

The Mother God Of Crete

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(FERAFERIA)



Svetlana Raises a Feraferia Phytala at Knossos, Crete, 1967

Archaeological find unearths vast storehouse of knowledge as man digs into history via the Palace of Minos in the heart of Knossos, center of civilization before the first Greek people in the Aegean.

On the Island of Crete, a truly erotic civilization flowered millennia before Christ.

Minos Kalokairinos, a Cretan merchant, was digging in his olive grove one morning in 1878. He uncovered part of a massive wall. Spading farther down, he reached foundations also composed of huge blocks of stone.

News of the find came to the ears of an American newsman, W. J. Stillman. Together, Kalokairinos and Stillman crawled into rooms filled with debris beneath the olive-shaded mound by Mt. Juktas. Thus opened one of the most sensational chapters in the annals of archaeology. These rooms were compartments in the vast "Palace of Minos" at the heart of the prehistoric city of Knossos. Knossos was the center of a civilization full-blown before the arrival of the earliest Greek peoples of the Aegean.

In 1893, Sir Arthur Evans, that great viking of antiquity's uncharted seas, discovered in Athenian shops, tiny stone seals and signet rings, covered with an unknown hieroglyphic. He traced them to their origins in Island Crete. Having purchased the land on which Kalokairinos accidentally made his architectural finds, Sir Arthur commenced systematic excavations in 1899. The results were astounding. Three great palaces, each generated from the ruins of the former structure, were re-introduced to the light of day.

The amazing complexity of these buildings probably inspired the Greek legends of the labyrinth that secured the deadly Minotaur. The life span of the palaces stretched over more than 1,000 years from the end of the Neolithic. A whole world of dazzling civilization that ended 500 years before the first Olympiad (776 BC), and from which the West obviously took its cultural roots unawares had lain in the rich soil of Crete, totally unknown and unsuspected for millennia. The power and wealth of the Minoans was derived mainly from maritime trade.

The “Minoan Peace,” extending from about 2500 BC until about 1300 BC, was virtually unbroken. This is the longest peace ever maintained by any major civilization. What was the nature of the people who claim, though mutely, this sterling distinction?

Judging from the fragmentary remains of their works, the Minoan people were very handsome, physically vigorous, talented and joyful. Three salient facts concerning their way of life should be emphasized. First, they were religious. Religion penetrated every phase of their daily life. But this religion was not grim, gloomy or at war with instinct. On the contrary, it expanded life gloriously and showered rainbow hues of fully discharging libido on everything with which the Minoans associated themselves.

Their art remained responsive to that sensitive impulse to celebrate nature, which became a part of their basic religion. Consequently, Cretan monuments and artifacts, unlike the examples of most other civilizations, never became rigidly geometric or stodgily and theocratically rectilinear. The ancient island styles are gaily curvilinear, mercurially animated, and evince that fairyland vitality and charm which can only originate from freely proliferating visionary activity. Some authorities believe the Minoan artists were “eidetic,” that is, able to project visible their psychedelic fantasies against whatever surface they worked upon and trace them out there.

Lastly, until the cataclysmic end of their unwritten history, the Minoans focused their faith in the feminine mysteries, the feminine image of deity. The history of culture makes it starkly apparent that reverential centralization of the feminine principle guarantees culture’s firm, instinctual implantation in nature, whereas social and religious centralization of masculinity precipitates dislocation between man and nature, and so ultimately between man and man.

The place of woman in Minoan society was exalted, for they were representatives of the Great Goddess, omnipotent mistress of the mysteries of birth, growth, love, death and rebirth. All sacramental agriculturalists associate sex and fertility with the necessity of death, but not pessimistically. The Goddess becomes the mistress of the underworld and therefore of the afterworld. Yet, since the vegetational round is recurrent, archaic mentality “posits” time as a latticework of recurrent “timelets” which are eternally self-renewing in this scheme. So death signifies an initiatory prefix to birth, and the mother shines forth as the natural “initiatrice” of this process. Death is her requirement for the fresh start, and, by virtue of later refinements of intuition, death confers her mystical boon of transformative regeneration.

We induce from remaining cult objects that the Minoans conceived of their Goddess in many

forms. These fall into perhaps three broad categories: House Goddess, Plant Goddess, and Wilderness or Mountain Goddess.

The first mentioned type was tutelary, or guardian, of the house, whether simple family dwelling or palace. In this capacity, the snake was sacred to her. It connected the dwelling with the bowels of the earth. Every family cherished its domestic snake. Even today in rural Greece, homes exhibit little holes in their floors, which provide entrances for snakes, who are the animal forms of ancestors. These ancestors must be placated with milk and other offerings. And they must be satisfied that the family still conducts its life with decorum in accordance with honored tradition.

