

From the Here and Now, to the There and Then: The Most Powerful Woman in Minoan Crete?

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Abstract *Nowadays, when we think of figurines and Palaikastro, in our minds' eye, we see the famous Palaikastro "kouros," a dazzling chryselephantine statuette, remarkable for the artist's stunning attention to detail and realism. However, other figurines were found at Palaikastro, that attract little attention in the here and now. We would like to suggest that at least one of them was likely quite famous and powerful in the there and then, despite a lack of individuating features and a diminutive size of just 4.5 cm in height. The figurine is a female based on dress and anatomical features, stylistically dated to the Neopalatial period and was found in an urban deposit, likely a pit containing ritual material, dated to the final palatial period. Based on its gesture placed in comparison to figures depicted on seals and sealings making a similar gesture, and its context that this figurine represented female power that communicated far more status and power than its modest appearance conveys.*

Introduction

When we consider Minoan figurines with regard to the site of Palaikastro in eastern Crete, we think of the famous Palaikastro "kouros" of the Neopalatial period, ca. 1700–1450 BCE (papers in MacGillivray, Driessen, and Sackett 2000).¹ The "kouros" is a dazzling chryselephantine statuette, remarkable for the artist's stunning attention to detail and realism. However, other figurines were found at Palaikastro, that attract little attention in the here and now. We would like to suggest that at least one of them served as a representation of an individual who was important, famous, and powerful in the there and then, despite a lack of individuating features and a diminutive size of just 4.5 cm in height (Fig. 1). The figurine is stylistically dated to the Neopalatial period (Verlinden 1984, no. 68), and was found in an urban deposit, likely a pit or pile containing ritual material. The bronze figure has an accentuated waist and breasts, leading us/the authors to believe this is a stylistic and anatomical depiction of a female body. Alexandra Alexandri (1994, 17), followed by Christine Morris (2009) observed that the breast, accentuated by clothing was the main distinguishing feature of females. Female bodies are further distinguished from male bodies by dress, summarized as an open bodice exposing breasts; the sleeve is rendered by a thickening of the upper arm with borders on the sleeves rendered in high relief that stops at the elbow; the neckline is sometimes rendered by light incision or in relief; the floor length, so-called flounced skirt follows the contours of the body: curving around the thighs with a hollow in the front with a series of oblique panels about halfway down, and a rolled sash which sits on the thighs. In contrast, male dress can be distinguished by a kilt with two panels in the front, and one in the back, the length varies; usually there is a codpiece or penis sheath; the sash or belt may be single, double, or triple, with a "sacred knot" sometimes visible on the right of the garment.² Thus, there is no ambiguity in the figurine and seal representations under discussion, as indicated by dress and accentuated breasts on females (*e.g.* Hitchcock 2009). The area under

¹ We warmly thank Dimitris Gavriel for his generous help. We are grateful to Alexia Spiliotopoulou for discussing the Katsambas figurine with us.

² This description is based on Verlinden's (1984) highly detailed study, and the reader is directed to her catalog for further consideration.

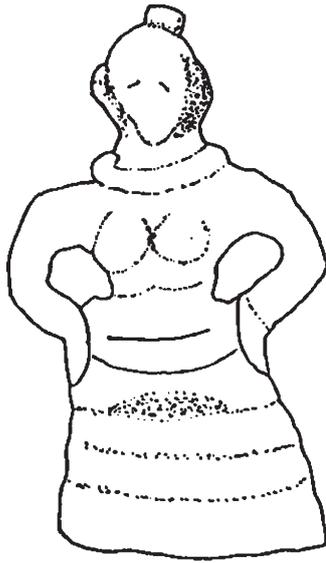


Fig. 1: Figurine from Palaikastro, bronze, making Gesture 3 (Hitchcock, after Verlinden 1984).

discussion at Palaikastro was designated as X41 was a Neopalatial doorless space, defined by LM I foundation walls. Although her facial features were not well defined, she is unusual for being the only bronze figurine from Crete with her hands placed on her hips, a gesture associated with status on seals and sealings. She is also one of only two female bronze figurines wearing jewellery in the form of a necklace. The deposit also contained white ashes, pottery, four to five clay bull heads, fragments of twenty clay lamps, and bovine bones and horn cores. Based on recent studies of foundation, repair, and termination rituals, this study reconsiders the significance of this figurine and concludes she was far more important than originally believed, perhaps the most powerful woman in Minoan Crete.

