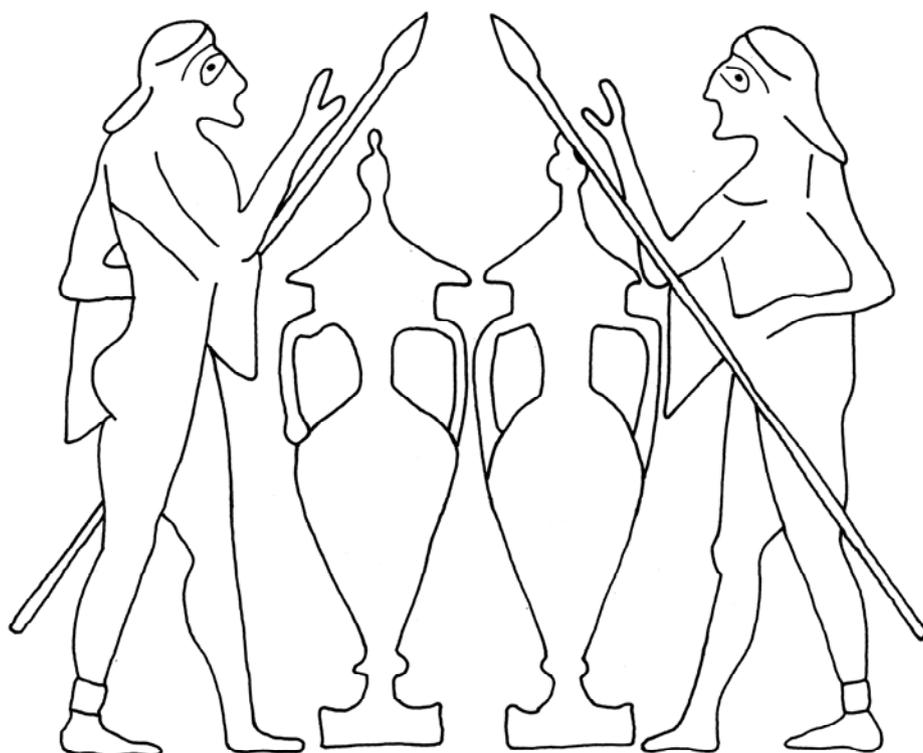


DIOSKOUROI

Studies presented to
W.G. Cavanagh and C.B. Mee
on the anniversary of their 30-year joint
contribution to Aegean Archaeology

Edited by

C. Gallou
M. Georgiadis
G. M. Muskett



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THE KNOSSOS “JEWEL FRESCO” RECONSIDERED

John Younger
University of Kansas

Abstract

The "Jewel Fresco" from Knossos shows a man's thumb and two fingers in relief touching a necklace of yellow beads with pendant beads in the shape of frontal faces. Conventionally, the fresco is reconstructed as a "sacred marriage": a man touches an elaborate necklace worn by a seated woman. There are problems with this interpretation. Above all, there are no certain representations of men and women in physical contact in Aegean art. The necklace's frontal faces have few parallels. The white area about the necklace does not depict a woman's neck; it should be in relief, not flat. Thus, the black line at left does not belong to her hair. And the blue tassel-like objects resemble more the net patterns on frescoes from Phylakopi, and this suggests that they represent the string and tassel ends of the necklace itself. Might the man therefore be holding his own necklace? Men wear necklaces almost as often as women. A woman touching or carrying a necklace is a common topos; the Jewel Fresco may present our only surviving (so far) male counterpart.

In 1901, Sir Arthur Evans discovered a small fragment of a relief fresco (**FIG. 1**) at “a low level in a basement”, the Magazine of the Vase Tablets, in the west wing of the Knossos palace, and he dubbed it the “Jewel Fresco” (Evans 1900-1901: 26; 1921-1935, I, 312 fig. 231, 525-27, fig. 383; Hood and Cameron 1967: pl. B fig. 2; Hood 1978, fig. 190; Higgins 1980, fig. 9; Immerwahr 1990, Kn No. 9; Younger 1992, no. 52; Marinatos 1993, fig. 48; Cameron 1987, 320-28). Bernd Kaiser (1976, 265) thought that the piece may have been still on the walls when the palace burnt, and he notes that the underside of the fragment preserves traces of red paint, attesting therefore to two phases of decoration. The piece was damaged in the earthquake of 1926 and restored; it is currently on display in the Herakleion Museum.

The fragment shows the thumb and two fingers of a red (male) hand in relief to left with white-painted fingernails, against a white background. The tips of thumb and fingers vaguely touch part of a necklace consisting of yellow (gold) spherical beads and beads in the shape of frontal yellow heads with black hair and red triple pendant circular earrings. The right end of the necklace terminates in three blue objects outlined in black; at the left edge of the fragment traces of an oddly shaped black line do not belong to the necklace.

Evans reconstructed the scene as showing a male, represented by the red hand, fastening or

unfastening an elaborate necklace around the neck of a seated woman (**FIG. 2**), and he interpreted this scene as referring to a “sacred marriage” (*hieros gamos*; Evans 1921-1935, I, 526). In this interpretation he was followed by Mark Cameron, who provided a full reconstruction (1987, 322-3 figs. 1, 5) (**FIG. 3**) and most recently by Nanno Marinatos (1993, 56-58).

