SOME UNPUBLISHED STUDIES BY PAUL REHAK ON GENDER IN AEGEAN ART

Last year (2004), in mid Spring, after a long struggle living with AIDS, Paul Rehak (Pls Ia-b) suffered a heart attack which led to his death on the fifth of June, a Saturday — one year ago today. When he died, he left behind a couple hundred unfinished studies on a wide range of topics, from the Bronze Age Aegean to the Roman Principate. As executor of his estate, I am trying to make sense of all this work, editing the more finished manuscripts and seeing them through press, and putting on-line the dates and titles and short summaries of each of the unfinished studies, as part of Paul’s bibliography. I want people to know his many and excellent ideas.

Paul Rehak received his BA in Classics from the University of Michigan in 1976, and, from Bryn Mawr College, his MA on Frescoes from the Mycenae Cult Center, under Machteld Mellink (1980), and his PhD on The Ara Pietatis Augustae in Rome, under Brunilde Ridgway (1985). After a series of one-year positions, he was hired at Loyola University, Chicago, where he was promoted to Associate Professor, but was denied tenure. He then came down to Duke University in 1995 and we both moved to the University of Kansas in 2001/02, where Paul received tenure and was promoted to Associate Professor a couple of months before he died.

Although Paul and I worked together on many projects, his studies of the frescoes from Xeste 3, Akrotiri, were primarily his own: the gathering of the autumn crocus, the presence of vitamin A in the saffron, the painted blue streaks in the eyes of the women due to vitamin A sufficiency, the painted red streaks in the eyes of the men due to vitamin A deficiency, the pharmaceutical qualities of vitamin A for the easing of pain during women’s menstruation and childbirth, the general interpretation of the frescoes as pertaining to women’s transition through puberty, and the identification of the Xeste 3 goddess as Artemis — all these were Paul’s ideas.

Paul had a habit of swiveling his chair around and saying, “I’ve got a question for you.” And then we would discuss his question — and argue about it. Eventually he would create an abstract, as if it were going to be a conference paper, with endless footnotes to document everything — a technique he learnt in graduate school.

Here is a sample of these short, unpublished studies, a summary of three of them with occasional quotes from his texts.

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* To have a session dedicated to Paul Rehak and his work in gender at the University of Crete is a great honour, especially appropriate on the anniversary of his death (this paper was read in Rethymno, on 6 June 2005, a Saturday).

1 Paul’s complete bibliography, including posthumous and unpublished works, can be found on his website: <http://people.ku.edu/~jyounger/prehak>.

The earliest Aegean figure-eight shield friezes and their meaning

A. Evans restored the famous figure-eight shield fresco at Knossos in the Grand Staircase (Pl. Ic), but its original location is difficult to determine — probably in a more secluded room. This may not be the earliest such fresco to have survived (LM II, according to S. Immerwahr), since a similar but smaller frieze survives in fragments from the North Threshing-floor Area, along with miniature frescoes that should be LM I. Similar and contemporary friezes are found on three-handled beaked jugs from Xeste 3 at Akrotiri. Other vases with shields come from the LM IB Cult Basement, in Knossos, which also held the cut bones of children — from the same room came the startling cup-rhyton with Gorgoneion. A LM II ewer from the Unexplored Mansion has lilies "growing" from the shield, an association that also appears on a LM IB askos from Kythera.

Such vessels seem to have had special significance, perhaps cultic, since figure-eight shields also appear on gold rings with religious scenes. The Vapheio ring depicts an outside sanctuary, with a shield sitting on the ground, with a sacred knot attached; a similar ring comes from Sellopoulo Tomb 4; the association here with tree-pulling and omphalos-hugging makes it likely that the figure-eight shield is associated with epiphanies, presumably of female divinities. MM III faience figurines from the South Propylon of Knossos show women in a "lactans" pose (holding their breasts) and wearing necklaces of beads in the shape of figure-eight shields. The plaster plaque from Mycenae (Pl. Id) shows a woman wearing a figure-eight shield, in much the same posture (note the feet) as a female figure on a sealstone and as the little floating figure on the Mycenae Treasure ring. And, to go a bit further, the shield with suspension strap occurs on the double axe said to be from Vorou, while an axe from near Rethymno is engraved with the head of the animal from which the shield is made — presumably after it was sacrificed.