The people of prehistoric Crete practiced the most charming observances with respect to their tutelary snakes. From sections of sewer pipes then in common use (the Minoans were consummate engineers), they fashioned little tubular dwellings for their serpent protectors. Lustral tripod tables were fitted with rounded cavities to hold milk offerings. Four twisting channels on the surface terminated in the central depression. In these, the snakes rested as they sipped their meal.

Snakes coil all about one figurine of the Goddess or her priestess that was produced in the Middle Minoan III period. Her eyes stare with the widened bulge of one who is in the grip of a trance, in rapture of that element with which serpents oracularly link man:earth.

Later, birds, probably doves, were coaxed to inhabit the tubular shelters also. In this way, the House Goddess became unifier of both celestial and subterranean realms, and converged their virtues in the middle ground of man's livelihood.

Athena Parthenos is probably the descendant of the Minoan Very Holy One of home and palace, as is Hera. Athena's cult associated Cecropian serpent with Screech Owl. The warlike Homeric aspect of Athena, opposed to her more peaceful demeanor as presented by the sculptor Phidias, derives from the fact that for the Achaean invaders of mainland Greece, life was "warfare," and the home always a fortified citadel.

The remains of sacral furniture, recovered from shrines in the larger Minoan homes and palaces, show a preference for a certain complex of symbolic objects. The most ubiquitous

symbol is the famous double axe, borne only by women. This thrilling cult utensil was probably not developed from analogous instruments of war, but from common tools of woodsman and carpenter. It is the emblem of supreme feminine authority, because the builder's axe makes possible the peaceful sway of domestic order. In design it is a beautiful pictographic epitome of the four quarters of the moon, that heavenly body **par excellence**, the ministrant of the mysterious provinces of female fecundity and passion. On pottery, the double axe profile sometimes suggests a butterfly or a winged and robed "fairy princess." In this form, it shows the influence of the Egyptian Ankh.

The double axe is frequently attached to a bull's head, another widespread object of veneration in the ancient island culture. So the axe may have been employed to sacrifice that animal. The bull embodied the ambivalent awe the Minoans entertained concerning earth's terrific powers. It must be remembered that Crete has often suffered earthquakes. Recent scholarship insists it was a very severe quake that terminated with complete devastation the third and last period of Minoan civilization in its foremost concentration, Knossos. The surrounding city, in those times, harbored about 100,000 souls.

The modern contest of bullfighting undoubtedly stems from the incredible Minoan custom of acrobatic bull grappling. Aristocratic youths, female as well as male, clad only in breechclouts, flipped over the backs of charging bulls by leverages executed on their horns. In these games, it seems the bulls were not killed, as is the case today in Provençal. Bull hide shields, shaped to the voluptuous swellings and trim waist of the Great Lady, were worshiped and carried in fertility dances.

The bull's "horns of consecration" appeared in all shrines and even on the courses of high palace walls. Between these horns, stylized in stone, ceramic or plaster was stationed the double axe, or the Korythale. The Korythale is the Holy Youth Bough, the tender shoot of a sacred plant. In Minoan icons, the Goddess sometimes appears in the company of a girl; maybe she is a daughter like Persephone is to Demeter in classic Greece. The Korythale connotes all that is fragile, dainty and precious about young life upsurging. It is the quivering wand of delectable "nymphancy," that which is uncalled, unsheathed and wondrously susceptible in its lambent nudity. **Psyche!**

But as Milton wrote, "Beauty has need of dragon protection." And so, about the maiden bough, Minoan artificers placed guardian gryphons or great bull's horns or other protective forms of earth-might.

Pillars were venerated by the Minoans for their phallic implications. The palace of Minos includes "pillar crypts" where libations were poured out about the bases of these generative shafts. Libation jugs, sometimes in forms of animals' heads (**Rhyta**), complete a rudimentary picture of the Great Goddess' home shrines, if we imagine there, also tripod hearths or braziers.

Pillars and Korythales take us out of the dwelling places of these favored people and into their fields and groves. The tree, like the pillar, was a characteristic epiphany of the Goddess. Much of our knowledge of Minoan religion is gleaned from collections of marvelous little seal and funeral rings that have come down to us from the golden ages of Crete. Many of these, like other kinds of seal impressions and like frescoes, show celebrations executed trees, in devotion to them.

A young God or male votary bends down the sacred bough, laden with fruit, as the Goddess, or her priestesses, dance ecstatically. From the small seals, it seems sacred trees were set aside in sanctuaries composed of walls and/or pillars which contained two-gated portals.

Dances, spiral, circular or whirling, were orgiastically responsive to the wondrous life cycles of trees.

The priestess, her long, wavy, serpentine tresses floating in air, extends her right arm and places her left index finger on her huge bosom, heaving and bare. In gay, flounced crinoline, or in skirt of animal skins, tightly aproned about her wasp waist to emphasize the topless magnificence of her sex, she whirls herself into trance like a dervish, wherefrom the Goddess of all wild, throbbing abundance manifests in blessing. The Goddess may descend ceremonially skirted in the courtly fashion, or gleamingly bedizened with only the jewels of her own nakedness, as she is in the western island paradise of the departed, Elysium or Hesperides. Among the waving trees... quince, fig, pomegranate, olive, plum and vine... phallic pillar stones are concupiscently erect before the dizzying vision. The pillars ripple with libations, overflow of earth's abundance.