There are problems with this interpretation - and I will offer an alternative, though it is only slightly less unsatisfactory than the conventional interpretation. One problem concerns the combination of flat and relief fresco on the fragment. Only the male fingers are in relief, while the necklace is painted flat against a white ground. White backgrounds are rare in Crete, but common at Akrotiri (Davis 1990). In Crete, most subjects are painted against a surface that is colored red, blue, or yellow. For example, there are several frescoes from Knossos with backgrounds that are red (e.g., the “Saffron Gatherer” and Lily Prince), blue (La Parisienne), or yellow (Figure-8 Shield frieze from the East Wing) (Immerwahr 1990, KN Nos. 1, 7, 26, 33, respectively). But there are some Minoan frescoes with white backgrounds: from Knossos, for example, come Bluebirds, Dolphins, the miniature fresco with boys playing a game, Dancing Lady, and Campstool frescoes (Immerwahr 1990, KN nos. 2, 6, 19, 24 and 26 respectively). White and red grounds are both used in the Throne Room (Immerwahr 1990, KN No. 28).

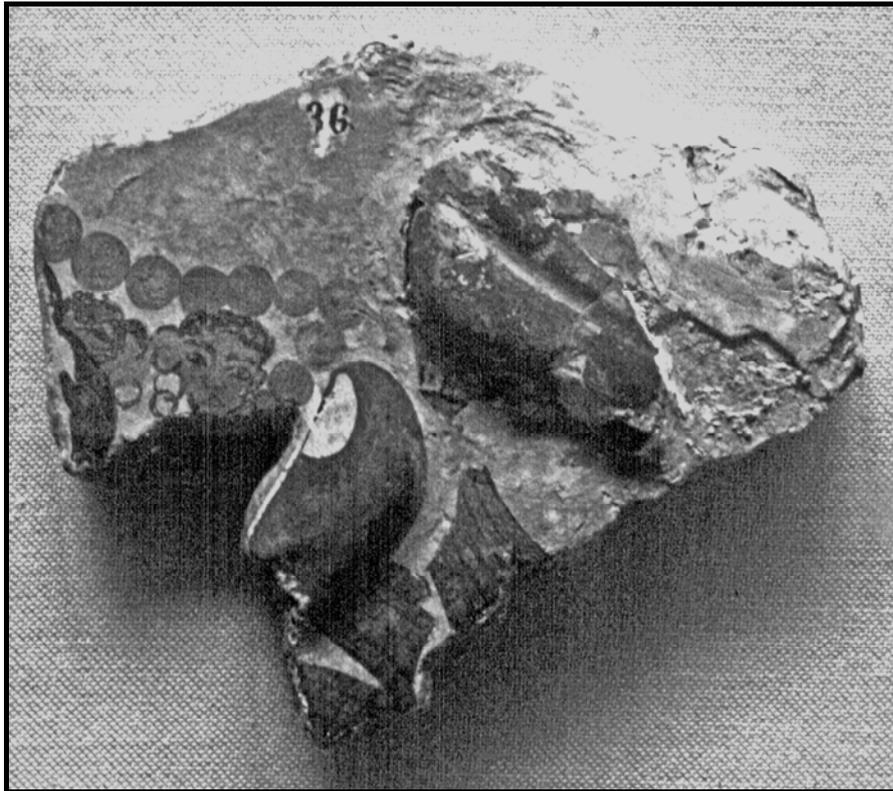


FIG. 1. Jewel Fresco. Photo author.

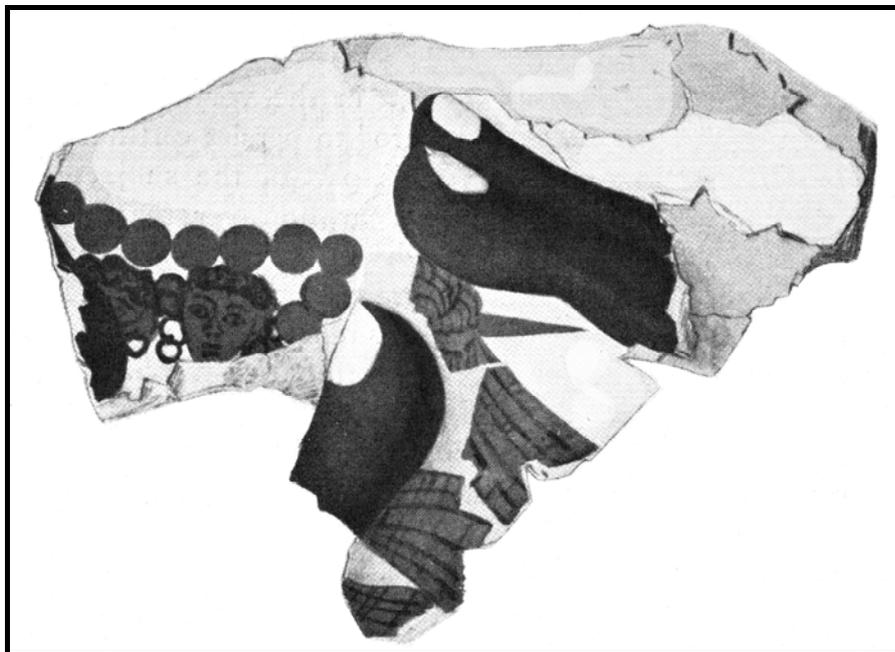


FIG. 2. Evans' reconstruction of the Jewel Fresco (after Evans 1921-1935, I, fig. 383).

