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DECODING NEOLITHIC ATLANTIC AND MEDITERRANEAN ISLAND RITUAL

For Bronislaw Malinowski - an island man throughout

Coastal sailing as long as it is perfectly safe and easy commands no magic. Overseas expeditions are invariably bound up with ceremonies and ritual. Man [humans] resorts to magic only where chance and circumstances are not fully controlled by knowledge.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1931)

AN OFFPRINT FROM

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Edited by

GEORGE NASH & ANDREW TOWNSEND

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LAURIE WAITE studied British Prehistory at the University of Bristol and is vice-chair of the Clifton Antiquarian Club which is currently excavating three Bronze Age and Neolithic sites in Guernsey. His particular interest is the Neolithic of Western Europe and its monuments.

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Dedication: Andrew Townsend

It is with great sadness that co-editor Dr Andrew Townsend passed away during the final editorial stages of the book. Among many of Andrew's interests, he had a wealth of knowledge concerning island archaeology, in particular research into Neolithic mortuary practices on Malta and Gozo. It is a fitting statement that his interests of prehistoric societies in an island context should be his last publication. Although Andrew has now gone, his legacy through publication and reputation will remain for many years to come. This book is dedicated to Andrew and the inheritance he has given to archaeology.

Ritual and religion in Neolithic Crete?

Alan Peatfield

The tendency to view Neolithic Crete through the filter of Minoan Bronze Age sophistication means that the Neolithic material is often read as a precursor to Minoan civilization rather than understood in its own right. This is especially true in the interpretation of religion, where early studies viewed Neolithic Cretan religion as replete with goddesses and elaborate rituals. By contrast this chapter addresses the Neolithic religious material within its own context. Essential is the fact that for most of the Neolithic period (approximately 7000 to 3000 cal. BC) Knossos was the only settlement on the island, and was relatively isolated from cultural developments elsewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean. Although only 1% of Neolithic Knossos has been excavated, the surviving evidence, fragmentary figurines, suggests religious life was focused on the simplicity of the household rather than the broader community. The change comes in the Final Neolithic period, wherein there is a massive dispersal of settlements across the island, indicating population growth perhaps supported by an influx of new settlers. Religiously this manifests in an enriched diversification of ritual material culture, including cave shrines and burial sites, communal feasting at population power centres, and perhaps also the beginnings of a ritual landscape.

Religion? What religion?

The question mark in the title may seem odd, but the theme of this chapter justifies its use. The wording of the title refers to assumptions concerning how the issue of religion in Neolithic Crete is approached. In comparison to other Mediterranean islands (and to contemporary East Mediterranean mainland cultures) there is relatively little evidence for religion in Neolithic Crete, a period that covers 3–4 millennia. In brief: the first permanent human-settlement on the island dates to c. 7000 cal BC. There is, however, evidence for earlier occasional visits by nomadic hunters. Occupation appears to be at first concentrated at one particular site – Knossos. Over the centuries, settlement over the remainder of Crete appears to have developed slowly, and on a small scale (Watrous 1994, 700). The nature of the evidence is mainly domestic, indicative of subsistence strategies, rather than of anything that is suggestive of symbolic behaviour. This remains the status quo, for much of the long Neolithic period. Then, at c. 3500 cal BC Crete enters the transition towards the beginning of the Bronze Age (which happens at c. 3000 cal BC). This period is

referred to as the Final Neolithic. The dramatic increase in evidence suggests a significant rise in population, spreading from Knossos over the remainder of Crete. The more varied nature of this material also suggests an increase in cultural complexity. The majority of the evidence for what may be called ‘religion’ is associated with this final period of cultural transition, as represented by figurines, mortuary practices and ceremonial feasting. The point to emphasise is that there are few indications of religious activity on Crete until the Late-Final Neolithic period. This is surprising, especially given the evidence for religion, at least at a household level, in mainland Greece at this same period.

The limitations of the available evidence poses considerable difficulties for establishing interpretative frameworks and raises a number of important questions: why is there so little evidence of religion for the earlier Cretan Neolithic? What does it reveal about the role of religion in social development, both on Crete, and more broadly as a cultural paradigm? What are the reasons for the changes of the Final Neolithic? Are inferences about religion in the Final Neolithic period applicable to the Cretan Neolithic as a whole?

This also has implications for the understanding of the developmental process of prehistoric religion. Much of the interest in Neolithic religion in the Mediterranean and Near East has focused on spectacular monumental discoveries, such as the early (c. 3500 cal BC) temples on Malta. There are also interpretations that advocate the emergence of religion, or at least the emergence of organised community religion (shared beliefs and rituals, manifested in images and artefacts), as co-phenomenal with the Neolithic Revolution and its effects on the development of social complexity and hierarchy, as argued for Çatalhöyük (Hodder 2010). The association of monumentality with religion has received further impetus with the discoveries at Göbekli Tepe in Turkey. The enormous structures at the site, whose construction required considerable social co-operation and organisation, appear to predate the Neolithic Revolution, dating to c. 9000 cal BC (Schmidt 2010; Hodder & Meskell 2010).

There is a puzzle, therefore, in terms of why Neolithic Crete, boasting one of the longest-lived continually occupied settlements in the world, at Knossos, is so lacking in evidence for religious activity. What insight does this afford into the association between settlement and religion?