The figurine is among 114 Neopalatial anthropomorphic figurines that were published in a catalogue by Colette Verlinden.³ Two of the most significant characteristics of these figurines were gender and gesture whereby details were not obscured (Hitchcock 1997). Two particular gestures made by the figurines seemed to indicate particular status based on gender. One of these was gesture 4, or hands to chest, found on just two unusual male bronze figurines, a seal said to be from Chania

but located in the Benaki Museum (*CMS* V.1, no. 201), also made by the Palaikastro statuette. One of the two bronze figurines is Verlinden no. 93, a male bronze from Katsambas. This is one of only two bronze males that wears headgear.⁴ It wears a tall, conical cap. The other male bronze figurine is from the sacred enclosure at Kato Syme (Lebessi and Muhly 1990, fig. 14; see also, Hitchcock 1997). The seal, carved from Lapis Lakedaimonius, depicts a man standing between horns of consecration, and flanked by a winged goat and a Minoan genius (*CMS* V.1, no. 201; Rehak 1995, 227–228; Hitchcock 1997, 125). The other gesture that we assign high status to is Verlinden’s gesture 3, the hands-on-hips gesture made by just one female figurine that is the subject of this contribution. We make this assessment based primarily on the rarity of the gesture among female bronze figurines and based on its context as depicted on seal iconography. In seal iconography this suggestion is further supported by its depiction on centrally placed females in hierarchic scale as discussed below.

The Figurine

Verlinden stylistically dates the Palaikastro figurine (Fig. 1) to the “Classic” Neopalatial period. The eyes and ears are rendered, although other facial details are not noticeable. The skirt has unusual horizontal folds, and the hair is in a great curl on top of the head and falls down the back (see also Verlinden 1984; Bosanquet and Dawkins 1923, 122–123, fig. 103B). The figurine wears a necklace and is one of only two female bronze figurines wearing jewellery.⁵ Depictions of jewellery were more common on male figurines, in contrast to other media such as fresco paint-

³ These were out of a total of 287 figurines published by Verlinden (1984), which included earlier and later figurines as well as pieces too fragmentary to be included. See also Hitchcock 1997.

⁴ The Katsambas figurine was presented in detail, and interpreted as exemplifying youth, strength, and power at these proceedings by Alexia Spiliotopoulou. In addition, it was discussed by Hitchcock along with the Kato Syme figurine in more detail than is possible here at the 13th International Congress of Cretan Studies, 5–9 October 2022, Agios Nikolaos (Crete), at the American Society of

Overseas Research Annual Meeting 2022, and in a longer presentation presented as NEH Fellow Lecture at the Albright Institute for Archaeological Research, 1 December 2022, see <https://youtu.be/b0TCHuZbxlw>.

⁵ The other, in the Fogg Art Museum, wears bracelets. The excavations at Ayios Yeorgios sto Vouno, Kythera have increased the corpus of Minoan bronze figurines by forty per cent (see Banou 2018). The final publication of the figurines from Kythera will invariably change the statistics and it is hoped they inspire a reconsideration of the overall corpus of Minoan bronzes.

ing. The rarity of gesture 3 led to the conclusion that it indicated high status, perhaps divinity (Hitchcock 1997). Based on the gesture, Verlinden (1984, 52, n. 119) suggested that she might represent a priestess.