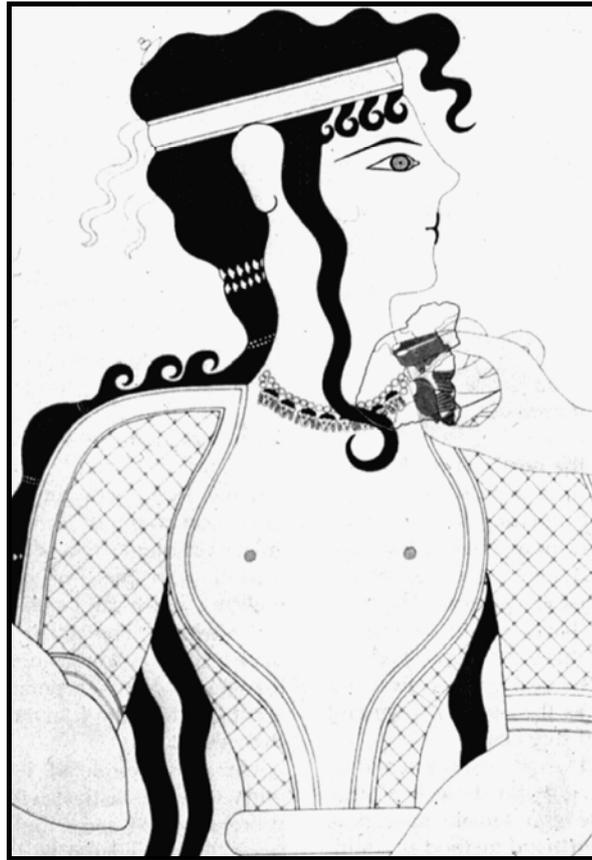


FIG. 3. Mark Cameron's reconstruction of the Jewel Fresco (after Cameron 1987, 322, fig. 1).

Where white (female) flesh is painted against a white background, as in the Knossos Dancing Lady and Akrotiri's women from Xeste 3 (Doumas 1992, pls.100-8, 116-34), it receives a black outline to frame the figure. In the Jewel Fresco, if there is a woman's neck present I would have expected it, first, to be also in relief; compare the women from the Great East Hall at Knossos who have their breasts in relief (Evans 1921-1935, I, 531, fig. 387). Kaiser's study of the surviving Cretan compositions (1976, pls. 32, 33, 42) shows that there is usually a pronounced curve where the edges of the flesh meet the flat background, for instance in the relief frescos of women from Pseira and the Lily Prince). Or, if the neck is not going to be in relief, then I would have expected it to have been demarcated from the background by a black line. Cameron has anticipated this problem by restoring such a demarcating line, but I see no traces of it on the preserved fragment. I find it difficult, therefore, to envision in the Jewel Fresco a composition involving a man (in high relief) and a woman (painted flat).

So, if there is no woman in the fresco, then there is

no hair, either. The trace of black at the left edge of the fragment has been reconstructed by Cameron as a single lock of black hair, possibly on analogy with the long locks of black hair that fall across the torso of the Lily Prince. A close examination of the black line reveals, however, that it has an irregular outline, captured more accurately in a watercolor by Gilliéron fils (**FIG. 4**; on display in the Herakleion Museum). With the face beads upright, the black line tapers towards the top, the opposite one would expect if this depicted hair. I do not know what this line once depicted, but its irregular outline denotes something quite deliberate. The man's fingers are in high relief, his fingernails painted white, as are the fingernails of at least one male in a fresco from Xeste 3, Akrotiri (Doumas 1992: pls. 115, and possibly 113, 114). The seated woman from Phylakopi has red-stained fingernails (Atkinson, et al. 1904, pp. 73, figs. 61, 74). The necklace appears to consist of two parts, a strand of common spherical yellow (gold) beads (see Xenaki-Sakellariou 1985: 292-3 12, esp. 292 no. 1), and another of unique ruddy male-face beads. A MM III sherd (Popham 1974: 189) depicts a necklace also using a red, yellow, and blue color scheme; its upper

strand consists of a row of red circular beads with blue tear-drop pendants separated by yellow leaf-shaped spacers.

In the Jewel Fresco, it is unlikely that the two strands are strung as a single unit, the spherical beads atop the face beads. The dragonfly necklace on the neck of the goddess in Xeste 3 (Doumas 1992, pl. 126) appears to be a double strand, a line of beads above the line of dragonflies, but the

dragonfly beads undoubtedly attached the tips of the dragonfly wings to the line of beads above, through which the string of the necklace was actually strung. In the Jewel Fresco, however, the face beads do not hang from the spherical beads, but rather the two "strands" are actually one strand, the spherical beads looping into the set of face beads; since the spherical beads do not flank or separate the face beads, the spherical bead at the right therefore leads to the first face bead at the right.

