28. High places and royal shrines[1]

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Introduction

Tara's historical associations with the high kings of Ireland give it a unique role in Irish culture. This paper sets out to contextualise that role cross-culturally by drawing comparisons within a broader phenomenology of high-place shrines, particularly those that have royal associations. Presented here, therefore, are two case-studies: one archaeological (the mountain shrines of Bronze Age Crete, the Minoan peak sanctuaries) and one literary-historical (the *bamoth* high places of biblical Israel). The Minoan archaeological comparison obviously has no direct connection with Ireland, but it may illuminate some of the processes in the evolution and organisation of royal hill-shrines. The biblical case-study may have other resonances, however, given that Irish medieval chroniclers made conscious efforts to create a biblical genealogy for the high kings who claimed Tara, and played upon its symbolism.

Peak sanctuary historical summary

Although the Minoan peak sanctuaries started as popular shrines, associated with the spiritual concerns of the peasantry and shepherds who frequented the Cretan mountains (Rutkowski 1986, 185; Peatfield 1987; 1990, 126; 2000), the reservoir of spiritual prestige that they elicited within Minoan culture made them attractive to the élite of the palaces (Peatfield 1987; 1990, 126–30). The cultural highpoint of Minoan civilisation is the period when Crete was dominated by 'palaces'—most famously, of course, Knossos. This covers the time of the Middle Bronze Age and the first half of the Late Bronze Age, approximately 1900–1400 BC. This is conventionally divided into two periods, the Protopalatial period (1900–1700 BC) and the Neopalatial period (1700–1450 BC). Most of the famous Minoan artefacts, especially the pictorial pieces such as wall-paintings, carved stone vessels and gold rings (Morris 2004), all of which show religious scenes, are from the Neopalatial period.

This relates to the peak sanctuaries in that we can also observe a division between the two palatial periods; there are changes in distribution pattern and in the character of the cult, manifest in types of offerings. Simply put, all the 25 known peak sanctuaries have archaeological material from the Protopalatial period, but only eight have material from the Neopalatial period, suggesting that the others fell out of use.[2] These eight remaining Neopalatial peak sanctuaries are associated with palace and urban centres that dominated the economic infrastructure of the Neopalatial phase. I have suggested elsewhere that this indicates that the peak sanctuaries, from being originally a popular cult, were centralised, appropriated into a palatial cult (Peatfield 1987; 1990, 126–30). Furthermore, this was part of a more general élite effort to dominate Minoan religion, as an ideological counterpart to the economic control that is also apparent.

Jouktas peak sanctuary as 'royal' peak sanctuary

At the centre of this process of élite centralisation of the peak sanctuary cult is Mount Jouktas (Fig. 1). Jouktas is the isolated mountain that rises south of the palace of Knossos and which visually dominates the landscape of north central Crete. In the later Greek and Roman period it was known as the Tomb of Zeus, an epithet perhaps inspired by its western profile, which resembles the face of a reclining man. It was this claim to have the tomb of the father of the gods which led other Greeks

Fig. 1—Mount Jouktas.

to label the Cretans as liars. A Greek inscription mentioning Zeus Soter (the Saviour) has been found on the mountain, and its modern sanctity arises from the chapel on its southern summit, dedicated to Afendis Christos, Christ the Lord. Its claim as the largest, richest and most important Minoan peak sanctuary relies on the site on its northern summit. This site has been excavated several times: surface-cleaned by Sir Arthur Evans in 1909 (Evans 1921, 151–9), briefly excavated in the 1960s, and fully revealed by the Greek archaeologist Alexandra Karetsou from the mid-1970s to mid-1990s (Karetsou 1981; forthcoming). The site has three terraces, supporting a multi-roomed structure focused on a low, built altar, around which was a deep fill, crammed with pottery, and the clay votive figurines characteristic of all peak sanctuaries. Encircling the site, but at some distance from it, is an extensive temenos wall, i.e. a wall defining the sacred boundary.