“The argument presented here, for a relatively early Minoan genesis for the figure-eight shield frieze, and the initial connection of the shield with females, the fertility of the natural world, bull sacrifice, and sanctuaries, calls into question the traditional notion that the figure-eight shield was first and foremost an instrument of defensive armor and thus an inherent sign of militarism.” In Minoan glyptic, men are wearing the shield in LM I-II talismanic seals, but the few friezes on seals with male figures carrying shields appear later, in LM IIIA;
almost no Neopalatial hunters or fighters are shown with the shield. On the mainland, in LH I-II, the shield appears seven times, five of them on prestige items from the Shaft Graves III, IV, and V (including the Lion Hunt dagger) -- one of these tombs, Shaft Grave III, presumably held the bodies only of women and children.

The association of the shield with women is most strongly borne out in the woman’s burial in Archanes, Phourni Tholos tomb A (LM IIIA1), which was rich with shield iconography: a lentoid sealstone of jasper-agate, four gold rings, a bead of rock crystal, and an ivory footstool (Pl. Ie); and, wedged in the blocking wall to the tomb’s side-chamber, where the woman was buried, was the head of a sacrificed bull.

**Aegean hairpins and Linear A**

Paul begins this study with the statement that jewellery in general was a significant marker of status. He then describes the Wounded Woman in the fresco from Xeste 3, Akrotiri, and her two hairpins (Pl. IIa):

“One, placed over the forehead, is in the form of an olive or myrtle twig with blue and yellow leaves,” imitating an actual twig in gold and silver. “The second pin is worn in the twist of hair at the nape of the neck. This pin is curved at the tip and has an iris flower finial of yellow with red accents and a ring where it is attached to the shaft.” This pin was probably also made of a mix of metals, like the silver pin with gold finial of a woman bending papyrus from Mycenae Shaft Grave III. The position of the second pin should indicate that the Wounded Woman’s hair is coming undone. It should also be noted that the Wounded Woman lacks the usual forelock; a loop in her hair-band replaces it.

The Wounded Woman is the only figure in Xeste 3 with hairpins, but she lacks the other usual jewellery, as worn by the Necklace Swinger (necklaces, bracelets, probably anklets). If the wound is a metaphor for the onset of menstruation, then we can regard the hairpins as pointing out the lack of her forelock, and emphasising the loosening of her hair.

At this point, the original manuscript stops -- I wrote in the margin, “Paul, you must do something with the Linear A.” So Paul pens in red ink on the back:

> A significant aspect of hairpins is that, of the surviving examples, three carry lengthy Linear A inscriptions (Pls IIb-c), each one completely different, with not even a single recurring word. Unlike libation tables, dedicated at peak sanctuaries, these

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23 This work was probably written in 1992.

24 His introduction is based on “Representations of Min.-Myc. jewelry” esp. 260.


26 “Representations of Min.-Myc. jewelry” 260; S. MARINATOS, “Numerous years of joyful life,” BSA 46 (1951) 102-16. For the woman bending papyrus, see also the recently discovered sealstone CMS V.Suppl.3.85, from a plundered tomb at Tragana in Phthiotida.

27 Τοιχογραφίες Θήρας πίν. 100-03.

28 1. CR (?) Zf 1 (Ayios Nikolaos Mus. 9675, GORILA IV 146-47, 162), gold hairpin from the art market:
hairpins do not carry a Linear A formula. They are probably more personal objects, not dedicated according to some prescribed ritual but according to personal desire. Their words, therefore, are the closest we may ever get to actual words spoken or thought by Minoan women.

"Nothing to do with myth?"

In this paper, Paul notes that little was being done with gender in Aegean studies — still in the mid-1990s. Dimitra Kokkinidou and Marianna Nikolaidou’s Η αρχαιολογία και η κοινωνική ταυτότητα του φύλου had appeared in 1993; but Oliver Dickinson’s 1994 textbook, The Aegean Bronze Age, did not even mention gender; and Barbara Olsen’s article “Women, children and the family in the Late Bronze Age” was three years away.