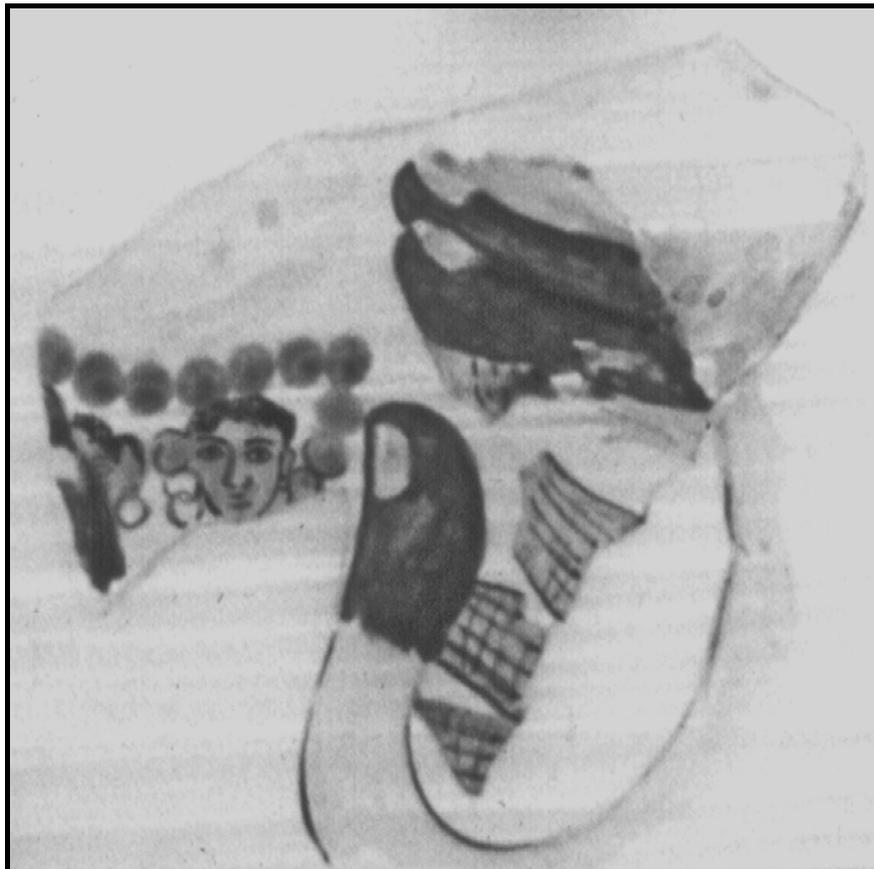


FIG. 4. Emil Gilliéron's reconstruction of the Jewel Fresco. Photo author.

We can imagine a necklace consisting of these two types of beads in two different ways: either the two sets of beads each forms half the necklace (**FIG. 5**) with the spherical beads presumably at the back of the necklace, the face beads lying across the front of the wearer; or there were few face beads (say, no more than three) lying at the center of what is otherwise a long strand of spherical beads. There are several necklaces made up of completely different beads (e.g. Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis

1997, II, figs. 644, 648) or of alternate beads (figs. 654, 655, 661, 677). But as far as I know there is no necklace extant or depicted, half one set of beads, half another; it is more likely then that the face beads formed a centerpiece for the necklace (**FIG. 6**), much like the many preserved pendants that must have formed the centerpieces for otherwise simple necklaces (e.g. Xenaki-Sakellariou 1985, pls. 7, 55, 69, 117; Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1997, II, fig. 656).

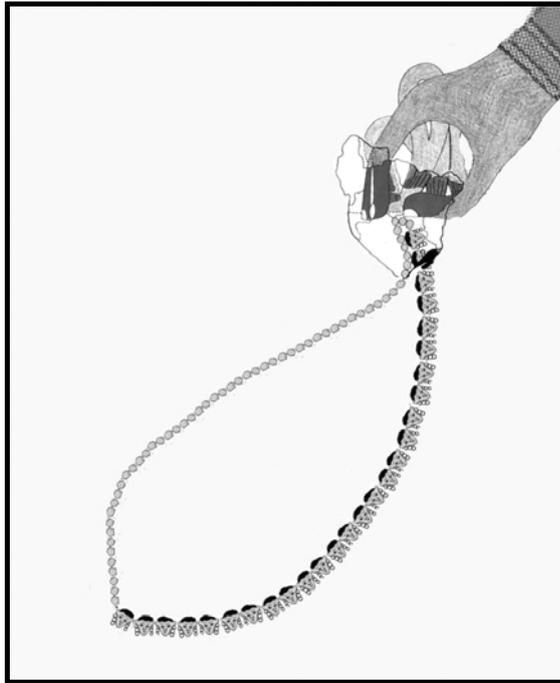


FIG. 5. Reconstruction of the Jewel Fresco as a necklace (half one type of bead, half another).
Computer reconstruction author.

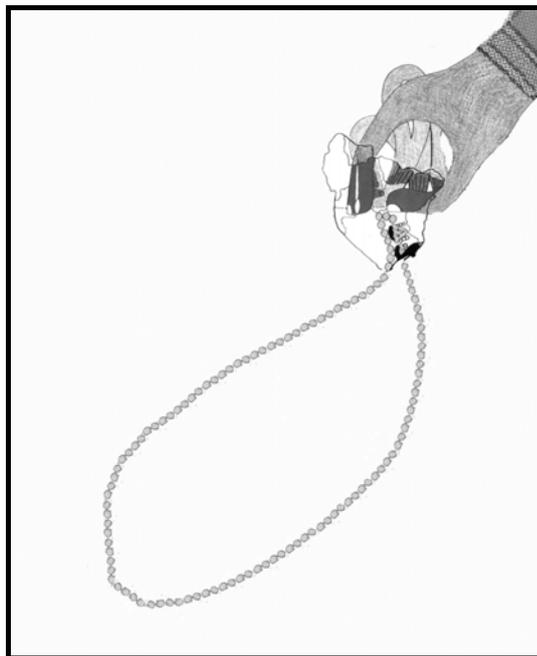


FIG. 6. Reconstruction of the Jewel Fresco as a necklace (mostly one type of bead, with centerpiece of 3 face-beads).
Computer reconstruction author.

