying, I suppose, a figure-eight shield. Above the girl is a double axe, which reinforces the sacred

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1 “Immortal and ageless”; *Minoan Religion* 147-74; “Iconography of rulership.”

2 HM 1034, from Sellopoulo Tomb 4, LM IIIA1 context (“Sellopoulo tombs” esp. 223;J8), and CMS II.3.114, from Kalyvia Tomb 11, LM IIIA2 context.

3 *Transformation of Egyptian Taweret*.

4 “Representations of Min.-Myc. jewelry” esp. 260, 265-66.

5 HM 1017 from Phourni, Tholos B, LM IIIA1 context (*Archanes* 651-53, figs 718-19).

6 REHAK (ed. YOUNGER) in this volume n. 2.

7 *Iconography of Sealstones and Finger Rings* 290.

8 A.E. HANSON, “Conception, gestation, and the origin of female nature in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*,” *Helios* 19 (1992) 56.

9 CMS I.17. A couple of serpentine plaques from Phaistos (HM L491) and Tylosos (HM) conjoin the full disk of the sun above a crescent moon; the surface of the pieces is decorated with small centred circles. See also the gold crescent from Episkopi (HM M31).

10 E.g. on the gold rings CMS I.219 (Vapheio, LH IIA context), CMS II.3.114 (Kalyvia, LM IIIA context), and HM 989 (Archanes, Phourni, Tholos A, LM IIIA1 context, cf. *Archanes* 654-60, figs 722-24), and on the sealstone CMS XII.264 (provenience unknown).

nature of the scene – and, if seen as a script sign (A), it may even allude, acrophonically, to the presumed goddess's name "A-sa-sa-ra" that occurs in Linear A. Along the rim of the ring, is a stack of six lion heads. As for the flowers, the poppy buds should refer to opium,<sup>11</sup> a pharmaceutical useful in relieving pain and relaxing muscles, and lilies bear an oil that was used as emollient on the vaginal lips<sup>12</sup> – both, therefore, referring to easing childbirth.

If the crescent moon situates the meaning of the Mycenae ring within a general context of women's menstruation, pubescence, fertility, and childbirth, then I could suggest a highly speculative interpretation that identifies the figures within a single context, thus: the six lion heads, used metonymically for Taweret, would relate to the six figures in the scene, imbuing them all with protection in childbirth; the child tugging at the tree would be invoking the epiphany of the goddess;<sup>13</sup> the woman seated under a tree would be the goddess of childbirth (like Artemis);<sup>14</sup> the two adult women would be Eileithyia, the doubled goddess of childbirth<sup>15</sup> – and at this point, I do not know how to identify either the girl in front of the seated goddess (unless she is simply an attendant, a *pais amphithalês*, as in Classical Athens for instance) or the figure with the figure-eight shield, although the latter may appear on a sealstone, flanked by what Rehak once identified as Sacred Robes.<sup>16</sup>

I could continue to make this interpretation even more speculative. Being impressed that the goddess sits under a tree, I could identify her as Leto (this tree is not, however, a palm, but it *is* a palm on another gold ring,<sup>17</sup> the only other glyptic depiction that shows the goddess sitting under a tree; in front of her, sits a monkey). This identification would allow me to speculate further by identifying the girl in front of the goddess as the young, just born Artemis, and the figure-eight shield-bearer as Apollo soon-to-be-born, Apollo the protector of epebes and of the Apella, the Doric assembly of citizens-in-arms.<sup>18</sup> That he stands above and between the two mature women may reinforce their identification as Eileithyia (her/their name deriving from *eleúsomai*), the goddesses in charge of children "coming into the world."

