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**AEGAEUM 39**

**Annales liégeoises et PASpiennes d'archéologie égéenne**

# **METAPHYSIS**

## **RITUAL, MYTH AND SYMBOLISM IN THE AEGEAN BRONZE AGE**

**Proceedings of the 15<sup>th</sup> International Aegean Conference, Vienna,  
Institute for Oriental and European Archaeology,  
Aegean and Anatolia Department, Austrian Academy of Sciences  
and Institute of Classical Archaeology, University of Vienna,  
22-25 April 2014**

Edited by Eva ALRAM-STERN, Fritz BLAKOLMER, Sigrid DEGER-JALKOTZY,  
Robert LAFFINEUR and Jörg WEILHARTNER

PEETERS  
LEUVEN - LIEGE  
2016

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## IDENTIFYING MYTH IN MINOAN ART

When I look for narrative in Minoan art, I start with an image that is distinctive and repetitious. With bull-leaping,<sup>1</sup> this was easy to do. And when discussing bull-leaping, I could add images of events that could have occurred before or after to create a longer narrative sequence: catching the bull, training the leapers, creating the bull-leaping arena, leaping the bull, sacrificing it, and, according to the Linear B texts at Pylos, feasting on the bull.<sup>2</sup> The complete narrative is extensive, and its social purpose must have been socially conventional: to celebrate community and, more specifically (I think), the coming of age of adolescents.

Building a narrative around bull-leaping was easy, because bull-leaping was something that Minoans actually did. Finding illustrations of stories, however, is more difficult. Classical art occasionally represented episodes of a story in a series of separate but linked images. According to Pausanias, the painting of the Battle of Marathon in the Stoa Poikile<sup>3</sup> placed separate episodes next to each other much as Menelaos and Odysseus confront Helen, Aphrodite, and Eros in two adjacent north metopes of the Parthenon (N24 and N25).<sup>4</sup>

Aegean art may have similarly linked images. I have interpreted the fresco in Akrotiri's West House room 5, as an *odyssey* that unfolds around the room like a papyrus scroll, presenting episodes in a long *periplous*.<sup>5</sup> There are individualized elements in the frieze, like the woman carrying a water jar on her head ("Meeting on the Hill" section) and the highly decorated ships ("Flotilla" section). And while these individual elements may tempt us into thinking that the entire frieze represents an individual's personal voyage, they and other images are actually conventional and repeat frequently enough that we know we are not dealing with an actual story of one person's voyage, but with a story shared by an entire culture. In "A View from the Sea," I thought the image of a woman carrying a water jar on her head was unique in Minoan art, but Melissa Veters (this volume) has presented a terracotta figurine of such a *hydriaphoros*. Other images in the West House fresco are also conventional, like the drowning men who also appear on a niello dagger.<sup>6</sup>

Such a mix of individual conventional scenes does not, of course, invalidate the notion of a personal adventure, but one scene in the West House fresco makes me suspect that, actually, the whole frieze is conventional: the line of soldiers marching along the coast. The scene is repeated on a stone rhyton from the Apollo Maleatas sanctuary.<sup>7</sup> The two images are almost identical: the marching men, the rocky coast, ships in the sea below. It is the juxtaposition of the two episodes, soldiers along the coast, ships in water, that demands a narrative connection but since this juxtaposition occurs in two separate media and at two very different places, the narrative cannot have been unique and personal. Instead, "coastal soldiers and ships in water" must have been part of a stock story known to all – in other words, a myth.

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<sup>1</sup> J.G. YOUNGER, "Bronze Age Representations of Aegean Bull-Games, III," in *POLITEIA*, 507-545.

<sup>2</sup> S.R. STOCKER and J.L. DAVIS, "Animal Sacrifice, Archives, and Feasting at the Palace of Nestor," and T.G. PALAIMA, "Sacrificial Feasting in the Linear B Documents," both in J. WRIGHT (ed.), *Mycenaean Feasts* (2004) 59-75, 77-126, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Paus. I.15; E.B. HARRISON, "The South Frieze of the Nike Temple and the Marathon Painting in the Painted Stoa," *AJA* 76 (1972) 353-378.