The chronological history of Jouktas makes it the longest-lived of all the peak sanctuaries. Early Minoan II pottery (*c.* 2500 BC) has been found in its rock crevices, and it was still in use in the latest palatial phase of Knossos from 1450 to 1400 BC (Karetsou, forthcoming). By this final period, Jouktas seems to have been the only peak sanctuary still in use. This suggests that the process of centralisation of the peak sanctuary cult continued through the Neopalatial period. Given the close association between Knossos and Jouktas, there is good reason to characterise Jouktas as a 'royal' peak sanctuary.

In some ways I hesitate to use the term 'royal' within this Minoan context, because it raises all sorts of anachronistic associations with the King Minos of Greek mythology and assumptions about the structure of the Minoan hierarchy. Nevertheless, it may serve for the moment as a useful shorthand label for Jouktas's élite role.

Jouktas and ancestral cult

The earliest material on the Jouktas peak sanctuary is Early Minoan II pottery (Karetsou, forthcoming). Given the continuity, this is likely to represent ritual usage at this early date. The question arises, therefore, as to whether the mountain was perceived as being sacred prior to the deposition of this material. Archaeological invisibility of sacred sites within the landscape is a problem for us, especially as we know from anthropological reports that the phenomenon is attested in many cultures. How do we account for it? One analogy is that of Japan, where the *kami* spirits are deemed to dwell in the mountains. For early phases of Japanese cultural history, later records suggest an embargo on human settlement in mountain areas, specifically so as not to trespass on the domains of the *kami*. I have suggested elsewhere that this might account for some peculiarities of Neolithic and Early Minoan settlement patterns (Peatfield 1990, 125–6).

The *kami* are, in origin, ancestral spirits, and there is a prominent component of ancestor worship in Early Minoan religion, focused around communal tombs and cemeteries. Jouktas itself has no indication of burials on the mountain, but just to the north-east of the mountain is a low craggy hill on which is the cemetery of Archanes Phourni (Sakellarakis and Sakellarakis 1997, 158–267). Karetsou (forthcoming) suggests that there may be some correlation between the cemetery and the first use of the sanctuary. The cemetery continued to be used throughout the whole Minoan period, and it has been suggested that the rich tombs were the burial places of the Knossian élite. Topographically, there is a strong intervisibility between the cemetery and the peak sanctuary (Fig. 2). Contemporary GIS research on the dynamic nature of the Minoan ritual landscape strongly suggests that the Phourni cemetery was an important way-station on processional routes between the Jouktas peak sanctuary and the palace of Knossos (see Soetens 2009). This ancestral component in the phenomenology of royal sanctuaries and mountain sanctuaries has a clear bearing on the understanding of Tara and its early tombs.

Jouktas buildings

Fig. 2—Mount Jouktas seen from Phourni cemetery.

Initially the peak sanctuary on Jouktas seems to have been simply an open area, similar to that on other peak sanctuaries. By Middle Minoan II, around 1800 BC, a monumental terrace had been constructed on the eastern side of the summit (Karetsou 1981; forthcoming). This was done while the other popular regional peak sanctuaries were still in use, and it continued long after they were abandoned. This architectural expansion soon developed to include the multi-roomed building mentioned above. Its walls, even though built of rough stone, were substantial enough to support a roof. It is possible that the stone vases which seem to show shrines in the mountains refer to Jouktas, even in a somewhat idealised form. At the heart of the sanctuary, however, was the open summit, an area of bare rock on which an altar was built. The open area was approached by a ramp on the south side of the building and its terraces (Karetsou, forthcoming).

Again, the progressive investment of resources on this scale towards the enlargement of the sanctuary, unique for a peak sanctuary, clearly indicates the ongoing significance that it had for the Knossian élite.

Élite iconography

It is not just architectural expansion which reveals the interaction between Jouktas and élite concerns. The aforementioned stone vases—a fragment from Knossos and the complete rhyton ritual vessel from the Zakro palace in eastern Crete—were made in palatial workshops. The remains of gold leaf on the Zakro rhyton not only hints at the visual magnificence of the finished piece but clearly demonstrates the fundamental symbolic importance of the imagery.