Defining religion

Archaeological approaches to religion tend to draw heavily from anthropology. This was most explicit in Renfrew's use of anthropological definitions of religion in his publication of Phylakopi in the *Archaeology of Cult* (Renfrew 1985, 12). There he chose between opposed definitions posited by Spiro (1966) and Geertz (1966). Spiro's definition – religion is 'culturally interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings' – privileges beliefs in deities, while Geertz's more laborious definition focusing on cultural systems might be seen as a broadly existential approach. Theistic (deity-centred) definitions of religion, like Spiro's, have a long history in anthropology, going back to early theorists such as Edward Tylor (1871). Indeed, one contemporary anthropologist refers to modern theistic-approaches as 'neo-Tylorian' (Tambiah 1985, 129). They also, consciously or unconsciously, model religion within the ancient Classical to Judaeo-Christian European experience. The broader problem common to all 'definitions of religion' is that, in their attempt to be all-encompassing, they can never quite cope with the immense diversity of phenomena that human beings and cultures call religion. The most obvious example is that theistic definitions of religion would exclude Buddhism as a religion because it is explicitly non-theistic. Consequently, more recent archaeological studies of religion that have addressed methodology and theory, as for example the volume of papers on Çatalhöyük (Hodder 2010), have avoided over-arching definitions in favour of a more cautious discursive approach to religious phenomenology.

Elsewhere, the author has preferred to take a more performative approach to religion (Peatfield 2001), in that it places more focus on the human experience and physical expression of the spiritual impulse, rather than intellectual beliefs in deities (superhuman beings, spirits, etc.). In terms of prehistoric cultures, religion is itself a controversial term. Some scholars would prefer to use the term 'religion' specifically and only for the institutionalised ritual and belief systems embedded in complex cultures (Hodder 2010). The problem with this is that it leaves no appropriate terms for the spiritual expressions, the religions, of non-complex cultures.

It is perhaps preferable, therefore, to use the broader term 'spirituality'. An archaeology of spirituality allows for more encompassing approaches to the variety of human religious (or spiritual) experience, especially those that lie beyond the parameters of western theistic ideas (Rountree *et al.* 2012). Nevertheless, for the limited purposes of this chapter, the conventional terms religion and religious are employed.

Interestingly, Buddhism itself offers an approach to religion which accords with modern neuro-physiological research. The human capacity for deep self-awareness creates in the mind an opposition between the Self and Other. Out of this dualistic impulse arise the many nuances of relationships, which, when combined with human imagination and abstract thought, include the oppositions of material and immaterial, body and spirit, natural and supernatural, human and superhuman, this world and the Other (or others). The descriptions are many (and only approximate); the principle is the same.

Although some archaeologists and anthropologists are hostile to this concept of existential dualism, all that is meant here is that different cultures mediate dualism in different ways. Some cultures emphasise it by creating barriers to separate them from the Other; others diminish it by deliberately engaging with and blurring the boundaries between themselves and the Other. Buddhism, of course, regards dualism as an illusion, and seeks to eradicate it.

The richness of human spirituality, both individual and cultural, arises out the attempt to make sense out of that which transcends everyday material sensory experience. Rituals and beliefs, religions, spiritual systems, philosophies all seek to explain, to systematise, to categorise, to celebrate, to manifest, to engage, to make safe, and otherwise variously deal with whatever it is that lies beyond the Self. One reason why archaeologists and anthropologists find defining religion so difficult is because the phenomenon is of its very nature inexplicable.

The relationship between prehistoric art and the origins of religion is already a well-explored field of study (Mithen 1996, 171–210; Lewis-Williams 2004). What makes it interesting is that art expresses and makes manifest the conceptual imaginings of the human mind. Out of this process are created the artefacts, the material culture that allows archaeology to study ancient religion.

In spite of the rich diversity of religious phenomena referred to above, not all cultures express their spiritual impulses equally richly. Indeed, one of the questions that may be asked of prehistoric religion is: why do some cultures appear so poor in material expressions of religion while others are so well off? In answer, one may posit the suggestion that there is an association with social development, i.e. that more complex societies have a richer and more diverse range of artefacts which reveal their religion, whereas poorer or simpler societies preserve less evidence. It would be controversial to suggest that this is a universal process in the development of religion, but as a proposition it may be pertinent to the theme of this chapter. As already stated, what archaeology perceives as evidence for religion in the Cretan Neolithic is poor – a few figurines, some human burials, and limited evidence of ceremonial feasting. The evidential value for religion of these cultural traits will be addressed in the following paragraphs.

The Minoan shadow

The relative paucity of religious evidence for the Cretan Neolithic may result from the vagaries and accidents of archaeological discoveries. It is contentious to create interpretations from negative evidence, especially as profound new discoveries continue to be made on Crete. Nevertheless, all interpretation of the culture of the Cretan Neolithic suffers from comparison with the rich complexity of the later Minoan Bronze Age civilisation. This is true for almost all Cretan archaeology – even to the degree that all subsequent periods (Iron-Age, Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman) are lumped together and referred to as Post-Minoan. Although matters are not quite so bad for Neolithic archaeology on Crete, the dominance of Minoan archaeology has two obvious consequences. The first is that there is a tendency to view Neolithic material through a Minoan lens. Value is imparted only insofar as that material is considered to prefigure an associated aspect of the later Minoan. Within the history of Cretan scholarship, this interpretation through hindsight has been most marked for the interpretation of religion.