But I hesitate even to approach this speculative path, not only because I dislike speculation, but also because I note that a group of three female figures appears before a goddess in several other instances – e.g. on two ring impressions from Pylos, and perhaps on the Isopata ring.<sup>19</sup>

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- 11 On opium in antiquity, see: R.S. MERRILLEES, "Opium trade in the Bronze Age Levant," *Antiquity* 36 (1962) 287-92; ID., "Opium again in antiquity," *Levant* 11 (1979) 167-71; ID., "Highs and lows in the Holy Land: opium in Biblical times," *Eretz-Israel. Archaeological, Historical and Geographic Studies* 20 (1989) 148-54. All three articles are reprinted in R.S. MERRILLEES, *On Opium, Pots, People and Places* (2003) 2-9, 121-26, and 180-86, respectively. See also: ID., "Opium for the masses: how the ancients got high," *Archaeology Odyssey* 2 (1991) 20-29; C.P. BEHN, "The use of opium in the Bronze Age in the Eastern Mediterranean," *Listy Filologické* 109 (1986) 193-97; J. SCARBOROUGH, "The opium poppy in Hellenistic and Roman medicine," in R. PORTER and M. TEICH (eds), *Drugs and Narcotics in History* (1995) 4-23.
- 12 Plin. *HN* 21.74 (an emmenagogue and emollient for the uterus). Dioscurides (*De mat. med.* 1.1.) describes a suppository of lily and honey to ease childbirth. See also M. NEGBI and O. NEGBI, "Domestication of ornamental and aromatic plants in the Aegean: the case of the Madonna Lily," in *Wall Paintings of Thera* 593-602.
- 13 *Minoan Religion as Ritual Action*; "Of baetyls"; P. WARREN, "Of Baetyls," in *Πεπραγμένα του βου Διεθνούς Κρητολογικού Συνεδρίου* (1990) 353-63.
- 14 At Delos (Hdt. 4.35), and elsewhere.
- 15 H. CANKI and H. SCHNEIDER (eds), *Brill's Encyclopedia of the Ancient World: New Pauly* IV (2004) 858-59 (F. GRAF). Eleithyia is mentioned in the Linear B texts: on KN Gg705, where *ere-ut-ti-ja* receives a jar of honey at Amnisos (cf. *Od.* 19.188-90, Strabo 10.476.8, Apollod. 1.2.6, Paus. 1.18.5, Dioscurides [*supra* n. 12]); and on KN Od 714, 715, where she receives wool.
- 16 *CMS* VII.158; "Mycenaean 'warrior goddess.'"
- 17 *CMS* I Suppl.114. (provenience unknown).
- 18 CANKI and SCHNEIDER (*supra* n. 15) 1 cols 850-57 (A. LEY).
- 19 For Pylos, see *CMS* I.313 and 361 (both depicting a female procession toward a seated woman, arguably a goddess). The Isopata ring (*CMS* II.3.51) depicts a group of four women and a "floating" miniature female at top right; the scene could be interpreted as a group of three women in the presence of a goddess (to left or top center) or four women in the presence of an epiphany (the "floating" female figure). It is also possible to argue that this scene does not depict an epiphany of any sort (P. REHAK, "The Isopata Ring and the question of narrative in Neopalatial glyptic," in *Minoisch-mykenische Glyptik* 269-75) or that no conclusions can be drawn since the ring is basically unique ("Dancing in the dark").

The most obvious example of the group of three females, however, is the Ivory Trio from the acropolis at Mycenae (Pl. XXXIIIId).<sup>20</sup> Two mature women kneel. The one on our left is perhaps slightly older than the one on our right, whose hair is worn long in back, the loose tress of maidenhood (Pl. XXXIIIe).<sup>21</sup> The child at their knees should be a girl, since it wears a long skirt (boys are always nude).<sup>22</sup> The older woman puts her left arm around the younger woman's shoulder, while the younger woman has her right arm down to grasp the girl's shoulder, who reaches up to reciprocate. The two women also share a cloak, which in Archaic and Classical vase painting implies a close, even erotic, intimacy.<sup>23</sup> These intimate gestures link the three females closely. If my ages are correct, then the two women flank a climacteric age, say the age of 15-18 years, puberty and nubility, fertility and marriage, the younger one approaching that age, the older one past it.