Other instances of mountain imagery reinforce this élite symbolic association with the mountain. The Mountain Mother sealing, found in a Knossos shrine, places a woman on top of a mountain at the centre, flanked by lions, creating a tripartite heraldic arrangement, typical of Minoan religious symbolism (Fig. 3). A man to the side salutes her, and the religious resonance of the whole scene is emphasised by the multi-tier platform with sacred horns. I and other

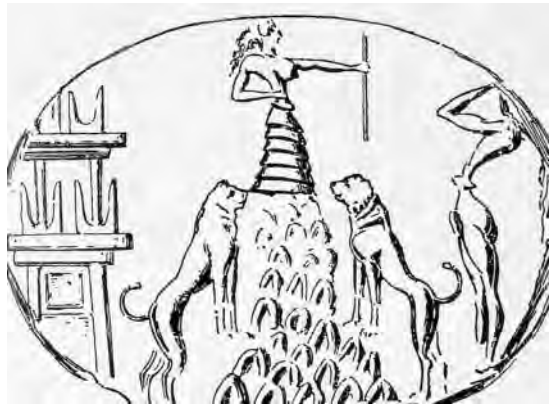

Fig. 3—Knossos 'Mountain Mother' sealing.

scholars have suggested that this scene, almost certainly from a gold ring, was an image of propaganda by which a change of rule at Knossos was sanctified by the mountain deity (Peatfield 1983, 278; 1990, 128–9).

The spiritual aspect of the link between mountain and ruler is even more closely signalled in the throne-room at Knossos (Fig. 4). Here the back of the throne, itself flanked by supernatural creatures, wingless griffins, clearly resembles the heraldic symbolism of the Mountain Mother symbolism and the schematic mountain flanked by goats atop the shrine on the Zakro peak sanctuary rhyton.

What we see here, therefore, is a symbolic merging of the exterior and the interior, the mountain and the palace, whereby the sacred significance of the mountain is used to sanctify the position of the ruler.[3]

Peak sanctuary rituals

Symbolic associations aside, what can peak sanctuary rituals reveal about possible connections with élite, even royal, interests? The first ritual that springs to mind is procession. I have already referred to processional routes between Knossos and Jouktas. Evans certainly identified a road between the two sites, sections of which are still obvious today. Karetsou's excavations at the peak sanctuary have also revealed a subsidiary building just outside the large gate in the temenos wall, at the site of Alonaki (Karetsou, forthcoming). It has open areas and

Fig. 4—Knossos palace throne.

evidence of cooking suggestive of a refreshment stop for large groups of people just before entering the sacred area. The processional linkage between Knossos and Jouktas is further emphasised by the alignment of the main entrance corridor of the Knossos palace with the Jouktas mountain. This corridor is called the Procession Corridor because of the Procession Fresco, bringing a female figure of ritual importance into the palace.

The main peak sanctuary finds expressive of ritual action are the ubiquitous clay figurines, representing the worshippers who offered them and their animals. In the Neopalatial period these offerings are enriched with jewellery, seals and especially stone libation tables, suggestive of purification rituals. A proportion of these are inscribed with Linear A symbols, the undeciphered writing system of Neopalatial Crete—another indication of élite connections between peak and palace (Karetsou *et al.* 1985).

Returning to the clay figurines, although their primary offering function expresses the worshippers' concerns for the health and well-being of themselves and their animals, Christine Morris and I have consistently argued that they also reveal a shamanic element in Minoan religion. Linking the figurines' postures to the actions portrayed on the later gold rings, we have further argued that this access to visionary states was monopolised by the Minoan élite in the Neopalatial period (Morris and Peatfield 2001; 2006).

Such a hypothesis fits the interpretation of Jouktas as an élite shrine. The main purposes of shamanic rituals focus around divination, particularly in relation to healing and the weather. The healing powers of monarchs are well attested in the historical and anthropological record. So too are associations with the weather and that corollary of weather lore, calendrical systems. Early Mesopotamian kings and Egyptian pharaohs invested a great deal in calenders as a device to ensure the predictability of the seasonal cycle (Claggett 1995).