The male face beads are unique; Evans suggested that they have a "negroid" appearance (1921-1935, I, 525), but Nanno Marinatos rightly warns us of such a cultural construction (1993, 56). Several sealstones carry frontal faces (**FIG. 7**), and some of these also wear hoop earrings (Sakellariou 1958, no.

109b; Younger 1993, 17 -18, 95; 1988, 119, 239-40), and the frontal male figure on the Aigina Treasure pendant is also similar (**FIG. 8**. Higgins 1957, pl. 9a; Hood 1978, 196 fig. 193; Higgins 1980, pl. 6B; Younger 1992, 266 n. 26). The double-hoop earring that some of these faces wear

resemble the actual triple-hoop earring preserved in the Aigina Treasure (Higgins 1980, 63); compare the EBA triple earring from Levkas (Hood 1978, 193 fig. 189C). The girl with red hair in the upper fresco in Xeste 3, Akrotiri (Doumas 1992, pl. 130),

wears a double-hoop earring in her left ear, but it is more likely that she has shifted the earring from her right ear to hang from the earring in her left ear so she would not get it caught in the basket she carries on her right shoulder.



FIG. 7. Impression of a sealstone from Knossos, Stratigraphic Museum Extension. Photo author.

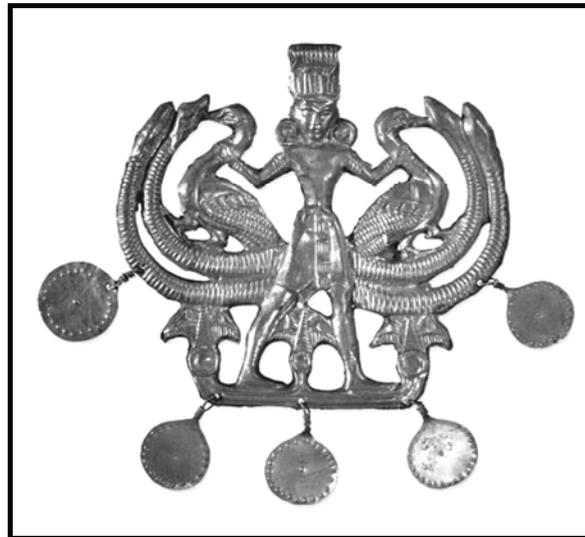


FIG. 8. Master of Animals pendant, Aigina Treasure. Photo author.

Many women wear necklaces in Aegean art, but they consist of beads in either geometric forms or in the form of dragonflies, butterflies, or ducks (see the necklaces of the Xeste 3 goddess, **FIG. 9**, Doumas 1992 pls. 125, 135), creatures that have considerable associations with Aegean women (e.g. sealstones Pini ed. I no. 233a, VII no. 134, and IX no. 154; ivory mirror handles, Poursat 1977, no. 332, pl. XXXV, and an ivory comb, Poursat 1977, no. 410, pl. XLI). Bearded male heads (in profile) decorate

two LH I silver niello cups, one from the Palace of Nestor at Pylos (Blegen and Rawson 1966, 57-58, figs. 261-63, 267; Xenaki-Sakellariou and Chatziliou 1989, 32 no. 25, pl X1) and the other from Mycenae Chamber Tomb 24 (Xenaki -Sakellariou 1985, 83-6, pls. 15, IV; Xenaki-Sakellariou and Chatziliou 1985, 30 no. 19, pl. X2); the motifs may identify these cups as men's drinking vessels. And male heads in profile also occur on sealstones (Younger 1993, 172-74).



FIG. 9. Goddess from Xeste 3, detail. Drawing P. Rehak.

At the right edge of the Jewel Fresco there are blue objects or "tassels" (**FIG. 10**), which Cameron has identified as "sacral knots" tying the end of the necklace, and he implies that by tying these knots the man was taking possession of the woman (1987, 324). But their blue color with black details does not at all resemble any known "sacral knots," either those in faience found in Mycenae Shaft Grave IV (**FIG. 11**. Foster 1979, 138-9, 140-41, pls. 45, 46) or the fresco representations of knots from Nirou Khani (Evans 1921-1935, II, 284) or attached to the upper back of the fresco "La Parisienne" from Knossos (Evans 1921-1935, IV, color pl. XXXI; Marinatos and Hirmer 1960, color pl. XVI). All these knots have surfaces decorated with a tartan pattern.

The blue color and black details on the Jewel Fresco

instead resemble the treatment of the wings of the flying fish on a fresco from Phylakopi (Atkinson et al. 1904, 70-72, pl.III; Evans 1921-1935, I, 541 fig. 393; Immerwahr 1990, 189 Ph No. 1), though certainly there were no flying fish in the Jewel Fresco. While the triple tassel of the necklace in the Jewel fresco is unusual, other Aegean necklaces have tassels: the one in the fresco of the Necklace Swinger from Xeste 3 is decorated with a loop and streamers (**FIG. 12**. Dumas 1992, pl. 104). And the bending female figure from Phylakopi wears a simple beaded necklace tied around her neck with a looped knot and long string ends with tassels (Atkinson et al. 1904, 74 fig. 62; Hood 1978, 53 fig. 37A; Immerwahr 1990, 189 Ph No. 3). The right Fisherboy from Xeste 3 likewise wears a simple necklace, perhaps just a string, knotted with two loose ends (Dumas 1992, pl. 23).