The second consequence of the Minoan dominance is a practical one. The inevitable and justified desire to preserve the rich and complex Minoan remains, especially architectural elements, has meant that there is often an extremely partial and limited view of the Neolithic remains. This is particularly true of Knossos. Underneath the remains of the Bronze Age palace of Knossos is a multi-layered “tell” comprised of Neolithic deposits, in places 6 m in depth (Fig. 11.1). This represents some 3–4 millennia of Neolithic occupation, before the Bronze Age even began, at c. 3000 cal BC. Stages of rebuilding the palace during its later history (notably the large-scale levelling and reconstruction which marks the Neopalatial phase, commencing c. 1700 cal BC), means that in some places on the Knossos hill,

especially in the centre, monumental Bronze Age walls are laid directly onto Neolithic strata. Consequently, excavating Neolithic Knossos is the archaeological equivalent of “key-hole surgery”. In other words, it presents a view that is very localised and very partial. It has been estimated that approximately 1% of the site has been explored (Broodbank 1992, 59–60). This area has been enlarged by more recent excavations (Manteli & Evely 1995; Efstratiou *et al.* 2013, 1–5), but only by very small amounts. Consequently, the validity of any reconstruction of activity at the site has been rightly questioned (Whitelaw 1992, 227). As has already been observed, Knossos is the first and main occupation site of Neolithic Crete. Such a partial view of the remains severely limits our understanding of its organisation and concomitant social complexity, including religious activity. Any discussion of Cretan Neolithic religion should recognise and articulate that as an interpretative factor.

The shadow of the Minoan remains does mean that the Neolithic period on Crete has been rarely considered outside the Minoan context – at least until recently. The explicit aim of the 2006 Sheffield Round Table on Neolithic Crete (Isaakidou & Tomkins 2008) was to discuss that Neolithic evidence, within its own context. This was neatly expressed in the title of the proceedings: *Escaping the Labyrinth!* Although some of the papers were avowedly controversial, and there was not always commonality of views among the participants, this volume must be acknowledged as setting the parameters for future study of the Cretan Neolithic.

First settlement

The first permanent human-settlement on the island appears to have occurred at c. 7000 cal BC. This is confirmed by a radiocarbon date (Perles 2001; discussed Broodbank 2008, 274; Facorellis & Maniatis 2013). Sometimes termed a ‘colonisation’, it has been argued that this group of settlers came, not quite en masse, but certainly in significant numbers. This suggests some form of pre-existing community. They brought with them their own domestic animals (including pigs, cattle, sheep and goats), which were not part of the endemic fauna. They established themselves as a farming community, on a small hill 7–8 km south of the north coast, in a well-watered valley. This is the site of Knossos.

That such a group (or groups) were so prepared suggests purposeful colonising journeys to a place that was already known to them. In other words, they already had knowledge of their destination. Scholars writing about the process of the Neolithic ‘colonisation’ of Crete have long speculated that this prior knowledge arose from sea-going migratory hunting patterns within the eastern Mediterranean area (Broodbank & Strasser 1991). The presence of pygmy hippopotamus and elephant on Crete would have attracted hunters (Ripoll 2013; Horwitz 2013), as they did on Cyprus (Simmons 1999). Indeed, it is argued that these hunters

Figure 11.1 Knossos hill from the East. Neolithic deposits underlie all the visible Minoan remains, up to 6 m deep (photo: author)

contributed to the extinction of such animals on the island (Lax & Strasser 1992, 214–215).

On Crete, the presence of Mesolithic, or even Epipalaeolithic, hunters moved from a speculative idea to an archaeological reality in 2008, when the remains of stone tools were found in the Plakias Gorge on the south coast of the island (Strasser *et al.* 2010; 2011). The suggested date of the earliest tools (c.160,000 cal BC) in this deposit indicates that Crete and its resources were well-known to humans long before Neolithic farming communities arrived on the island.

It remains to be seen whether such early remains will be found elsewhere on Crete. This would be particularly significant for the north coast and eastern parts of the island, not just for the location of Knossos, but also for the suggested origin of the first settlers. Their point of origin is consistently argued as being from Southern Anatolia (Asia Minor, modern Turkey). If this is so, their journey to Crete would have been greatly facilitated by their ability to ‘island hop’ across the Dodekanese islands which link Crete to the Asia Minor coast, rather than having to navigate large expanses of open sea.

This cultural argument for an Anatolian origin of these first settlers on Crete has, however, been complicated by recent DNA studies, which suggest that they may have had a European origin (Hughey 2013). Nevertheless, until this

DNA evidence has been fully correlated, the theory that the first settlers on Crete may have originated in Anatolia also makes sense culturally. Agriculture, the hallmark of the Neolithic Revolution, originated in that area around c. 8000 cal BC, and was well established by c. 7000 cal BC when breakaway groups left for Crete. In other words, the settlers brought with them their own package of subsistence strategies – arable farming and animal husbandry.

The idea that they brought with them the appropriate cultural knowledge, techniques, materials, and experience, for survival and subsistence does, however, give rise to a question pertinent to this chapter. Did they also bring with them their religious ideas and practices?

Although, as shall be further discussed below, there are clay figurines and indications of comparable mortuary practices, there is nothing like the animal (zoomorphic) images or symbolic installations with bulls’ heads and horns which reveal the emergence of complex spiritual ideas and behaviours at sites such as Çatalhöyük and Gobekli Tepe, or indeed later Crete. Comparison with Çatalhöyük does, however, raise an issue in the models of interpretation. When Mellaart found the horns and bucrania set into the walls of the Çatalhöyük houses, he found inspiration for the religious interpretation of the bull in Minoan Crete (Mellaart 1967). Clearly influenced by Arthur Evans’s

articulation of the bull as a key element in Minoan ritual (especially sacrificial) and religious imagery, Mellaart applied similar ideas to the Çatalhöyük bulls, with little regard for the chronological and geographical separation between Bronze Age Crete and Neolithic Anatolia. Analysis from the current excavations of Çatalhöyük has produced a far more nuanced understanding of the bull and other zoomorphic imagery as local-symbolic and ritual expressions of cultural and ecological interaction (Hodder 2006; 2010). Unlike the Minoan bulls, which are domestic, the ‘bulls’ at Çatalhöyük are more likely to represent aurochs and/or wild cattle.