<sup>4</sup> F. BROMMER, *Die Metopen des Parthenon* (1967); the juxtaposition of the two metopes may be appreciated in the new Akropolis Museum.

<sup>5</sup> J.G. YOUNGER, "A View from the Sea," in G. VAVOURANAKIS (ed.), *The Seascape in Aegean Prehistory* (2011) 161-183.

<sup>6</sup> A. XENAKI-SAKELLARIOU and C. CHATZILIOU, *Peinture en métal à l'époque mycénienne* (1989) 29, no. 16 from the Vapheio tholos.

<sup>7</sup> E.T. VERMEULE, *Greece in the Bronze Age* (1964) 103, fig. 20b; B. KAISER, *Untersuchungen zum minoischen Relief* (1976) 30, no. Epidauros 1.



How grand is the myth in the West House fresco? Surely, the myth includes the *nostos* (the return home) depicted in the Flotilla fresco. The necklace-like rigging, gold butterflies and dandelion puffs on the bow, niello-like lions and birds on the hulls – these cannot be real. Even mock-decorations at this scale would be colossal, and the niello-like hull decorations would rot in the sea water and be worn away by beach sand. These are fantastical boats devised for the fresco.

One more example: in the Arrival Town a woman and boy stand on a balcony. She waves to the ships giving an appropriate “welcome.” So far, so un-myth-like.

But the woman on the balcony is not unique; there are other women who stand on rooftops or in windows in the Arrival Town. It must have been conventional for women to step out onto actual balconies or actual rooftops (like Helen in *Iliad* 3, lines 121-244) or to stand in large open windows, watching and waiting for their men to come home – or for enemy soldiers to take them away. Such women appear in the Silver Siege rhyton.<sup>8</sup> They represent prominent pieces of property for their men to protect and for their enemies to capture. They define what home is and why it is worth the fight. They are, in other words, a metaphor.

Several frescoes present this topos of “women in windows:”<sup>9</sup> Mycenae, Knossos, Ayia Irini (Kea), and Thebes.<sup>10</sup> From the Megaron at Mycenae women in a window watch a combatant fall in front of them; could this be an illustration of the fall of Kapanews from the walls at Thebes?

The terracotta house model from Archanes (Pl. CXXIXa-b)<sup>11</sup> almost replicates the plans of Nirou Chani, the Strong House at Zakros, or Xeste 3.<sup>12</sup> A prominent balcony juts out over an imaginary street below, and in this prominent balcony are the remains of the legs of a solitary figure.<sup>13</sup> This figure on the balcony is reminiscent of the equally prominent Chania Master,<sup>14</sup> but the Archanes figure is life-size in relation to the building, not colossal like the Chania Master, and its placement, on a balcony, looks very much like the woman on the balcony in the West House fresco.

“Women on balconies, women in windows.” According to feminist theory, these women in windows or aloft on balconies are women who are desirable but inaccessible. While the *topos* is static (“the desired but inaccessible woman”), it occurs frequently in stories, ancient and modern, simply because it strikes a familiar theme of patriarchal societies: desire the woman all you want, but she is not easily available. In order to get Rapunzel or Sleeping Beauty or Juliet a man must prove his worth.<sup>15</sup> The welcoming woman on the West House balcony closes the periplous myth: she is home and the adventurer is home.

I now try to reconstruct a more complicated myth. I start with two gold rings: one comes from tomb VIII in the Athens Agora (Pl. CXXIXc; *CMS* V, no. 173; LH III A1-2 context); the other left an impression on a LM IB sealing from Chania (*CMS* VS 1A, no. 133). Both depict a man striding

<sup>8</sup> G. KARO, *Die Schachtgräber von Mykenai* (1930) 106, no. 281, pl. CXXII; A. SAKELLARIOU, “La scène du ‘siège’ sur le rhyton d’argent de Mycènes d’après une nouvelle reconstitution,” *RA* (1975) 195-208.

<sup>9</sup> L. MORGAN, *The Miniature Wall Paintings of Thera. A Study in Aegean Culture and Iconography* (1988) 82-83.