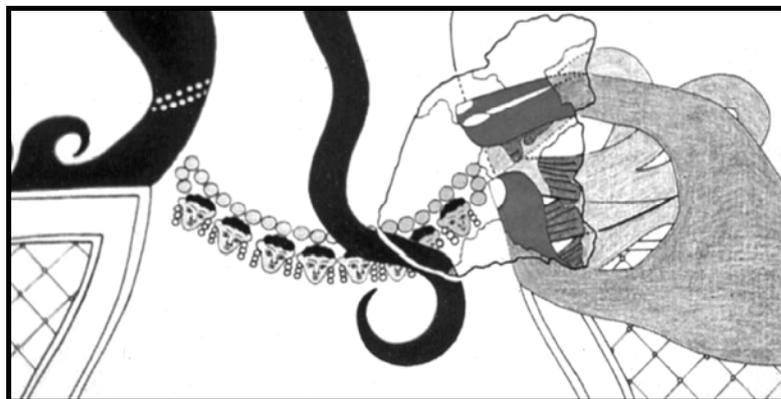


FIG. 10. Mark Cameron's reconstruction of the Jewel Fresco, detail (after Cameron 1987, 323, fig. 5)



FIG. 11. Faience Sacral Knots from Mycenae Shaft Grave IV. Photo author.

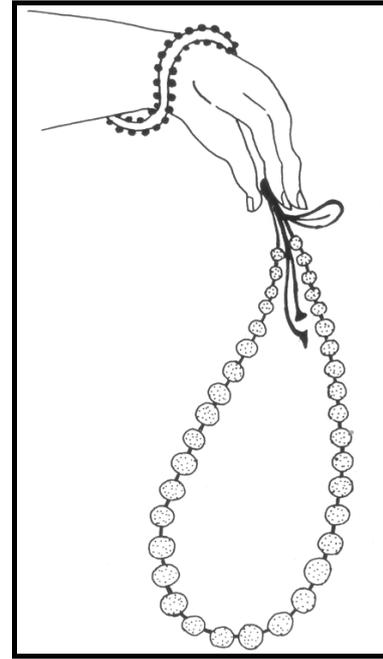


FIG. 12. Necklace Swinger, Xeste 3, Akrotiri, detail. Drawing P. Rehak.

These unusual aspects (the face beads, the odd tassels, the strong relief fingers against a flat white background that shows no sign of belonging to the neck of a woman) all make it seem unlikely that this fresco once depicted a man adorning a woman with a necklace - let alone the inference that this scene was an *hieros gamos*. In fact, there is virtually nothing in Aegean art to support this iconography, of a man touching a woman. Men and women are usually shown separated. The Temple Fresco or the Dance in the Grove fresco (Evans 1921 -1935, III, color pls. XVI, XVIII) have the men and women in

clusters against different colored backgrounds, undoubtedly because of technical considerations, but even the Ayia Triada Sarcophagus keeps men and women separate (Marinatos and Hirmer 1960, color pls. XXVIII, XXIXA; the lyre player stands with the women because, as Plato tells us, he is effeminate (Symposium 179d). Only one object, a seal impression from MM II Phaistos (**FIG. 13**. Pini ed. II 5, no. 324), shows a man and a woman in close enough proximity that their hands might actually be touching, although the size of the seal (a stamp) is too small (D. 1.15 cm) to be sure.



FIG. 13. Seal impression from Phaistos (Pini ed. II5, no. 324). Drawing courtesy *Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel*.

Aegean art is well known for refusing, almost entirely, to depict any kind of intimacy, eroticism, or sex. The only exceptions involve agrimia, which copulate on one gold ring (Pini ed. VII, no. 68) and in a couple of unpublished minuscule terracotta figurines from the peak sanctuary on Mt Ioukhtas (**FIG. 14**, on display in the Herakleion Museum). Since there is no concrete evidence for a woman's neck around which the necklace is being placed, the case for reconstructing a "sacred marriage" collapses. And without the woman there is nothing inherently sexual or erotic in the depiction, as

Marinatos claims (1993, 56). Aegean frescoes seem to have dealt with a relatively small number of themes, which once established, were repeated over and over with some variation. The position of the man's hand and the presence of the necklace suggest instead that we have here, not a completely unattested topos of "holy marriage," but a man who draws our attention to his own necklace (**FIG. 15**), a male-version of a topos that is otherwise well established for women: women pointing to, touching, or swinging a necklace (Younger 1992, 266-68).

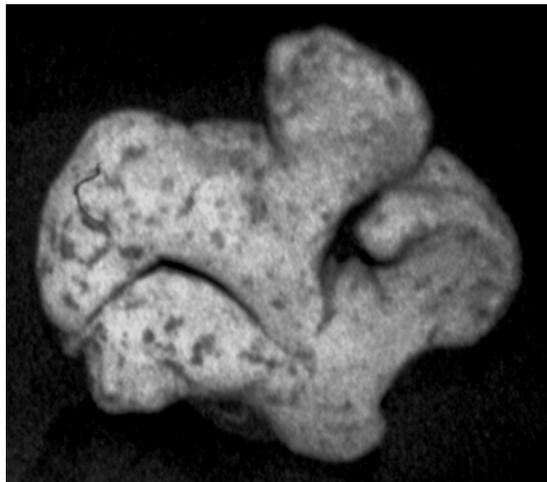


FIG. 14. Terracotta figurines from Ioukhtas. Photo author.