Context One: Seal Iconography

Although the facial features of the Palaikastro figurine were not well defined to the point of being barely visible and she is tiny, the hands-on-hips gesture she makes is associated with status in at least four instances on seals and sealings (*CMS* I, nos. 126, 159; II 3, no. 3; II 6, no. 1). In one instance, *CMS* II 3, no. 3 from Agia Triada, the figure is isolated except for what may be two trees. On the other three, the figure making the hands-on-hips gesture is centrally placed between two other figures. In two instances, the central figure is rendered in hierarchic scale, which appears exaggerated and indicates that the accompanying females were of lower status. The flanking female figures might have been attendants, priestesses, worshippers, young female children or minor deities who are also making gesture 3. In the case of *CMS* I, no. 159, a lentoid seal-stone from Mycenae, the breasts are more fully developed in the central figure than in the flanking figures, convincingly indicating age difference. In addition to the central female and the two small flanking figures, the sealing from Agia Triada includes a built structure with an associated tree (Nilsson 1927, 231, fig. 75; *CMS* II 6, no. 1; Hitchcock 1997; Tully 2018). A similar, network of relationships can be observed in a famous gold ring from Mycenae (Fig. 2; *CMS* I, no. 126; Hitchcock 1997; Tully 2018). Although the flanking figures in this seal are not rendered in hierarchic scale and are engaged in what appears to be tree shaking activity, they are both bent over in a subordinate position to the central figure who is positioned above them by virtue of her upright posture. Both flanking figures are associated with built structures, probably altars, and both built structures have free-standing columns, probably baetyls, and vegetation associated with them. In addition, the left structure associated with the female who is bent over, also has a small object below it to the left of the column which may be an eight-shield (also Rehak 1992). While this comparison is a chronological jump, it demonstrates a similar configuration in the use of a particular gesture employed by a female in a dominant position, depicted in Minoan style, and in the use of a precious material.⁶



Fig. 2: Gold Ring, Mycenae (redrawn by Hitchcock after *CMS* I, no. 126).

Context Two: Kea Statues

Most of the fifty terracotta statues in the Temple at Agia Irini on Kea are preserved well enough to be seen also making gesture 3. Miriam Caskey (1986, 36; more recently Gorogianni 2011) interpreted them as ritual dancers rather than divinities because none of them stand out “in size or any other observable way, such as to suggest that they might have been set apart as a representation of a divinity.” It is possible that the statues may represent worshippers because they were placed in a temple context, a practice common throughout antiquity. We agree, however, with Evi Gorogianni (2011) who argues that they might also represent deities. Louise Hitchcock’s perception is based on the belief in hundreds of deities from the Near East known collectively from Near Eastern textual sources and from art as the *Anunnaki* as dispensers of justice and the *Igigi* as servants, and well represented by the 13th century relief of minor underworld deities at the Hittite open air shrine at Yazılıkaya near the Hittite capital at Hattusas in Anatolia.⁷ The analogy with the Near

⁶ While we acknowledge the geographic and chronological differences in the provenience of the gold ring from Mycenae, addressing these issues is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁷ The *Anunnaki* had the power to decree the fate of humankind, and were characterized differently in Sumer-

ian, Akkadian, and Hittite texts that span the entire period of the Bronze Age, and may or may not be synonymous with *Igigi* (servant deities). By the late Babylonian period, they numbered in the hundreds, both in heaven and in the Netherworld, see Puhvel 1987 and Pritchard 2010. For a brief definition, see Leick 1998, 85.