One enchanting signet from Tyrins, a city of the mainland, the culture of which originated in Crete, shows an embarkation scene. In the foreground, a lady whose torso is fashionably bare, performs a dance which is, for all the world, an archaic version of the American "Jerk." "Vegetative dance" among the Minoans exhibits unmistakably those sinuous curvets which Wilhelm Reich described as characteristic of the orgasm reflex when it occurs completely. In distorted form, this kind of movement can be detected in the trance behavior of some spiritualist

mediums as well. Apparently the trance-dancing of tree worship in Minoan Crete was proof against those rigidities of “pleasure anxiety” which plague historic western peoples.

Artemis Caryatis (nut tree Artemis) is one of the many later Greek Goddesses of plant life and associated ecstatic, lascivious dances. If one only recalls stop motion movies of developing plants, the association becomes quite reasonable. Our ancient predecessors were much better observers than we are, for they saw from within, where time may be altered at will.

Having seen how the Goddess manifested in the house, the most humanly determined environment, and in the orchard, humanly intermediate between house and wilds, now we must consider how the Minoans envisioned her in terms of sheer wilderness. For indeed, a culture that poetically roots its members’ instincts in ecological process, maintains balance and gradation between the three zones of the Goddess: construction, cultivation, and wilderness. Unfortunately, the Minoans like all civilized peoples, did commit many sins against their woods and soil, the cumulative effects of which constrained their decline. And the same effects may cause our downfall if we do not heed the voice of “virgin wilderness.”

The Lady of The Mountains dominated the Queendom of unsullied Wilderness. There is convincing iconographical and mythological evidence in support of the thesis that the Greek Artemis originated in Minoan Crete. To funeral shrine, house shrine and grove shrine we must add the primordial Artemisian sanctuaries of cave, mountain peak and spring.

In the great cave of Psychro, many votive offerings have been recovered. The huge stalagmites of this cave were aniconic objects of worship; many of them were incised with the sign of the double axe. Artemis as Eileithyia was the Minoan patroness of childbirth. The cave is a natural symbol of this process.

Traces of fire in sanctuaries on mountain peaks recall the fire festivals so similar to the pre-Christian European mainland. The Cretan Goddess of high peaks was akin to Phrygian Kybele.

Sacramental platforms were constructed over the overflow of springs, and lustral basins were provided there for the vital waters. As Britomartis, “The Sweet Virgin,” the feral Goddess bathed in springs, those proveniences of what is perhaps the purest essence and splendor of wildness.

Who has not felt beatific bewilderment at the discovery of a spring in the mountains? The nestling springs' coolness, sweetness and clarity convey divinity with forceful ingenuousness to eroded senses. Fountainhead may easily be apprehended as Godhead.

Artemis as *Karpophoros*, or Lady of Wild Things, was Mistress of The Animals. In this role, her mountainous nymphancy becomes most conspicuous. She roams the thickets of hill and dale with her lions. A famous seal from Knossos shows her on top of a mountain or a cairn. She stands stiff and tall in the attitude of a lion tamer, beautiful in her pride and power, her outstretched arm holds aloft the staff of sovereignty. Two rampant lions heraldically flank the mountain, and a youthful male figure at one side assumes the posture of worship.

The mystery religions of classical Greece were most probably resurgences of Minoan mother religion within the patriarchal framework. The orgiastic worship of Dionysos stemmed from the wilderness reverences of the forgotten island civilization. Then, the Eleusinian Mysteries represented the untraced survival of Minoan rituals associated with domesticity, cultivation and the afterlife.

The Minoan Goddess was queen of the starry heavens also. The extant monuments do not emphasize the astrological aspects of her dominion. However, the signet of the so-called Ring of Mochlos shows the Naked Lady departing some shore with her sacred tree on a trim, crescent-shaped barque. The prow ends in a dog's head and the stern in a fish's tail. Now if one surveys the northern heavens during clear, summer nights, one may still see her lunar barque cross the stellar oceans between the constellations of Pisces and Virgo, which polarize the present axis of the equinoxes. For as Canes Venatici, the Hunting Dogs, are setting in the west, Pisces, the Fishes, are rising in the east. She sits between this dog prow and fish stern, perhaps at Polaris, between the Artemisian Bears and the Athenian house serpent of Draco. There she still patiently follows our sun in search of the next dawning of her erotic covenant, which weds man and all nature.

Note from Feraferia: We are looking for the original article to locate when Fred wrote this: it is likely from about 1967, since that is when Fred and Svetlana first went to Crete.