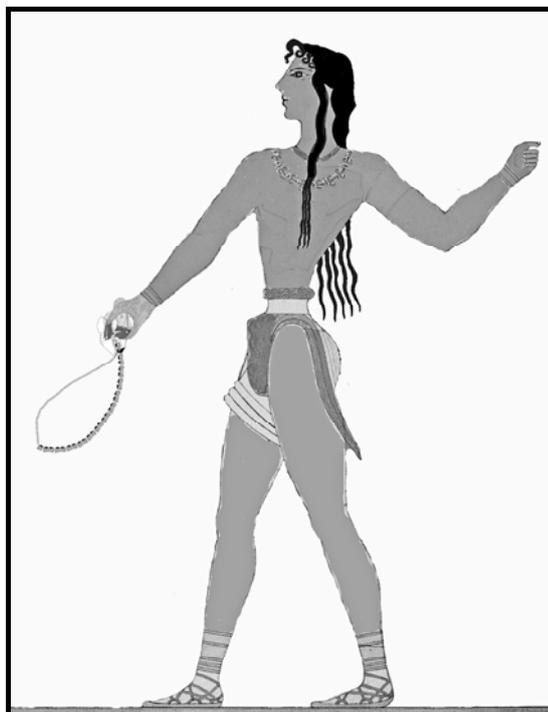


FIG. 15. Jewel Fresco as necklace swinger. Computer reconstruction by the author.

So far, it has only been women who carry and touch necklaces in Aegean art - the child in the Ivory Trio from Mycenae is a clothed girl, not a nude boy (pace Hood 1978, 125 fig. 114), and she touches her necklace in keeping with the *topos*. A good parallel for a thumb and forefingers grasping a necklace occurs on a fragment from the "Ladies in Blue" (**FIG. 16**), a flat mural composition that once decorated a room in the East Wing of the Knossos palace, perhaps the "Great East Hall" (Evans 1921 - 1935, I, 545 fig. 397, 546 fig. 398; Immerwahr 1990, 115 fig. 32b, 172 Kn No. 11). There, a white (female) hand toys with a string of circular beads above a strand of crocus blossom beads. A better preserved female necklace-slinger occurs in the fresco from the lustral basin in Xeste 3 at Akrotiri (**FIG. 17**, Immerwahr 1990, 186 Ak No. 6; Doumas 1992, pls. 100, 101, 104). A much later necklace handler, the "Mykenaiia" found near the Cult Center at Mycenae (**FIG. 18**), points to her necklace with one of her two right hands (Immerwahr 1990, 191 My No. 3, color pl. XX).

The man in the Jewel Fresco could be about to put the necklace on himself; men wear necklaces almost as often as women (Younger 1992, 261-9). Best known are the youths on the Chieftain Cup from Ayia Triada (**FIG. 19**, Marinatos and Hirmer 1960, pls. 100, 102; Hood 1978, 144 fig. 137). The dominant Boxing Boy from Akrotiri also wears a

necklace of large beads (Doumas 1992, pl. 81). One of the fishermen from the West House, Akrotiri, wears a string tied around his neck, very similar to the rope necklace around the neck of the Stooping Figure from Phylakopi. Other figures with necklaces are more problematic. The Prince of the Lilies, for example, wears a lily necklace but the Prince's flesh does not correspond to the usual color convention; it is neither white nor red but rather reddish cream (Shaw 2004).

Or the Jewel Fresco man could be carrying the necklace in order to adorn an object. An ivory pyxis from Ayia Triada shows women garlanding small shrines on architectural platforms (**FIG. 20**, Rehak and Younger 1998, 237, pl. XXVIc). Fresco fragments from Knossos and Mycenae show the windows of buildings draped with garlands with pendants (Immerwahr 1990, 173 Kn No. 17b, 190 My No. 1a, respectively). The pithos on a gold ring from the Vapheio tholos (Pini ed. I, no. 219) has a dotted (beaded?) garland around its rim. Garlands comprised of elements resembling necklace beads decorate the stern cabins and the rigging of the "flagship" in the Naval Procession fresco from the West House at Akrotiri (Doumas 1992, pls. 49-56, 59-62 [cabins], 74-77 [ship "rigging"]). Both men and women may have participated in garlanding these objects for special occasions.

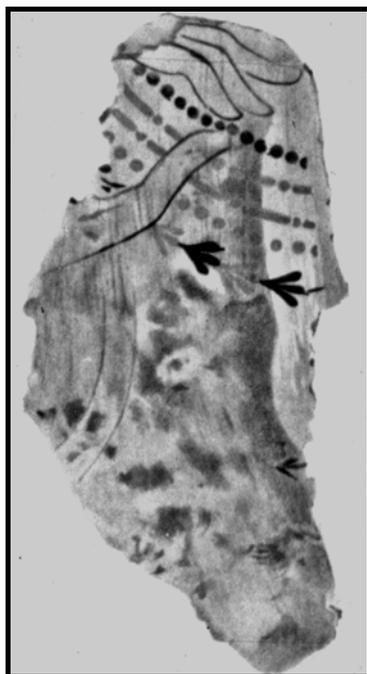


FIG. 16. Ladies in Blue, fresco fragment from Knossos.
Photo author.



FIG. 17. Necklace Swinger, Xeste 3, Akrotiri.
Drawing P. Rehak.