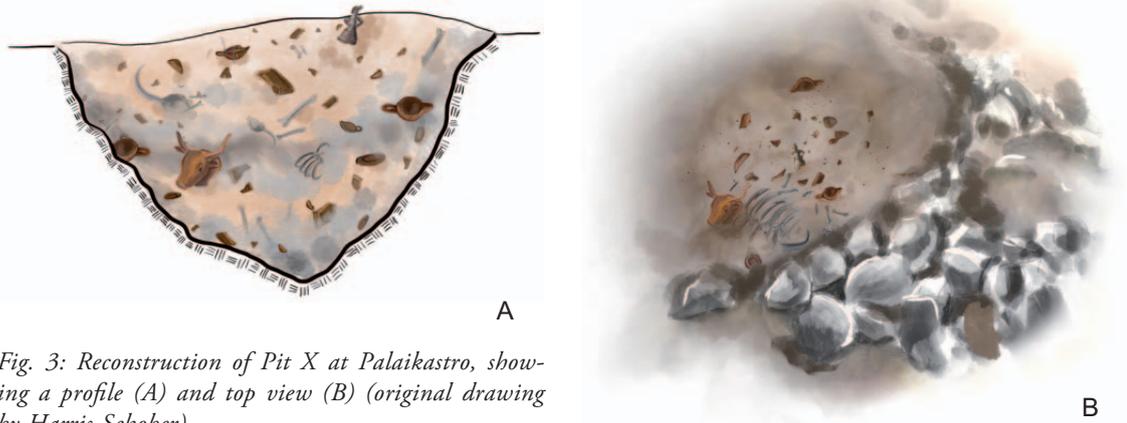


Fig. 3: Reconstruction of Pit X at Palaikastro, showing a profile (A) and top view (B) (original drawing by Harris-Schober).

East is made based on similar economic systems, the long history of interactions accelerated by the quest for metals whereby the Aegean participated in a globalized Mediterranean world system, and evidence for a strong Aegean presence in the Near East as seen at Miletus, ancient Millawanda (Hitchcock 2023). We believe it is unlikely that the Kea statues represent dancers as the depiction of movement is limited to the upper body.⁸

Context Three: Space 41, Urban Deposit

The depositional context of the Palaikastro figurine, the Most Important Minoan Woman (MIMW), seems to have been a rubbish deposit exhibiting what is known in recent times as structured deposition (discussed below). It was from space 41 either in block Pi or X, this is unclear, and both are similar Neopalatial doorless spaces, defined by LM I and Middle Minoan foundation walls.⁹ The associated deposit seems to have been composed of white ashes, which included pottery, four to five clay bull heads,¹⁰ fragments of twenty clay lamps, and bovine bones and horn cores, possibly in multiple layers (Fig. 3A–B).¹¹ The combined nature of these finds led Richard Dawkins (1904–05, 287), followed by Nanno Marinatos (1986, 35–40), to relate the assemblage to ritual sacrifice and cult meals. To our knowledge, there has been little recent

⁸ Bending of the knees and/or swaying of the hips as depicted on some seals and wall paintings represents a more certain indicator of dancing *contra* German 1999; see also Tully 2018, 69–70.

⁹ Dawkins (1923, 123) states “it was found in X41, a region in which there were walls not only of the earlier MM houses, but of all three periods of the later town, LM I, II, and III.” The discussion of the figurine does not reference the ashy deposit. Earlier in the report, Dawkins (1923, 21) notes a “similar (to Kato Zakro) but stratified deposit in Block Pi at Palaikastro seems to have accumulated year by year within a sanctuary, the Minoan forerunner of the Temple of Zeus Diktaios which stood almost on the same spot in Hellenic times.” He describes this area as containing white ashes, horn cores, oxen bones mingled with pottery which he suggests indicates a place of sacrifice near-by. In an earlier report, under the heading of Block Pi, Dawkins (1904–05, 287) describes a similar deposit of white ashes, horn cores, a great number of oxen bones, some twenty clay lamps, and fragments of four or five clay bull heads, one of which was restorable, denoting a place of sacrifice in 41. The plan (Dawkins 1904–05) indicates MM and LM I walls surround a space

designated as X 41, in building Pi, while MM, LM I, and LM III walls surround X41 in Block X. In either case, the meaning of the figurine would be much the same, even if the process of deposition was different.

¹⁰ On clay bulls in Neopalatial domestic shrines, see Sikla 2011. The integrity of the deposit can be questioned based on Hutchinson (1939–1940, 39), while the context is difficult to understand as objects were categorized by material rather than by context, and not always in accurate numbers as discussed by Chamberlain-Heslop (2019, esp. 19, 28).

¹¹ The pit profile is based on profiles found at Thronos-Kephala (D’Agata 1997–2000) while the top view is based on a pit from the same era found at Tell es-Safi/Gath (Hitchcock et al. 2015). The depiction of the contents is based on the description from the BSA report, however, we assume that the bronze figurine was found at or near the bottom. The purpose of the illustration as presented is to provide the reader with a maximum amount of visual information as to what such an assemblage might look like rather than to provide a scientific representation of the pit as discovered.

discussion of the figurine, its significance, or the importance of such a deposit although the seals including trees and altars have been well studied by Caroline Tully (2018).