<sup>10</sup> Mycenae: S.A. IMMERWAHR, *Aegean Painting in the Bronze Age* (1989) 190, MY No. 1a, and 194, miscellaneous no. 5. Knossos: EVANS, *PM* II figs. 375, 376. Kea: K. ABRAMOVITZ, “Frescoes from Ayia Irini, Keos. Parts II-IV,” *Hesperia* 49 (1980) 60-61. Thebes: MORGAN (*supra* n. 9) pl. 156.

<sup>11</sup> I. and E. SAKELLARAKIS, *Archanes. Minoan Crete in a New Light* (1997) vol. I, 135-136, drawings 26-28, II fig. 564.

<sup>12</sup> Two-story Minoan buildings are similar in plan: Nirou Chani (S. XANTHOUDIDES, “Ανασκαφή εις Νήρου Χανί της Κρήτης,” *PAE* (1919) [1922] 63-69), Kato Zakros the “Strong House” (D.G. HOGARTH, “Excavations at Zakro, Crete,” *BSA* 7 [1900-1901] 121-149), and Xeste 3, Akrotiri (C. PALLYVOU, *Akrotiri Thera. An Architecture of Affluence 3,500 Years Old* [2005] 54-62).

<sup>13</sup> A. LEMBESSI, “Οι οικισμός Αρχανών,” *Arkhaiologike Ephemeris* 1976, 12-32, esp. 33 pl. 13a. A third and fourth parallel from Symi and Ayia Triada seem to include figures in niches, with which we can compare the Giamalakis Hut Urn: A. LEMBESSI, “A Minoan Architectural Model from the Syme Sanctuary, Crete,” *AM* 117 (2002) 1-19.

<sup>14</sup> *CMS* V Supp. 1A, no. 142; E. HALLAGER, *The Master Impression* (1985).

<sup>15</sup> A. AARNE, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography* (1961), gives a typology for folktales: Rapunzel, for instance, is type 310, “The Maiden in the Tower” Sleeping Beauty is type 410.

energetically, holding in one hand some kind of staff, and, in the other, a double leash attached to two females.<sup>16</sup> A lentoid from a Mycenae chamber tomb (Pl. CXXIXd; *CMS* I, no. 159) shows a large central woman flanked by two small females; from the woman's right hand a double leash seems to drop to the waist of the small female at left and to go around the woman's waist toward the small female at right – the pose of the small females (puffed out chest and hands to waist) makes it look as if their hands were tied behind or beside them. The same scene probably recurs on a worn lentoid said to be from Mochos in Crete (*CMS* II, 3, no. 218).

These rings and seals might refer to two separate stages in one story, or perhaps to two separate pairs of females in related stories. We can imagine two females, perhaps young females, being leashed at one time by a man and brought to a woman, and at another time they, or another pair of girls, are leashed and brought by a woman to a shrine that encloses a tree (Pl. CXXIXe; *CMS* II, 6, no. 1 from Ayia Triada).

“Two girls brought to a shrine.” The Classical poet Korinna of Boeotia wrote a poem, the “Koronaiai,” now preserved in a prose epitome.<sup>17</sup> Plague has struck a village and an old woman tells two young girls to sacrifice themselves to Persephone and Hades. The girls slit their throats with a weaving tool; the gods make them stars in the sky and the villagers honor them as heroes with a shrine.<sup>18</sup>

A story involving two pairs of young women may be more pertinent. Two pairs of young maidens come to Delos from the far north to introduce the cults of Artemis and Apollo and to help with their birth through the cult of Eileithyia (Hdt 4.34-35).<sup>19</sup> First, the Hyperborean maidens Opis and Argê arrive escorted by men. Then come Hyperóchê and Laodikê. Both pairs of maidens die in Delos.