Using these identifications of the females, I could speculate and identify the two women as Demeter and Persephone, and the young girl as Korê,<sup>24</sup> the three making up the three main ages of woman: Girl, Maid, and Matron. This may correspond to the *Damátēres*, a group of female divinities found occasionally in Doric sanctuaries.<sup>25</sup>

Three similar females appear again, but more loosely. In the lower fresco from Xeste 3 at Akrotiri (Pl. XXXIVa) the Necklace Swinger steps toward the Wounded Woman while a girl (slightly older than that of the Ivory Trio) wears a veil and appears to dance. The Wounded Woman sits in a rocky landscape, her left hand up to her head in pain, her right hand down to her bleeding foot. Her hair is dishevelled and loose, somewhat like the hair of the young woman in the Ivory Trio. If the bleeding foot is a euphemistic metaphor for menstruation,<sup>26</sup> the necklace that is being brought to her must be a marker of this young woman's passage into puberty. Necklaces are used similarly in many cultures,<sup>27</sup> including the ancient Aegean – for an Aegean *topos* in art is the woman fingering her necklace, drawing our attention to her bejewelled state, her social state.<sup>28</sup> The dancing girl has the head shaved in places, but individual locks were allowed to grow long – one of the stages of hair growth

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- 20 NMA 7711. See: H. WACE, *The Ivory Trio: "The Ladies and Boy from Mycenae"* (1939); A.J.B. WACE, "Mycenae, 1939," *JHS* 59 (1939) 210-12, pl. XIVb (before restoration) and c (view from back); *Mycenae* 83, figs 101-03; J.-C. POURSAT, *Catalogue des ivoires mycéniens du Musée National d'Athènes* (1977) 20-21:49, pl. IV; ID., "Les ivoires mycéniens," *Les Dossiers d'Archéologie* 195 (1994) col. fig. ("groupe dit de Déméter, de Coré et de l'enfant divin trouvé dans le sanctuaire du palais de Mycènes. Helladique Récent II"); *Crete and Mycenae* 174, pls 218-19; P. REHAK and J.G. YOUNGER, "International styles in ivory carving in the Bronze Age," in *Aegean and the Orient* 229-55, esp. 240.
- 21 See "Representations of Min.-Myc. jewelry" n. 46, for a summary of the arguments of E. Davis, R. Koehl, and D. Withe concerning hairstyles in children at various ages.
- 22 For nude boys in Aegean art, see: the crawling bronze baby from Psychro cave (*Arts in Prehistoric Greece* 112, 113, fig. 98; "Children in Aegean prehistory" 31-57, 237-38, cat. and fig. 38, and CHAPIN in this volume Pl. XXVIIa); two ivory boys from Palaikastro (*Arts in Prehistoric Greece* 120, fig. 108; "Children in Aegean prehistory" 38, figs 8-9; CHAPIN in this volume Pls XXVIIb-c); and some boys in frescoes from Akrotiri, Thera (*Τοιχογραφίες Θήρας* 18-23 [the fisher boys, West House], 38 and 48 [the boy with his mother in the Arrival Town, West House], 78-81 [the boxing boys, Sector Beta 1], 109, 111, 112, 113, 115 [the boy attendants, Xeste 3 – contrast the draped young man, πιν. 110, 114]).
- 23 *Sex in the Ancient World*, A-Z 33-34, s.v. "cloak." A comparable sequence is painted on the legs of a tripod pyxis in Oxford, Mississippi (H.A. SHAPIRO, *Art, Myth, and Culture: Greek Vases from Southern Collections* [1981] no. 62): one leg carries a marriage scene, the second depicts two men having intercrural intercourse, and the third one shows two women sharing a cloak.
- 24 Following Wace (*supra* n. 20), most scholars agree that the three figures represent Demeter, Persephone and Iakhos or Ploutos, the divine male child – or their Bronze Age precursors (cf. *Crete and Mycenae*).
- 25 M. Nilsson discusses both the *Damátēres* that appear on a stamped tile from the sanctuary of Demeter at Kalyvia Sochas, south of Sparta, and in two inscriptions from Rhodes, and the *Dēsipoīnai* in Laconian inscriptions (*MMR* 518-23, esp. 520, n. 50).
- 26 REHAK (ed. YOUNGER) in this volume n. 2. See also KOPAKA, in this volume.
- 27 For example, Oaxacan girls, in Mexico, receive their first necklace at age one; their bridegrooms give them more; and, at death, mothers will their necklaces to their daughters (P. FRANCIS jr., "Bead News Roundup 17," *Bead Study Trust Newsletter* 25 [1995] 9). Upon reaching puberty, Tahltan girls, in British Columbia, receive a "purity" necklace, which they wear until marriage (<http://www.stikine.net/Tahltan/tahltanpuberty.html>).
- 28 See YOUNGER (*supra* n. 4) 266-69.