Nevertheless, one might speculate whether the later religious importance of the Minoan bull owed something to Neolithic ideas and rituals. The problem with such speculation is that without evidence of a sustained iconographic tradition throughout the Cretan Neolithic period, it remains impossible to prove. In regard to this, however, questions do arise concerning the interrelationship between religious/symbolic iconography and cultural complexity. Is the absence of bull iconography in the Cretan Neolithic simply a consequence of the lack of an artistic process, or does it indicate the absolute absence of such ideas and rituals? The former possibility might explain why, when Bronze Age Crete was culturally sophisticated enough to sustain an iconographic tradition, images of the bull, including ritual vessels in the shape of bulls (rhyta or libation vessels) are ubiquitous. This does suggest that the symbolic and religious associations of the bull were already fully-formed, and not just contemporary.

Cretan Neolithic chronology

The idea that the first Neolithic settlers on Crete may have taken a step backward in the material expression of whatever religious ideas and practices they may have brought with them from their homeland, although speculative, is not entirely improbable. When Evans and, later, Furness, developed their chronological system for the Cretan Neolithic (Furness 1953), they followed the ceramic-based divisions that Evans had developed for Minoan chronology – a tripartite scheme of Early, Middle, and Late. This was book-ended by two phases, a Final Neolithic which expressed the transition to the Bronze Age, and at the very beginning, an Aceramic Period. This is as much a descriptive as chronological term in that there are no potsherds to be found in the earliest Neolithic layers at Knossos. Given that ceramic technology was by this time already well-developed in the Near Eastern homeland, the lack of pottery in these strata at Knossos is surprising, and does suggest a step-backward in technological and cultural sophistication. If this is indeed so, then the idea of a comparable retardation in the expression of religious ideas becomes at least plausible.

The Evans/Furness dating scheme has dominated not just the chronological understanding of Neolithic Crete but, to some degree, also the interpretation of its historical development. When John Evans conducted his excavations at Knossos, he refined, but still essentially adhered to the pre-existing framework. His narrative of the development of the Knossos settlement, with its simple, small-roomed houses, followed the parameters set-out in the Evans/Furness chronological divisions and its implied historical parameters (Evans 1994; Furness 1953).

Recently, however, Tomkins has cogently argued for a reassessment of Cretan Neolithic chronology (Tomkins 2008). His replacement schema is increasingly becoming the accepted frame-of-reference. Tomkins makes several points in particular which have implications for the understanding of Cretan Neolithic religion: first, the Evans/Furness chronology noted above was derived from, and thus emphasised, the Knossos-centric perspective on the entire Cretan Neolithic. This in turn made it difficult to identify and categorise the already limited evidence of Neolithic activity beyond Knossos. Furthermore, it was a different chronological scheme from that used for the interpretation of Neolithic Greece and Anatolia. This tended, therefore, to reinforce the idea of Knossos/Crete as being isolated from contact with the remainder of the Eastern Mediterranean, and in particular, Mainland Greece.

In broadly accepting Tomkins’ new chronological framework, the papers from the Sheffield symposium opened the way to identifying a broader spectrum of Neolithic activity on Crete away from Knossos (Isaakidou & Tomkins 2008). This includes the specialised sourcing of raw materials over the island (notably stone axes: Strasser 2008). Nevertheless, despite this softening of the Knossos-centric view, for the time being, the essential picture of settlement over the island remains unchanged, i.e. from its establishment in the Aceramic/Initial Neolithic period (c. 7000 cal BC), Knossos was the the major settlement on the island for at least 3 millennia. Subsequently, in the Late Neolithic (Evans/Furness terminology) period, at c. 3500 cal BC, settlement dispersed dramatically over the remainder of the island following the exploration and exploitation of the landscape resources. Conventionally it has been assumed that this away-from-Knossos settlement focused on the use of caves as habitations, and as Late Neolithic gave way to Final Neolithic, other settlements emerged, significantly at major sites that would eventually evolve into Bronze Age political and palatial centres, such as Phaistos (Todara & Di Tonto 2008). Recently, however, Tomkins has challenged this notion that the Neolithic remains from caves, often sparse and hidden in the deepest parts of the caves, indicate domestic use (Tomkins 2013, 61–63; he argues that it suggests episodic ritualisation, an interesting and plausible idea (Tomkins 2013, 65–69).

Alongside this population increase and demographic expansion of the Late and Final Neolithic phases, there is also evidence for a deepening of cultural complexity. This does, of course, have a bearing on the evidence for religion as manifested in clay figurines and evidenced by mortuary customs. But, before progressing to a closer discussion of that evidence, it is necessary to consider the historical factors that lie behind such an expansion and change, especially in relation to the Final Neolithic.

The end of the Neolithic period and the beginning of the Bronze Age is characterised by the appearance of bronze metallurgy on Crete. Hypotheses regarding the cultural origins of this introduction have considered whether this was a gradual or sudden introduction, and whether it was essentially an indigenous Cretan development, using imported technology, or whether that technology was brought in by another group of settlers – another wave of immigration. Essentially, this recalls the familiar debate between exponents of indigenous cultural change versus diffusionist theorists of cultural change via population change (be they immigrants or invaders). Nowicki's identification of Late Neolithic and Final Neolithic defensive settlements in the mountain and coastal areas of Crete does provide strong evidence for an influx of people into Crete at this time which may, or may not, have been peaceful (Nowicki 2002; 2008). More strongly, he also demonstrates that this represents a broader change in settlement patterns not just on Crete, but throughout the islands of the Aegean.