The tomb of Hyperóchê and Laodikê lay just inside the Artemis sanctuary on the left as you enter (Hdt 4.34), where the so-called Mycenaean *sêma* is. The tomb of Opis and Argê lay behind (ὄπισθε) the sanctuary, “toward the dawn”;<sup>20</sup> it may be the so-called Mycenaean *thêkê*, though that is more to the north. The Mycenaean deposit in the Artemision may have had some connection with these tombs. Callimachos tells how Delian girls and boys offered cuttings of their hair to “the daughters of Boreas” and to the men who escorted the “Arimaspian maidens.”<sup>21</sup> It would seem, therefore, that the Hyperborean/Arimaspian maidens, whether in one or two pairs, introduced the

<sup>16</sup> The two rings may characterize the leash differently. The Agora ring has the leash attached to the waist or the lowered wrists of one female whose pose is duplicated by the other female, implying the same attachment. The Chania ring had the leash higher as if tied around the females' neck. The *topos* of a large man flanked by two smaller females may have been duplicated in the bronze sphyreleton group from Dreros (late 8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE).

<sup>17</sup> J.M. EDMONDS, *Lyra Graeca* (1927) 22-27, citing Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphoses* 25 (2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE).

<sup>18</sup> A similar story was told by Euripides and resurrected by Joan Connelly to account for the “Peplon Folding” scene in the Parthenon's east frieze: “She holds that it represents the mythical king Erechtheus, together with his wife Praxithea and their three daughters. Our main Athenian source for this myth consists of the fragments of Euripides' play ‘Erechtheus.’ One large fragment is preserved by the orator Lycurgus (Against Leocrates, 101) and another is preserved on papyrus (Sorbonne 2328 = *Recherches de Papyrologie* 4 [1967] 11-67). The myth can be reconstructed as follows: Erechtheus' new city is threatened by a rival, Eumolpus the son of Poseidon (whose gift of a spring was rejected in favor of Athena's olive). Delphi says Erechtheus must sacrifice his daughter to save the city. The three girls make a pact that if one of them must die they will all die. The youngest is sacrificed and the city wins the battle, though Erechtheus himself is swallowed by an earthquake; the other girls will die later. Athena directs the queen, Praxithea, to honor the dead girls with a sacred precinct on the Acropolis.” (quote by D.L. Silverman, <http://academic.reed.edu/humanities/110tech/parthenonfriezeconnelly.html>).

<sup>19</sup> W. SALE, “The Hyperborean Maidens on Delos,” *HTR* 54.2 (1961) 75-89. Tombs: Ph. BRUNEAU and J. DUCAT, *Guide de Délos* (1966). Also online: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nymphai\\_Hyperboreioi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nymphai_Hyperboreioi).

<sup>20</sup> HERODOTOS also says that their tomb was also very close to the “hestiatorion” of the Keans, but that building has not been identified.

<sup>21</sup> CALLIMACHOS, *Hymn* 4.278 ff.

cult of Eileithyia and helped Leto give birth to Artemis and then to Apollo; they are thus associated with coming of age and with childbirth. The childbirth itself would have been located in a sanctuary with a prominent tree, a palm.

“Pairs of girls, Hyperborean maidens, Arimasps, childbirth, Artemis and Apollo, coming of age.” The upper fresco in Xeste 3 might be relevant.<sup>22</sup> The north wall depicts, left to right, one young girl delivering crocus stamens, a blue monkey, and a goddess with lots of jewelry and a complex hairstyle, sitting on a bolt of saffron-dyed cloth; behind her, a griffin is leashed to a window, and, beyond the window, a young woman brings a basket of crocus stamens. The east wall depicts two more females, a young girl and a young woman picking crocus. I identify the goddess as an Artemis-type (saffron, mountainous setting, young females, animal familiars).<sup>23</sup> The entire wall painting depicts two pairs of young females: in each pair one is older than the other. The older girl on the north wall, behind the griffin, has red hair and blue eyes, traits that Xenophanes of Colophon ascribes to Thracians.<sup>24</sup> Also on the north wall is the griffin, an Arimaspsian creature – and it is leashed.

Downstairs in Xeste 3, Room 3b, to the west of the lustral basin, had wall paintings of four males, the only males in the building apparently. The room is a narrow area, about 2 (E-W) by 4.25 (N-S) m. at its maximum size. Two boys carry gold vessels, a man pours from a hydria, and an adolescent youth carries a narrow strip of blue cloth.<sup>25</sup> As several scholars have remarked, the males are in various stages of coming of age.<sup>26</sup> Over the Lustral Basin is a scene of one girl in a saffron-dyed veil and two young women that has been interpreted as referring to a young woman’s first menstruation.<sup>27</sup> If so, the references to crocus stamens and saffron upstairs and downstairs may refer to saffron’s pharmaceutical properties in alleviating menstruation and facilitating childbirth,<sup>28</sup> surely something that Leto in giving birth to twins, would need to know about.