for children. Upstairs in Xeste 3, two women comprise a fourth category of “woman,”<sup>29</sup> more mature, perhaps even elderly (Pl. XXXIVb): perhaps these constitute the woman who no longer gives birth, or is even through menopause.

In this same upper fresco of Xeste 3, the goddess herself combines the two climacteric stages of pre- and post-puberty, just as Artemis herself does, while in front of her stands the girl. A fragmentary fresco from Mycenae shows a large seated woman, her foot, like that of the Xeste 3 goddess, resting on a footstool; the Mycenae woman holds the girl in her hand (Pl. XXXIVc).<sup>30</sup> Since the girl’s arms are in motion, she is alive (the arms are in the same position as the Dancing Girl’s in the Akrotiri lower fresco). Perhaps the seated Mycenae woman also combines the two older stages of womanhood.

These three ages for women (childhood, *parthenia*, and maturity) are critical, for they shape and define the female’s roles in society, as the learner of female culture, the newly fertile woman, and mother. Yet in our Minoan-Mycenaean examples, these functions of female fertility are not stressed: no husband stands behind the woman, his hand touching her, or keeping her under his command, as in later representations in art;<sup>31</sup> nor do her children sit in her lap, immobilizing her.<sup>32</sup> It is as if these three (or four) stages constitute the complete woman: not in the modern sense of “virgin”, “bride” and “mother” – which are functional terms for woman as seen and used by men – but rather as simple stages or attainments important for women in their own right.

In spite of my facetious need above to identify these “three women” as specific divinities, it is not necessary to do so. In fact, it might be easier, and maybe archaeologically more sound, to imagine them as representations of a common idea, like a Jungian archetype that exists in many cultures. I see in this woman-in-triplicate<sup>33</sup> (or even quadruplicate) a socialisation process that must have accompanied – and indeed does accompany even today – the critical transitions in a female life: from girl to adolescent woman to adult woman (to woman past her fertility).

Since this series of transitions and concomitant need for a woman’s socialisation process is present in every culture and every era, we should be able to discern it ubiquitously and diachronically. I give a few examples.

People of Classical Athens institutionalised this socialisation process, when they selected adult women, young maidens, and two girls to weave Athena’s *peplos*.<sup>34</sup> Similar groups of women accomplished similar state tasks in other parts of the Greek world, like the “Sixteen Women of Elis,” and the “Daughters of Leukippos” in Sparta.<sup>35</sup>

29 NTOΥΜΑΣ (*supra* n. 22) πίν. 131-34.

30 I. ΚΡΙΤΣΕΛΗ-ΠΙΡΟΒΙΔΗ, *Τοιχογραφίες του Θρησκευτικού Κέντρου των Μυκηνών* (1982) 41-43:B2, B3, πίν. 6α, β; G. MYLONAS, *Mycenae Rich in Gold* (1983) 209, col. fig. 165; DEMAΚΟΠΟΥΛΟΥ, *Mycenaean World* (1988) 183:183 nos. 152-53, col. fig; IMMERWAHR, *Aegean Painting* (1990) 119-20, fig. 33.