Significantly, Nowicki also uses a loaded cultural chronological term which has, up till now, been avoided by Cretan archaeologists – he parenthesises the Final Neolithic as a *Chalcolithic* period (Nowicki 2002, 11–15; 2008, 201–204). This has the effect, also endorsed by other contributors to the Sheffield conference, of redefining the Final Neolithic period as being perhaps more properly part of the Bronze Age, rather than being of the Neolithic. Given that the majority of the evidence for Neolithic religion on Crete is associated with this Final Neolithic/Chalcolithic period, it raises the question of whether it is truly representative of the religious ideas of the Neolithic population of Crete.

Human (anthropomorphic) figurines

The association of figurines with religion has a long history in archaeology. In terms of Cretan archaeology, this reaches back at least to the time of Arthur Evans (Evans 1921). The obvious reason for this was the persistent interpretation of figurines as images of divinities. Although, as shall be discussed further, this monolithic assumption has been mostly dismantled, and figurines are rightly interpreted as fulfilling a variety of functions, those functions, such as charms, amulets, spirit helpers, are still well within the broader parameters of

what may be defined as spiritual or religious. Even in cases where they functioned as toys, they may still be considered as material manifestations of conceptualisations of what is human, or animal, or whatever (Bailey 2005). As such, they materially express symbolic thought.

Study of Cretan Neolithic figurines has very much concentrated on the anthropomorphic examples, which creates certain problems for the interpretation of their meaning, as will be discussed below. Probably the most comprehensive study of the material to date is that by Peter Ucko (Ucko 1968). This study, comparing Cretan, Egyptian, Greek and Near Eastern figurines, has not yet been superseded in terms of its detailed records and analysis. From Crete, primarily Knossos, Ucko catalogued 103 figurines, almost all of which were fragments. His catalogue is based mainly on his own observations (Ucko 1968, 203–301), but he also included some figurines reported from excavation notebooks, which were untraceable. Mina's more recent work uses a sample of 110 figurines, and references other figurines mentioned in notebooks from both Arthur Evans and John Evans (Mina 2008, 118–119). The figurines occur throughout the whole duration of the Cretan Neolithic, from Aceramic/Initial to Final, although the majority are from the later period. Part of the problem for developing a clear chronological scheme for the figurines stems from the fact that the majority derive from poorly defined or unclear contexts, with the majority recovered from secondary habitation deposits, i.e. habitation debris.

The importance of Ucko's (1968) work does not, however, lie only in its detail. Its main significance relates to the manner in which it completely broke with previous unitary interpretations of figurines, and established the parameters for all later thinking on the subject. They follow him in attributing multiple meanings and uses to the objects. Prior to Ucko, figurine studies tended to create conventional typological analyses. Ucko, for example, observes that Weinberg (Weinberg 1951) created a typology based on leg positions (Ucko 1968, 302), and that Hutchinson (Hutchinson 1938) was more interested in the position of the arms (Ucko 1968, 303). He further exposes the partiality of other analyses in their, often contradictory, attribution of figurines to 'schematic' or 'naturalistic' categories (Ucko 1968, 305–307).

The majority of Cretan Neolithic figurines are made from clay, burnished and fired. The colour of the clay ranges from pink to black, mostly shades of grey, as is true of Neolithic ceramics in general. There are a few figurines of stone: marble and polished greenstone. There are individual figurines made from bone and shell. Bearing in mind that these are mostly fragments, the preserved sizes of the objects can be as small as 2 cm. One of the largest intact figurines comprises a clay violin-shaped figurine 9 cm in height (Fig. 11.2). Also, of the same preserved height is, perhaps, the finest of all Cretan Neolithic figurines – a

standing-male figurine made of polished marble (Fig. 11.3). It lacks its head, which would have added perhaps another centimetre or more to its height, but its marvel lies in the sensitive carving of its anatomical features, especially the musculature curves of the leg. Perhaps even more remarkable is the fact that this is one of the earliest of the figurines, found in an Early Neolithic deposit at Knossos. This figure holds its arms to its chest, which is probably the gesture indicated on other more schematic figures which preserve their arms. It may be possible to attribute some religious significance to this gesture, given its common occurrence among later Minoan figurines, especially those from peak-sanctuaries (Peatfield 1990, 118; Morris & Peatfield 2004; Peatfield & Morris 2012, 237–241, 45–50), but it may also be that Neolithic sculptors found that making figurines with outstretched arms was simply too difficult, and prone to breakage. Figurine fragments that preserve the legs generally reveal 3 main postures: standing, sitting, and kneeling or squatting. Often it is too difficult to be certain about what is being represented.

The most important factor to observe about the size of the figurines is that they are all easily hand-held. That tactile quality might also explain the ambiguous gestures and postures. With the limbs contracted towards the torso, the figurines do lend themselves to manipulation without fear of breakage.

Many of the clay figurines are decorated in some manner. The clay is often burnished, and they are incised with a variety of curvilinear and zigzag designs. The incisions are highlighted with white clay rubbed into them. Scholars disagree about the meaning of the incisions: purely decorative, dress, or tattoos. Such particularising debate misses an essential point about this decoration. While there is some repetition of designs, every figurine is unique, suggesting that each is intended to represent an individual.