Paul identifies three possible reasons why Aegeanists were so slow to study gender:

1. The lack of real literature (i.e. poetry or history; Linear B is accessible only to specialists) in the Bronze Age means that the Bronze Age cannot be approached in the traditional mode of classical scholarship.

2. Most of us come to the Bronze Age only after a training first in Classical philology (Greek and Latin) and then in archaeology, meaning that we have had to master two fields before we can come to our coveted third.

3. Finally, the emphasis on Aegean archaeology has been traditionally masculinist. In 1995, processual archaeology, with its systems theories, was a dominant, and dominating, generalising approach that did not allow for person-oriented interpretations of Aegean Bronze Age cultures, which a combination of Third wave feminism and post-modern approaches now fosters.

Let me (JGY) provide a couple of interesting examples of gender biases at work in Aegean archaeology. We all know, of course, that H. Schliemann’s identification of the sexes in the Shaft Graves of Mycenae was based on the associated grave goods — not on the skeletons: swords meant men, jewellery meant women. G. Mylonas describes how Grave Theta (Circle B) was accidentally discovered while digging an aqueduct: a body with a bronze “sword” were both badly damaged. After L. Angel had identified this body as a woman, the sword became a μαχαιρίδιον — a penknife — in the final publication. And when Angel studied the bones from Grave Circle A, he concentrated almost exclusively on the male skeletons;

This essay was written in 1995, as a paper at the joint Annual Meetings of the American Philological Association and the Archaeological Institute of America; it had been rejected by the Archaeological Institute, and so Paul delivered it to philologists — its intended audience, however, was archaeologists. We had just been to the Third Australian Women in Archaeology Conference in Sydney the previous February, and this had changed the direction, the “flavour” if you will, of our research.

Sec. respectively: Αρχαιολογία και κοινωνική ταυτότητα του φύλου; O.T.P.K. DICKINSON, The Aegean Bronze Age (1994); “Women, children and family.”


G. MYLONAS, Mycenaean Culture (1966) 98.

J.L. ANGEL, “Human skeletons from Grave Circles at Mycenae,” in Γ.Ε. ΜΥΛΩΝΑΣ, Ο Ταφικός Κύκλος Β των Μυκηνών I (1973) 379-428, esp. 383 – “a curiously wide-shouldered ... woman of medium height (156.1 cm), with good muscularity ... age 35.”

MYLΩΝΑΣ (supra n. 34) 109.

ANGEL (supra n. 34) 384-94.
this implies that he sexed them all — but dismissed the females — in order to highlight “the rulers buried in the Mycenaean Shaft Graves.”

Paul also outlined a few peculiarities of the Aegean cultures — several of which are themes at this conference — pointing out that the representations of “infancy (Pl. IId), old age, obesity (Pl. IHe) or physical deformity, or individual portraits (Pl. III) are startlingly rare.” As he notes: “The female breast is often revealed through costume, but apparently not as an erotic device; might it then be a power image which conveys a meaning we have not yet understood? ... Human sexuality, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is almost never depicted — even sexuality among animals is rare (Pl. IIg). And we have not yet developed a methodology that allows us to securely identify representations of divinities as opposed to humans. The frequent, and often subjective, identification of women as ‘goddesses’ has had the effect of depopulating the archaeological landscape of real women.”

He then identified “six artistic variables that need to be considered critically, if we hope to understand the ways in which inhabitants of the Aegean conveyed to themselves and to others the place of individuals in society, and their differences in gender and in age roles, and in social and political status;”

1) the strictly-adhered-to colour conventions (red for male, white for female skin) — “we need to re-examine our own reasons if we reject women bull-leapers and women boar-hunters”; 2) the morphology of the human body; 3) hairstyles; 4) costumes; 5) jewellery;”