31 See, for example, the wall paintings of the House of Punished Cupid in Pompeii (VII.2.23), showing Mars behind a seated Venus and reaching for her breast (Naples Museum 9249 – cf. J. GUILLAUD and M. GUILLAUD, *Frescoes in the Time of Pompeii* [1990] figs 244-45). See also a Campanian wall painting, of unknown provenience, showing Mars behind a seated Venus, undressing her and touching her breast (Naples Museum 9256 – cf. S. DE CARO, *The Secret Cabinet in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples* [2000] 19 with illustration).

32 There are few pre-classical *kourotrophoi*, for example: the Late Neolithic terracotta figurine from Sesklo (H.-G. BUCHHOLZ and V. KARAGEORGHIS, *Prehistoric Greece and Cyprus. An Archaeological Handbook with over 2000 Illustrations* [1973] 98:1180; POMADÈRE in this volume Pl. XXXIa); the late Neopalatial or early Final Palatial figurine from Mavrospelio Tomb VIIB (HM 8345 – cf. “Mavro Spelio cemetery” 263, pl. XXI, 254, fig. 43); and several women with infants among the Mycenaean figurines (“Mycenaean terracotta figurines” esp. 142-44; SHELTON in this volume Pl. XXb, and POMADÈRE in this volume Pls XXXIIa-b).

33 Compare the fourth century Attic tombstone of Ampharetê (C.W. CLAIRMONT, *Classical Attic Tombstones I* [1993] 404-06:1.660). The stele depicts a woman holding a swaddled infant as if she were its mother, but the inscription on the lintel tells us that Ampharetê is holding her [dead] daughter’s dead child.

34 *Prehistoric Textiles* 361-62, 381-82; E.J.W. BARBER, “The Peplos of Athena,” in J. NEILS (ed.), *Goddess and Polis. The Panathenaic Festival in Ancient Athens* (1992) 103-17.

35 For Elis: Paus. 5.16.2-3, and T.F. SCANLON, *Eros and Greek Athletics* (2002) ch. 4; for Sparta: Theoc. 18 and Hesychius E2823.

This concept, however, may be even more ingrained, deeper than institutionalisation, a kind of social unconscious — “*this is the way it is.*” In the Parthenon’s East Frieze, a group of five people stand over the central doorway (Pl. XXXIVd).<sup>36</sup> The group is divided in two: at the right, a man (the *Archon Basileus*) and a child, and at the left, an adult woman (the priestess of Athena *Polias*), a young woman carrying a stool, and farther away, a girl also carrying a stool. The adult woman helps ease the young woman’s burden, while the girl stands alone. If this were a scene depicting a nuclear family (instead of a group of figures in a public cult ceremony), we might view the man and child as “father” paying attention to his “son” (I believe it is a boy), while “mother” pays close attention to her elder “daughter.” The younger “daughter” stands farther away, an add-on to the family — which should have consisted, in those times, of “no more than one daughter, no less than one son”: a mistake on the way of getting a son.<sup>37</sup> But regardless of the politics for having children, the archetype is again present: the girl, the maid, and the woman constitute a unit.

The main purpose of this female unit is to socialise girls and pubescent women into full adult womanhood. In the Great Frieze from the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii (Pl. XXXVa), we follow the instruction and initiation of a young woman into marriage in the presence of Dionysus and Ariadne — a presumably ideal married couple (albeit one that seems to me notably dysfunctional).<sup>38</sup> The frieze contains some scenes that are interesting in the context of our Aegean woman-in-triplicate (especially the lower fresco in Xeste 3): a child (probably a girl)<sup>39</sup> accompanies the bride-to-be; the bride-to-be is caned by a Vanth as she unveils the “mystery” (probably the *fascina*, the phallus); a woman in a veil dances while our wounded bride-to-be is comforted; in the penultimate scene (Pl. XXXVb), our bride-to-be arranges her hair while a mature woman instructs a winged child (perhaps a girl-Psyche) to hold steady the mirror.<sup>40</sup> In the last panel, the frieze even adds the fourth age, the matron, surveying the entire process wearily.