So too did Chinese emperors, from the very beginnings of their civilisation. Many of the Shang dynasty oracle-bones express concerns about the

weather and advise sacrifices to ensure good weather (Keightley 1978; 2000). Furthermore, the whole Chinese concept of the Mandate of Heaven, by which dynasties claimed the divine right to rule, was predicated on the continuity of good weather for agriculture. Ecological disasters were the main sign of the removal of the Mandate of Heaven. Consequently, an essential part of Chinese imperial ritual was centred on sacrifices for good harvest carried out at the circular Altar of Heaven (Harrington 2000). Subsidiary rituals included procession, restrictions on clothing and diet, and the architecture of the altar symbolically expressed the union of Earth and Heaven enabled by the emperor.

Mountains make obvious observatories for the heavenly signs necessary to predict the weather and make calenders. While theories linking Minoan peak sanctuaries with stellar constellations have so far proved speculative and unconvincing, there are clear links with the solar cycle. Several peak sanctuaries have alignments towards landscape features which mark sunrise on solstices and equinoxes. So too does the throne-room of Knossos, already noted for its associations with mountain symbolism (Goodison 2001; 2004). There is a clear universality here in this nexus of mountains, rulers and heavenly phenomena. Given the association of Irish culture with sun symbolism, it would be most interesting to know whether Tara too sustained such symbolism and/or acted as an observatory.

Sacrifice is the last ritual to mention before leaving Jouktas. Evidence for animal bones is scarce at other peak sanctuaries but it does exist at Jouktas (Karetsou, forthcoming). Even more conclusive is the presence of a sacrifice shrine on the north slope of Jouktas at the site of Anemospilia (Sakellarakis and Sakellarakis 1997, 268–311). Its notoriety from the evidence for human sacrifice has distracted scholarship from the point that it seems to be purpose-built for sacrifice and offering, including a low altar, channels and vessels for collecting blood, and animal bones. After the building was abandoned, it is possible that sacrificial rituals moved into the peak sanctuary proper, if they were not already carried out there, to judge by the altar there already mentioned. This 'new' ritual use of a peak sanctuary for sacrifice chronologically coincides with the other innovations at Jouktas, which suggest its growing role as an élite shrine, used to reinforce royal authority and its monopolisation of certain rituals.

If this is an accurate interpretation of the evidence, I suggest that this is a phenomenological religious process which bears comparison with many cultures and sites, and against which Tara might also be measured.

High places in Israel

Leaving Crete, the obvious resonance of this paper's title is with the famed 'high places' of the Bible's Old Testament. The Hebrew word translated as 'high place' is *bamah* (plural *bamoth*). Our English translation actually derives from the Greek translation, *ta ypsila* (literally 'high place'). Even though the New English Bible further translates this as 'hill-shrines', current biblical scholarship seems dissatisfied with this terminology, calling into question whether all *bamoth* were literally on hills or mountains or whether there was a more metaphorical meaning which would allow urban shrines also to be called *bamoth*. Following this, biblical archaeologists have taken to applying the term *bamoth* to a type of Iron Age urban shrine, characterised by a raised open platform with an altar, used for sacrificial rituals. Quite possibly it is the altar that is the true '*bamah*'.

Leaving aside the issue of whether archaeology and the Bible coincide comfortably or not, there is a reading of the biblical account of 'high places' which may further assist our understanding of the phenomenology of 'high places' as royal shrines. As already noted, the medieval chronicler-monks who established Tara's reputation as the seat of the Irish high kings also gave those kings a biblical pedigree; they would surely have been aware of the connections between the Jewish kings and 'high places'.

The range of usages among the 102 mentions of *bamah* in the Old Testament include mountains, shrines and funeral mounds (a combination of sacred associations that we have already observed). In their origins, the *bamoth* represent a Canaanite, pre-Jewish, stratum of popular cult. The Israelites' worship at these shrines was taken by later prophets as an example of their faithlessness to Yahweh. The *bamoth* of Israel and Judah were finally totally destroyed by King Josiah (II Kings 23:

8–20) and were never rebuilt (this may account for their elusiveness in the modern archaeological record). But before this bloody event we can trace a more subtle transformation in their use.