FIG. 18. “Mykenaiia” fresco from the Cult Center at Mycenae, detail. Photo author.



FIG. 19. Chieftain Cup from Ayia Triada (after Evans 1921-1935, II, fig. 516).

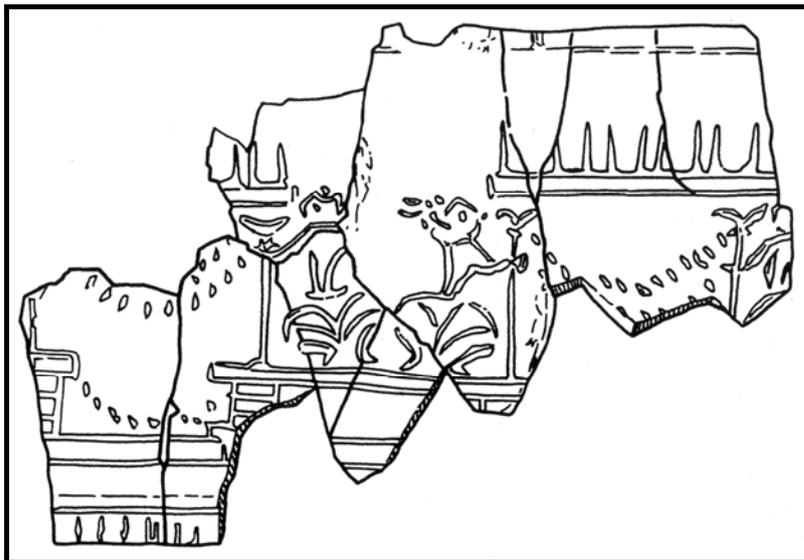


FIG. 20. Ivory pyxis from Ayia Triada. Drawing P. Rehak.

Or the Jewel Fresco man could be carrying the necklace in order to offer it, say at a shrine, like Egyptian men who carry necklaces to offer them to important officials (Younger 1992: 264, 283 nos. 50, 51). Around and on the altars in both the East and West Shrines of the Mycenaean Sanctuary at Phylakopi (**FIG. 21**) were found scores of necklaces, mostly of spherical glass beads (Renfrew 1985, 317 -22). In the East Shrine, 13 sealstones

were also found on and next to the altar, two of which are twins to two sealstones found under the Pi-shaped benches in the Temple at Ayia Irini, Kea (Renfrew 1985, 286-8, 290-4; Pini ed. VS 1B, nos. 38, 40, and V, nos. 499, 500, respectively). Since men and women are depicted wearing necklaces and sealstones, it is easy to imagine a man or a woman bringing these offerings to the shrines.



FIG. 21. East Shrine, Mycenaean Sanctuary, Phylakopi, Melos. Photo author.

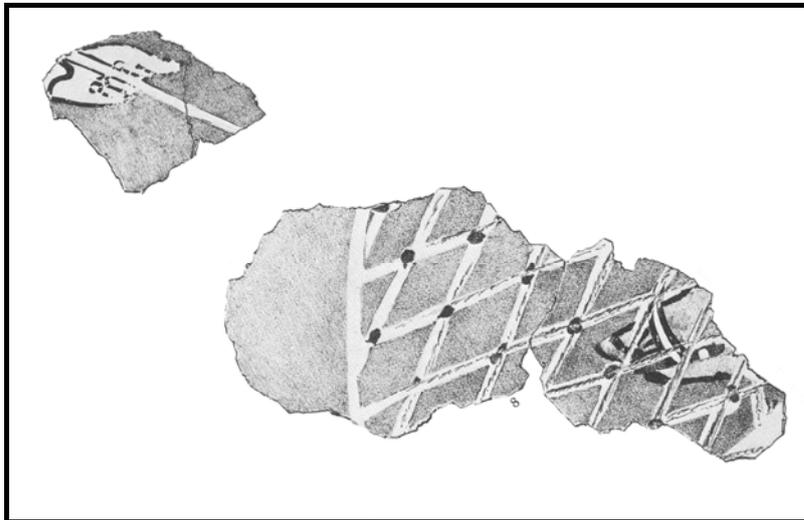


FIG. 22. Female boar-hunter, fresco from Tiryns. Computer compilation by the author (after Rodenwaldt 1976, pl. XIV.1, 8).

We might be suspicious that a *topos* of (up-to-now) women handling necklaces could have occasionally also included a man doing the same. There are indeed some occupations that involve either only men or only women: young females (and monkeys) pick saffron, men appear at peak sanctuaries and make music (Younger 1998, 54-60). But some activities that we might assume to be gendered either male or either female have both Aegean men and women practicing—bull-leaping is the one that “leaps” first to mind (Younger 1995), but men and women also wear sealstones (and thus participated in administration; Younger 1977), hunted boar

(**FIG. 22**) (Rodenwaldt 1976, 120-22), and wielded weapons of war (a sealstone showing a woman wielding a sword: Pini ed. II.3, no. 16; and frescoes from Mycenae, the Cult Center: Immerwahr 1990, 191, My No. 6, pls. 59, 60, woman with a sword; 191-92, MY no. 7, plaster plaque with "Warrior Goddess"; and 192, MY no. 9, a woman wearing a boar's tusk helmet).

If women can do those activities that we ordinarily associate with men, then men, who, like women, can finish and handle textiles (Ventris and Chadwick 1959, 123), can also handle necklaces.

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