Following this brief description, the interpretation of the figurines should now be considered. Ucko's contribution here was that he decisively disposed of the idea that figurines are representations of prehistoric deities, especially the 'Goddess' types (Ucko 1968, 409–419). Once Evans became convinced of the existence of a Minoan Great Goddess, he projected this idea back into the Neolithic period (Evans 1921, 51–52). Hutchinson followed, drawing connections with the Classical Greek goddess of childbirth, Eileithia (Hutchinson 1938, 54).¹ One consequence of this almost ideological interpretation was that the female sexual characteristics of the figurines were emphasised, often in highly selective descriptions, while neglecting male or sexless figurines (Goodison & Morris 1998, 114–115).

In contrast to this singular interpretation of the figurines, Ucko pointed to the variation observable in the figures, and argued for a plurality of their uses and meanings: as dolls, initiations figurines, sympathetic magic (Ucko 1968, 420–444). Added to these might be some of the uses he

attributes to the Egyptian examples: mourning, servant, concubines, twins. It is clear from the variability observable in the figurines, the individualisation referred to above, that Ucko's insight of a plurality of uses and meanings to these figurines is undoubtedly correct.

Nevertheless, the idea that these figurines represent a Mother Goddess continues to persist, especially in cases where the boundaries between archaeology and popular ideologies such as feminism and the Goddess Movement become blurred. Two scholars have been particularly influential here: James Mellaart, in his identification of Goddess figurines at Çatalhöyük (Mellaart 1967), and Marija Gimbutas in her work on Balkan figurines, the scope of which which broadened to include all of 'Old Europe', including Crete (Gimbutas 1982). This has provoked strong reactions among scholars against the Goddess interpretation. In relation to the Çatalhöyük figurines,

Figure 11.2 Knossos Neolithic violin-shaped figurine in clay, Heraklion Archaeological Museum (photo: author)

Meskel & Nakamura, for example, call into doubt such a monolithic religious interpretation in favour of a set of more diffused ritualised associations, ‘figurines as process’, rather than divine images (Meskel 1998, 51–52, 59; Meskel & Nakamura 2005, 183–185). Bailey (2005) and Conkey and Tringham (1998) have further developed Ucko’s (1968) approach in emphasising the importance of context.

Returning to the Cretan material, Mina’s recent work has a specific ‘gendering’ agenda (Mina 2008). She reasserts the feminine characteristics of the figurines to the point of attributing as ‘female’ what appears to be sexless imagery. This is in order to support her notion of the figurines as being used in rituals to define social and sexual identity. The problem with this approach is that, while it advocates a plurality of uses and meanings for the figurines, it labours an intellectualisation of ‘gender’ in a manner that reveals more about contemporary obsessions than it does about Neolithic Crete.

In contrast, if it is considered that these figurines were created to express the intended purposes of their makers, in some cases the representation of gender was meaningful in terms of the use of the figurine. In other cases it was not and, instead, the figurine represented simply the idea of personhood – of humanity.

Figure 11.3 Knossos Neolithic marble figurine, Heraklion Archaeological Museum (photo: Wikimedia Commons)

What then are the strands of evidence that can be brought together to interpret the Cretan Neolithic figurines? First, there is the notion of the figurine itself. Bailey has emphasised the 3-dimensional conceptualising, miniaturising, individualising processes involved in the making and use of figurines (Bailey 2005; Bailey *et al.* 2010). Second, the Cretan figurines, while highly stylised, clearly demonstrate strongly tactile qualities, and a concern for individualisation. Third, the context is within the household, and was time-limited, i.e. a figurine was disposed of when it was broken, or its efficacy had diminished. The figurines essentially demonstrate the conceptualisation of the individual expressed in symbolic material form. This strongly suggests that they operated within the diversity of household and personal rituals. Obvious possibilities would include rituals associated with social status (age- or gender-specific), puberty/initiation rituals and the like, or they may have served as personal charms or amulets, or even the tools of magic. This use of figurines suggests a concern for individual spirituality (or at least the individual within a circumscribed community). It does not, however, indicate the existence of complex, deity-centred, belief systems.

If this is indeed the case, then it strongly suggests that religion on Neolithic Crete was centred on the household context rather than within a broader community context. This would certainly fit with what appears to be the prevailing social structure of Knossos.

The idea that Neolithic Crete was less isolated than previously thought (Isaakidou & Tomkins 2008), also supports this idea. The much richer evidence of religion from the Greek mainland in this period also appears to be centred on the household (Souvatzi 2008, 216–222). The corpus of figurines from the Greek mainland Neolithic sites is richer, with more elaborate figurines, and also includes house-models and animal figurines (Marangou 1996, 149–150). But again, the choice of representations reveals a concern for the household and the individual.

Further afield, the idea of a household-centred religion may also be perceived operating at Çatalhöyük and other Neolithic sites (Bloch 2010, 161–162). Neolithic Crete shared that spiritual milieu, albeit in the context of an indigenous process.

Animal (zoomorphic) figurines

Before leaving this discussion of figurines, mention should be made of animal figurines of the Cretan Neolithic. Notwithstanding the scarcity of known examples it is, nevertheless, surprising in that they remain almost entirely neglected in scholarly discussion. Some of the fragments are, however, mentioned and illustrated in Evans’s reports (1964). Among those that are recognisable beyond ‘indeterminate quadruped’ are snakes and bulls.