“The narrow strip of cloth.” This cloth is not for the women because it is not wide enough for a garment and it is not dyed saffron. The garments (*krokotá*) for girls “playing the bear” at Brauron and the peplos for the statue of Athena Poleas at Athens – these are dyed saffron. If the scenes above and below do refer not only to menstruation but also to stages of coming of age and to childbirth, the cloth may be for the eventual newborn infant. Newborns need to be wrapped tightly to give them the security they felt in the constricted womb, and they need the moderate warmth to survive, 18.5°-21° C (65°-70° F).<sup>29</sup>

<sup>22</sup> C. DOUMAS, *The Wall-Paintings of Thera* (1992) pls. 116-130.

<sup>23</sup> Is it coincidence that an ancient name for Thera is Kallisté (Hdt 4.147-148) and Kallisté is an epithet of Artemis? A temple to Artemis Kallisté in Athens lay outside the Dipylon on the road to the Academy (J. TRAVLOS, *Bildlexikon zur Topographie des antiken Athen* [1971] 301-302, 322; A. PHILADELPHUS, “Le sanctuaire d’Artémis Kallisté,” *BCH* 51 [1927] 155-163).

<sup>24</sup> XENOPHANES of Colophon: “Men make gods in their own image; those of the Ethiopians are black and snub-nosed, those of the Thracians have blue eyes and red hair” (J.H. LESHER, *Xenophanes of Colophon: Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary* [2001] 90).

<sup>25</sup> DOUMAS (*supra* n. 22) pls. 109-115.

<sup>26</sup> J.G. YOUNGER, “Bronze Age Representations of Aegean Jewelry,” in *EIKON*, 257-293, esp. 288-289. A.P. CHAPIN, “Constructions of Male Youth and Gender in Aegean Art: The Evidence from Late Bronze Age Crete and Thera,” in K. KOPAKA (ed.), *FYLO. Engendering Prehistoric ‘Stratigraphies’ in the Aegean and the Mediterranean. Proceedings of an International Conference, University of Crete, Rethymno 2-5 June 2005* (2009) 175-181.

<sup>27</sup> P. REHAK, “Children’s Work: Girls as Acolytes in Aegean Ritual and Cult,” in J. RUTTER and A. COHEN (eds.), *Coming of Age: Constructions of Childhood in the Ancient World* (2007) 205-225.

<sup>28</sup> P. REHAK and R.R. SNIHUROWYCH, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture? Medicine, Myth and Matriarchy in the Thera Frescoes,” *American Philological Association, Abstracts of Papers Presented at the One Hundred Twenty-Ninth Annual Meeting* (1997) 180. J. DAY, “Counting Threads. Saffron in Aegean Bronze Age Writing and Society,” *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 30 (2011) 269-391.

<sup>29</sup> H. KARP, “Guide for Parents, Swaddling 101,” *Contemporary Pediatrics*, February 2004 ([http://www2.aap.org/sections/scan/practicingsafety/Toolkit\\_Resources/Module1/swadling.pdf](http://www2.aap.org/sections/scan/practicingsafety/Toolkit_Resources/Module1/swadling.pdf)), adapted from H. KARP, *The Happiest Baby on the Block* (2002).

“Strips of cloth, pairs of young women (one older than the other), and an adult woman.” Upstairs, in the House of the Ladies at Akrotiri, the north central room (Room 1) was painted with large lilies at its western end and, separated by a short spur wall, with three women at its eastern end.<sup>30</sup> The entire room is small, about 4.5 E-W by 2.5 N-S m (Pl. CXXXIXf); it could not have accommodated much more than the three surviving females: a young woman on the south wall, while on the north wall another woman confronts a third with some yellow cloth. The woman presenting the cloth is well preserved; with her pendulous breast she is older than the young woman on the south wall. The scene of two young women attending a third is repeated on a lentoid in the Ashmolean Museum (Pl. CXXXa; *CMS* VI, no. 283). And the lilies in the western room?: lily oil is well-known for its pharmaceutical properties, lubricating the vaginal lips and facilitating childbirth.<sup>31</sup>