In the time of Samuel the high priest, i.e. before Israel became a kingdom, each city seems to have had its own *bamah*, where worship was sanctioned (or at least not condemned) within the practice of Judaism (I Samuel 9: 12–25; 10: 5–10). They were places of sacrifice and prophetic vision. Interestingly for our broad theme, Samuel's identification and anointing of Saul as the first king of Israel is bound up with references to worship at the *bamah*.

It is, however, within the stories of the greatest Israelite kings, David and Solomon, that we see the most overt associations of *bamoth* with the religious elements of royal power. David built an altar to God on Mount Moriah, as a clear prelude to the idea of the Temple in Jerusalem. Accounts of Solomon's reign make great play on the fact that he worshipped at the *bamoth*, particularly the 'chief' one at Gibeon (I Kings 3:4). Gibeon does indeed seem to have been a main, maybe the main, *bamah*. In David's reign it housed the Tabernacle of Yahweh (I Chronicles 16: 39; 21: 29). It is at the *bamah* of Gibeon that God speaks to Solomon, instructing him to build the Temple. The implication is that Solomon centralised the cult of the *bamah*, or at least took it under royal control.

In terms of landscape analysis, it is even possible to understand the Temple of Jerusalem as a royal hill-shrine. Topographically Jerusalem is set within the hills that separate the fertile coastal lands of Israel from the deserts of the interior. The site identified as the original city of David is set on the slopes of Mount Moriah overlooking the Kidron Valley. The expansion of the city to include the summit of the mountain (called Zion), i.e. what became the Temple Mount, can plausibly be interpreted as royal monopolisation of religious power represented and expressed through the symbol of the mountain, the ultimate 'high place'.

The process of royal centralisation of the *bamoth* is even more explicit when Jeroboam split the kingdom from the descendants of Solomon. In the northern kingdom King Jeroboam set up *bamoth*, with the cult centralised at Bethel, where the priests of all the other *bamoth* were compelled to serve (I Kings 12: 31–3). He additionally maintained control by personally appointing the priests (I Kings 13: 33–4).

The biblical narrative of 'high places' may therefore be summarised as follows: the Canaanite *bamoth* were popular localised shrines, dedicated primarily to Canaanite deities. They were used by the Israelites, with some blurring as to the deities worshipped, probably Yahweh as well as the local Canaanite gods. By placing the Tabernacle of Yahweh at Gibeon, the priestly/royal hierarchy was acknowledging the syncretism but in an attempt to take control. The cult was taken under royal patronage by Solomon, and rigorously controlled and centralised by Jeroboam. The end of the Israelite process is the destruction by Josiah, but even this is a form of centralising control: under the guise of monotheistic fidelity, the royal/priestly hierarchy suppressed the popular, and therefore less controllable, cult practices, and achieved a ritual monopoly by centralising worship at the Temple of Jerusalem, itself built, appropriately, on Mount Zion.

Conclusions

The possibility that the Irish chroniclers consciously modelled their account of Tara on Old Testament ideas I leave to others to consider. Nevertheless, I do suggest that there is a pattern of similarities in the phenomenology of 'high places' and royal shrines across cultures. While such cross-cultural comparisons are unpopular in contemporary preferences for narrow research specialisations, we should occasionally look up and acknowledge some of the universalities in the ways that humanity configures its spiritual landscape.

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Notes

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2. These numbers of peak sanctuaries are currently in the process of revision by current research. An account based on the latest research will be presented in Peatfield *et al.*, forthcoming.

3. The significance of this concept of symbolically 'bringing the mountain into the palace' will be further strengthened by recent finds from the palace of Galatas in central Crete, where Giorgos Rethemiotakis reports clay models of a peak sanctuary and even a rock garden (Rethemiotakis, forthcoming).