If the figurine is so important, then why is she so plain in terms of facial details? One explanation for its plainness might be linked to the skill of the sculptor however, it is possible to propose a different explanation. Hitchcock (2020) has proposed that Crete was administered by a “deep state,” that is, a faceless administrative bureaucracy of elites that belonged to “secret societies” as categorized by Brian Hayden (2018). In this scheme, Minoan elites maintained their power through the possession of special knowledge in the form of obscure writing systems, rituals, initiations, clothing, and other manipulation of symbolisms and behaviours. These individuals met in the segmented spaces provided by benched rooms and meeting halls in monumental buildings in the palaces and villas. The absence of individuality in many of their representations marked both their absence from the mundane world through membership in an exclusive corporate group as well as their ability to attain an ecstatic state in communication with the divine realm as argued by Morris (2004).

Discussion and Conclusions

To recapitulate, gesture 3, the hands-on-hips gesture, belonged to a repertoire of symbolism in Minoan society that was the exclusive domain of females of high status, whether political, religious, divine or a combination of these things. Rather than being diminished by her context in a pit full of ash, bones, lamps,¹² and ritual items such as ceramic bull heads, we believe that this context amplified her importance (Fig. 3). It constituted what is known today as special or structured deposition, the recognition of ritual behaviour through the detection of deliberate patterns in the deposition of archaeological remains, that might appear to the modern eye as rubbish. It fits a pattern of feasting debris, ritual items, and symbolic images that indicate formalized actions by those who created the deposit (as discussed by Richards and Thomas 1984; Hill 1996). The fragmentary aspect of some of the deposited remains, such as the bull heads, may be indicative of the participants in a ritual activity of keeping tokens or mementoes of the event. People still do such things today when they keep a matchbook or swizzle stick to trigger nostalgic memories of a significant occasion (Hitchcock *et al.* 2019). The practice of symbolic deposition and memorialization is also known as *enchainment*, a feature that characterizes pits in post-palatial Crete (D’Agata 1997–2000; Driessen *et al.* 2008, esp. 7–8) and in Philistia (Hitchcock *et al.* 2015).

We would suggest that the significance of this deposit goes much further than the depositional activities just referred to, in that it possibly represents a foundation, repair, or termination event connected with the associated architectural remains. Foundation deposits took many forms in the ancient Mediterranean, with respect for them being held in such esteem, that Mesopotamian and Egyptian kings went so far as to rebury older deposits with their own (Hunt 2006, 191–196; also Levtow 2013). In the Aegean, the composition of building deposits does not follow a pattern but is heterogeneous (detailed by Herva 2005, 216).

Vesa-Pekka Herva (2005; also Hunt 2006, 190–197) argues that foundation deposits represented the beginning of a new phase in the significance of a deposit’s history. Rather than indicating the end of its life, it marked the beginning of a new, more important, and vastly more powerful existence for the objects forming part of the deposit. Through establishing and maintaining positive relations with ancestral and/or underworld spirits or deities that resided in the site the act of deposition communicated and promoted an ongoing positive link between the building and those who deposited the figurine. What is more, depositing an unbroken object in an elite material, namely bronze, that required importation from abroad and special knowledge to craft, the figurine references the power and prestige of the individual offering such a gift to insure ongoing benefit and stability. It calls to mind the practice of the wealthiest and most powerful chiefs among the Pacific Northwest Indigenous tribes who might destroy

¹² On lamps as a typical Canaanite foundation deposit, see Bunimovitz and Zimhoni 1993.

through sacrifice an entire ornamental copper in the competitive feasting activity known as potlatch (Hitchcock 2013).

The ethnographic parallels and analogies presented here, were not to suggest that the Minoan culture was identical to Hittites, Mesopotamians, or First Nations Peoples. Rather, these parallels were presented to show how the material can be interpreted. It can be concluded that it was through her anonymity, combined with the power of her position and knowledge as marked by the rarity of her gesture, materiality, and context that our humble looking figurine represented the Most Important Minoan Woman.

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