One more image for a pair of females handling a narrow strip of cloth (Pl. CXXXb): two fresco fragments from the early excavations at Phylakopi survive enough to show two young women at about one-third life size.<sup>32</sup> One may sit while she holds up a narrow strip of cloth, again blue. The other woman may have stood, slightly bent forward to face her. If the House of the Ladies is a guide, we may have another scene where one woman hands cloth to another. It should also be noted that the standing woman has a short rope necklace around her neck; might she once have been leashed? Does the rope identify her as a *doula*, that is, as a midwife?

All this is speculative. But the leashed girls, the young girls flanking and attending an adult woman, the leashed griffin and red haired girl, the setting of crocus and saffron implying menstruation, coming of age, and childbirth, and the narrow strips of cloth appropriate for swaddling a newborn infant – these, I think, are real allusions to a set of protreptic, epideictic, educational stories that could be told to young women as they come of age and are about to get married and have children.

A woman’s need for such information is universal. And we can imagine Aegean mothers telling their daughters about menstruation, sex, and childbearing in a variety of settings, whether Xeste 3 and the Room of the Ladies in Akrotiri, or at Phylakopi, all house-like buildings provided with sets of educational frescoes about the mysteries of life.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> DOUMAS (*supra* n. 22) pls. 2-12. PALYVOU (*supra* n. 12) 83-85, fig. 112. Combined, the two rooms measure about 2 (N-S) by 4 (E-W) m.

<sup>31</sup> M.E. WIESNER, “Early Modern Midwifery: A Case Study,” in E.R. VAN TEIJLINGEN *et al.* (eds.), *Midwifery and the Medicalization of Childbirth: Comparative Perspectives* (2004), 63-74, esp. p. 67.

<sup>32</sup> IMMERWAHR (*supra* n. 10) Ph Nos. 2 and 3; L. MORGAN, “New Discoveries and New Ideas in Aegean Wall Painting,” in L. MORGAN (ed.), *Aegean Wall Painting. A Tribute to Mark Cameron* (2005) 21-44, esp. 31 fig. 1.16; L. MORGAN, “Chapter 9: The Painted Plasters and Their Relation to the Wall Paintings of the Pillar Crypt,” in C. RENFREW (ed.), *Excavations at Phylakopi in Melos 1974-77* (2007) 371-399; T.D. ATKINSON *et al.*, *Excavations at Phylakopi in Melos* (1904) 70-72, give the provenience: rooms 6-7 (Pillar Crypt) of building G3 of the Second City (E-W 3.75, N-S 2.75 m), along with the more famous flying fish fresco (IMMERWAHR [*supra* n. 10] 189 Ph No. 1) and fragments with blue monkeys, white lilies on a red background, and other motifs.

<sup>33</sup> I find it interesting that the rooms with cloth-handling scenes are similar in size: small and narrow (about 2 by 4 m).

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Pl. CXXXIXa Terracotta house model from Archanes, photo author.  
Pl. CXXXIXb Terracotta house model from Archanes, detail, photo author.  
Pl. CXXXIXc *CMS* V, no. 173: gold ring from Athens Agora tomb VIII (drawing courtesy *CMS*).  
Pl. CXXXIXd *CMS* I, no. 159: lentoid from Mycenae (drawing courtesy *CMS*).  
Pl. CXXXIXe *CMS* II, 6, no. 1: gold ring impression from Ayia Triada (drawing courtesy *CMS*).  
Pl. CXXXIXf Akrotiri, The House with the Ladies, computer restoration of rooms 1 and 2 by the author, based on the exhibit in the Museum of Prehistoric Thera, Fira, Thera.  
Pl. CXXXa *CMS* VI, no. 283 (drawing courtesy *CMS*).  
Pl. CXXXb Fresco fragments from Phylakopi, adapted from a drawing in MORGAN 2005 (*supra* n. 32) fig. 1.16.





a



b



c



d



e



f