Goodison and Morris have commented on the privileging of human (anthropomorphic) figurines over comparable animal (zoomorphic) figurines in discussions of Early Minoan religion (Goodison & Morris 1998, 117). The same criticism may be levied upon discussions of Cretan Neolithic religion (Goodison & Morris 1998, 114). Until a more represented corpus of Cretan Neolithic animal figurines is available, comments are necessarily superficial. But two points may be made. First, animals associated with the household are represented – domesticated cattle and snakes (there are many traditions of the house-snake in the Mediterranean area and elsewhere). Second, the bull and the snake are the two key animals associated with later Minoan religion. Perhaps it is possible to infer from this a degree of continuity between Neolithic and Minoan spiritual symbolism.

Human burials

Whether burials are truly part of religion or not is a much contested issue in archaeology. For the purposes of this chapter, it will be assumed that they are. It is striking, however, just how little evidence there is of primary burial practices for Neolithic Crete. As an aside, curiously there is similarly little burial evidence for the highpoint of Minoan civilisation in the Neopalatial period (conventionally dated c. 1700–1450 cal BC). At Knossos, there are a few intramural infant-burials in the earliest and the latest phases (Triantaphyllou 2008, 139, 146–148). The few adult bones found were disarticulated. Human bones have been found in many of the Late and Final Neolithic caves sites, notably the Trapeza Cave on the Lasithi Plain (Pendlebury *et al.* 1936) and Pelekita (Davaras 1979) on the east coast. In all cases, the bones are not just disarticulated, but they also strongly suggest secondary burial practices. In the case of the Ayios Charalambos cave, used mainly in the Minoan period, Neolithic human bones appear to have been brought there from elsewhere (McGeorge 2008, 578). While this is frustrating for the understanding of Neolithic mortuary practices, it does reveal something important for the present theme – the manipulation and handling of human bones (Tomkins 2013, 69–71).

Looking ahead to the Early Minoan period, tombs are the most monumental structures of that period. Used over many generations, with 100s, and in some case 1000s, of burials, it is clear that Early Minoan funerary rituals were elaborate, involving secondary burial and the extensive handling of bones. As sites within what was regarded as a sacred landscape, tombs were also associated with notions of celestial cosmologies, with entrances orientated eastward towards the sun (Goodison 1989; Goodison & Morris 1998, 118–119). Clearly, an important component of Early Minoan religion was a cult of the ancestors.

Although the Neolithic evidence for mortuary practices is more tenuous, it reveals the same pattern of activities.

As noted above, it is conventionally argued that some of the Neolithic caves, with evidence for secondary and primary burial, were also used as habitations. This creates a variation of intramural burial. From a religious perspective, intramural burial, whether the primary burial of infants, or the secondary burial of bones, serves to emphasise familial/community continuity. It binds the living and the dead together, and creates a spiritual community that transcends ordinary divisions of life and death, natural and supernatural. This strongly suggests that the ancestor cult, in evidence during the Early Minoan period, had its roots in Cretan Neolithic practices.

This pattern of burial practice supports the evidence of the social role played by Cretan Neolithic figurines. Both categories of evidence emphasise the individual, the familial, the household – religion as a restricted, household activity, without any sense of elaboration or organisation.

Feasting

Phaistos, in the south, is the site of Minoan Crete's second major palaces. Habitation, in the form of small hilltop houses, begins in the Late Neolithic, seemingly as late as Final Neolithic, and contemporary with the latest Knossian Neolithic layers (Todaro & Di Tonto 2008, 177–181). At several locations on the site, two near the later West Court, and one near the later Central Court, was found evidence for the extensive preparation and consumption of food and drink. That this was more than merely domestic use is indicated by the scale of the material, and the fact that any associated architecture appears to be ephemeral, linked to periodic 'episodes of consumption' (Todaro & Di Tonto 2008, 181–189). The excavators characterise this material as evidence of ceremonial feasting, organised by the Phaistos households, but drawing in other local and regional communities. It is fairly clear that this is the beginning of Phaistos's Minoan role as a regional power-centre and palace.

In terms of the interpretation of Neolithic religion, it reveals two major aspects. First, it suggests that ceremonial activity now transcends the limitations of the household, and is being used to express a sense of greater community identity and cohesion (one of the key factors common to religions). Second, it is associated with a greater socio-cultural complexity. Linked together, what is apparent here is the beginning, in Neolithic Crete, of the institutionalisation of ceremonial practices – religion, in the broadest sense, being used to support emergent hierarchies and socio-political structures.

Sacred landscapes?

The final body of evidence to consider in this chapter highlights the need for greater research into the notion of

a sacred landscape during the Cretan Neolithic. The best attested shrines of the later Minoan sacred landscape are represented by the cave sanctuaries and mountain peak-sanctuaries. The presence of Late and Final Neolithic pottery in Minoan sacred-cave contexts would suggest a degree of religious continuity (Tyree 1974; 2001; Tomkins 2013). The precise nature of that continuity is, however, difficult to ascertain. It is highly unlikely that the caves were sacred in the same manner and reflective of the same spiritual concepts during the Neolithic as they were during the succeeding Bronze Age. A more plausible scenario of the sanctity of caves such that of Eileithya at Amnissos, Psychro on Dikte, as well as the already mentioned caves of Trapeza and Pelekita, is that their combined use as places of secondary burial, performative ritualisation, and possible habitation during the Neolithic imbued them with a symbolic, spiritual value, that evolved into specific localised landscape cults. Furthermore, Eileithya and Psychro, over time, became Pan-Cretan cult sites that continued in use into the Greek period later (Tyree 1974; 2001; Watrous 1996). The complexity of that later use undoubtedly had relatively simple beginnings.