In the modern world, we have tended to de-institutionalise this socialisation process for both women and men, although vestiges linger. For men, we have boy scouts, Little League, camping with dad, fraternity hazing. But the process seems to stop at late adolescence; fathers and sons often separate then, even compete. For women, the process looks similar at the start (girl scouts, girl’s softball, sorority hazing), but it seems to continue: mother-daughter outings and parties, the TV sitcom “Golden Girls.” And just about every magazine includes advertisements that link three generations of women together (Pl. XXXVc).<sup>41</sup> Talk about continuity!

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36 J.G. YOUNGER, “Gender and sexuality in the Parthenon frieze,” in *Naked Truths* 120-53.

37 E. EYBEN, “Family planning in antiquity,” *Ancient Society* 11-12 (1980-81) 5-82.

38 Cf. Catull. 64.50-65.

39 This child is usually identified as a boy: see, for example, J. WARD-PERKINS and A. CLARIDGE, *Pompeii A.D. 79. Treasures from the National Archaeological Museum, Naples, with Contributions from the Pompeii Antiquarium and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (1978) 2:183 (“the small boy reading from a scroll”). Other scholars are in doubt: see, for example, R. LING, *Roman Painting* (1991) 102 (“a naked child reading from a scroll”). A short vertical patch of light paint in the child’s genital area could be interpreted as a penis, but the child’s *mons veneris* is clearly indicated.

40 Psyche also holds up mirrors to Aphrodite (N.T. DE GRUMMOND, “Mirrors, marriage, and mysteries,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* Suppl. 47 [2002] 62-85, esp. 77-78, n. 41, figs 22, 25).

41 Note how the girl is placed at extreme left of the photograph, and by herself, and how mother is more intimately involved with her elder daughter (compare the female group in the East Frieze of the Parthenon’s Central Scene, in Pl. XXXIVd). It is also possible to see the fourth generation, grandmother, as “replaced” by the image of the mother in the mirror. And the message of the photograph, continuity and social stability, is perfect for the product being advertised, insurance — even if the subsidiary message, women learning to make themselves attractive (presumably at least for the absent father), may be demeaning.

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Pl. XXXIIIa Gold ring from the Tiryns Treasure (*CMS* I.179, photograph by the author).  
Pl. XXXIIIb Goddess from the upper fresco in Xeste 3, Akrotiri, Thera (detail, drawing by Paul Rehak).  
Pl. XXXIIIc Gold ring from the Mycenae Treasure (*CMS* I.17, photograph by the author).  
Pl. XXXIIId Ivory Trio from Mycenae (front view, photograph by the author).  
Pl. XXXIIIe Ivory Trio from Mycenae (back view, photograph by the author).  
Pl. XXXIVa Lower fresco in Xeste 3 (drawing by Paul Rehak).  
Pl. XXXIVb Matron from the upper fresco in Xeste 3 (drawing by Paul Rehak).  
Pl. XXXIVc Seated goddess holding girl. Fresco from the Cult Center of Mycenae (photograph by the author).  
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a



c



b



d



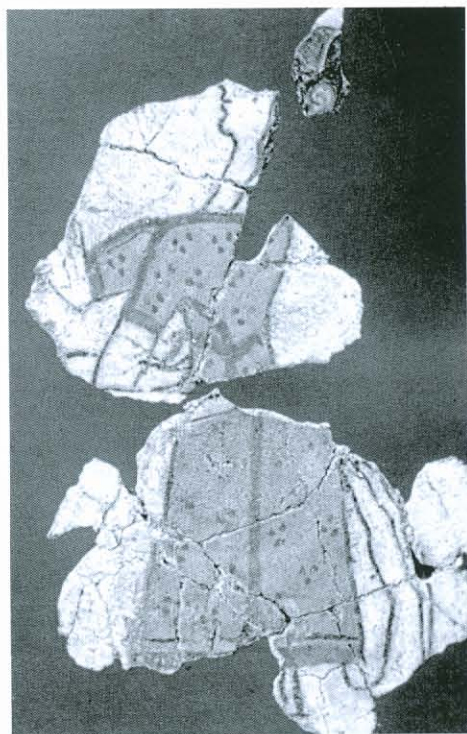
e



a



b



c



d





a



b



c