37 See also YOUNGER in this volume Pl. XXXIVb.
38 See, for example, for children: the crawling bronze infant from the Psychro cave (Acts in Prehistoric Greece 112, 113, fig. 98; “Children in Aegean Prehistory” 31-57, 237-38:3, fig. 38; CHAPIN in this volume Pl. XXVIIa), and the ivory boy from Palaikastro (Acts in Prehistoric Greece fig. 108; CHAPIN in this volume Pl. XXVIIIb). For mature, possibly old, women: the fresco from Xeste 3, Akrotiri (To γυναικείος θρόνος πτώσις. 181-34. For obese men: a bronze statuette from Tylissos (Statuettes anthropomorphes crétoises cat. no. 30, pl. 14). For physical deformity: a terracotta figurine from Traostalos with swollen leg (Guide to Cretan Antiquities 246, fig. 138; for a general discussion of deformed or diseased body parts in clay, see R. ARNOTT, “Healing cult in Minoan Crete,” in MELETEMATA 2-6). Individual portraits have been claimed for the heads (male?) depicted on CMS I.5, CMS II 8.41.42 (the cropped hair may instead identify these heads as those of girls), CMS IX 6Da and CMS X.278 at right (the authenticity of the two last seals has been questioned).
39 See also B. COHEN, “Divesting the female breast of clothes in classical sculpture,” in Naked Truths 66-92, and MORRIS in this volume.
40 CMS II 5.324: a scaling from Phaistos (MM IIB context) shows a nude man and a woman in a skirt standing next to each other, their faces turned toward each other; they may be touching hands. Note, however, that a vertical line intervenes between their faces, as if to thwart the possibility of intimacy.
41 CMS VII.68, a gold ring, shows two agrimia in sexual intercourse; miniature terracotta agrimia from Youchach show the same thing (HM on display but no. unknown).
42 “Iconography of rulership” esp. 133-54. See also CHAPIN in this volume.
43 See the brief discussion of those who dissent from the, otherwise, strict colour conventions in Aegean frescoes, in J.G. YOUNGER, “Bronze Age representations of Aegean bull-games III,” in POLITIEIA 507-45, esp. 515, n. 25. Two examples of such dissent: S. DAMIANI INDELICATO, “Were Cretan girls playing at bull-leaping?” Cretan Studies 1 (1988) 39-47, who suggests that the white painted bull-leapers depict different times or phases of the sport; and N. MARINATOS, “Bull-leaping and royal ideology,” in M. BIETAK, N. MARINATOS and C. PALYVOU, Taureador Scenes in Tell el-Dab’a (Avaris) and Knossos (2007) 127-32, who argues that, since white painted figures are never shown leaping bulls, they are men who specialised in the more dangerous tasks like grappling the bulls or confronting them. BIETAK et al., however, do reconstruct one white painted figure at Dab’a as leaping a bull.
44 The arguments of E. Davis, R. Koehl and D. Withee concerning children’s hairstyles and their ages are summarised in “Representations of Min.-Myc. jewelry” 288-89.
and 6) “how humans are structured in art, individually and in groups, through scale, position, gesture, and pose.”

Paul’s paper closes with a pair of caveats:

First, he says, we need to distinguish the Bronze Age from the Classical period. Many archaeologists are still looking for Bronze Age antecedents to the Classical world — as if we needed them. He warns: “many of the Bronze Age elements may have been separated, reorganized, and then assimilated into Greek culture, only during and after the long period of societal transition of the Dark Age.”

And second, he advises us to consider Minoan culture apart from Mycenaean — an even more difficult task: “The Linear B tablets list a pantheon of male and female divinities,” apparently of equal status, “iconographically, however, it is virtually impossible to identify representations of male gods in Mycenaean art.” Is it possible that the Mycenaens never developed a manner, or a reason, “for depicting male gods, even though they borrowed Minoan conventions for representing goddesses?” Even more puzzling: they created a patently Greek title, “potnia,” for a “powerful female” divinity that they may have borrowed from the Minoans; but they had to borrow a non-Greek, perhaps Minoan, word, “wanax.” for their own male leader.

“Problems like these suggest that we should be wrestling with the differences between Minoan and Mycenaean art, before we even begin to tackle the question of possible survivals into the historical age.”

Paul REHAK (ed. John G. YOUNGER)
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