While the connection between Neolithic caves and Minoan sacred caves is well-attested in the archaeological record, the possibility of Neolithic sacred mountains is presently only an intriguing possibility warranting further investigation. Minoan peak-sanctuaries, exemplified by the mountain peaks of Petsophas (Myres 1903) and Jouktas (Karetsou 1981) among approximately 30 of the known sites, are essentially the landscape-shrines of the Minoan palatial period (Peatfield 1990). The archaeological evidence for their use comprises large numbers of clay figurines and pottery. While some of the sites commence in the immediate period before the emergence of the palaces, at c. 2000 cal BC or earlier, the zenith of the peak-sanctuary phenomenon occurs during the Middle Bronze Age (c. 2000–1700 cal BC). During this period, all the known peak-sanctuaries were in use, suggesting it was a popular, non-elite cult. The second phase of peak-sanctuary use was in Minoan Crete's Neopalatial period (c. 1700–1400 cal BC), when the cult became dominated by the palatial elites.

What does this have to do with Cretan Neolithic religion? During the excavation of the small peak-sanctuary of Atsipadhes in west Crete, Final Neolithic pottery was found on the lowest level of the site (Peatfield 1992, 71–72; Morris & Batten 2000). Although the pottery was intermixed with the later peak-sanctuary pottery and figurines, there was no evidence of material which filled the chronological gap between Final Neolithic and Early Minoan III/Middle Minoan I (the date of the earliest Minoan material). This comprises a period of at least 1000 years. The Atsipadhes Neolithic material is all pottery; there are no figurines, bones, stone tools or evidence of domestic debris. It is, therefore, very hard

to characterise – not definitively religious, but definitely not domestic. The only potential evidence of ritual use comprised two upturned cups placed on the natural *terra rossa*. Uncertain of how exactly to interpret this material, the Atsipadhes team requested excavators of other peak-sanctuaries to look for the presence of similar Neolithic material amongst their collections of finds. Since then, Neolithic pottery, again in the lowest strata, has been identified at Traostalos in East Crete (Chrysoulaki 2001, 63), and is also reported from several other peak-sanctuaries, including Jouktas (Karetsou pers. comm.). Until that material is published, however, the notion of Cretan Neolithic sacred mountains remains conjectural, but admittedly attractive.

Conclusions

It has to be acknowledged that in comparison with other Neolithic sites and cultures, the evidence for religion on Neolithic Crete is disappointing and frustrating. With the inevitable focus on Knossos, however, it must be repeated that this evidence is drawn from only 1% of the site. Is that 1% representative of the whole, or are there more spectacular finds hidden under the Minoan remains? If the 100+ figurines are considered as numerically representative, that would mean there are 10,000 figurines at Neolithic Knossos, which would constitute a far greater corpus of figurines than any other Neolithic site in the east Mediterranean. But this is speculation.

In summary: for the greater part of the Cretan Neolithic, the evidence for religious practices comprises figurines found in secondary habitation deposits. This suggests a restriction of symbolic, spiritual, behaviour to the needs of the individual and the household. There is no evidence for complex belief-systems, expressed in the form of large-scale rituals or developed iconographies. Although the conventional picture of Knossos being isolated from contact with mainland communities is being challenged by current research, the likelihood that it was the only major settlement on the island would have created a rather inward-looking community perspective.

The general mortuary evidence, intramural infant-burial and secondary treatment of remains, also suggests a similar focus on the household, on family.

Where the evidence for Cretan Neolithic religion does become more apparent and substantial, is during the Late, and especially Final, Neolithic periods. It is no coincidence that this is also the time when the Cretan population expanded, and dispersed away from Knossos over the remainder of the island. Contact with cultures outside Crete appears to have increased, and there may also have been an influx of people or groups arriving from abroad. What is most notable in the Final Neolithic is a significant increase in cultural complexity on Crete. It is for this reason that

scholars identify this as also being an incipient Chalcolithic period, with more affinity to the following Bronze Age, than with the preceding earlier Neolithic periods. It is an acknowledgment that most of the Cretan Neolithic appears to represent a cultural stasis. If this interpretation is correct, it is no surprise that the diversity in religious evidence also occurs in the Final Neolithic: greater numbers and elaboration of figurines, more evidence for mortuary activity, the possible construction of a sacred landscape, the beginning of institutionalised ceremonial practices – they are the spiritual counterpart to the dynamic social processes which led to Minoan Crete.

Within a broader discussion of the development of religion, it is also clear that any model which makes religion, in organised form, as co-phenomenal with the emergence of the Neolithic, is just too simplified. On Crete, the factors which restricted the manifestation of Neolithic culture to merely subsistence strategies, clearly also restricted the manifestation of religious behaviour. This is not to suggest that Neolithic Crete offers in any way an alternative interpretative model for the development of religion. But it is a salutary reminder that the interaction of religion and culture is a more complex process than can be accounted for in any present explanatory models.

Note

- 1 There is one particular Cretan Neolithic figurine which many regard as decisively a goddess image, the so-called Ierapetra Goddess, 14.5 cm in height, and rendered in a cross-legged seated posture, the emphasis on large buttocks and thighs allows comparison with Balkan Palaeolithic and later 'fat lady' figurines. The problem with this figure is that it is a surface find, without context. It has not yet been definitively proved to be ancient, and Ierapetra is often used as the supposed find area for archaeological fakes on Crete. Essentially, this figurine cannot be used in hypotheses advocating Cretan Neolithic religion.

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