

Did the Goddess with Upraised Arms Have a Bench Shrine in the Inatos Cave?

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Abstract *The arm gesture of the figure conventionally known as the Goddess with Upraised Arms creates one of the most striking poses in Late Bronze Age Cretan art. The arm placement is the most recognizable feature for a group of female figurines found primarily in bench shrines from settlements dated from LM IIIB to LM IIIC. New information on this dynamic female gesture comes from the figurines excavated from the cave shrine of Eileithyia at Inatos, in south-central Crete. The new information is available because the objects from the shrine, excavated over 50 years ago by Nikolaos Platon and Costis Davaras, are now being studied in detail in preparation for publication. Among the objects from the shrine are standing female figures with upraised arms, cylindrical stands, kalathoi of the proper size to fit on the stands, and a fragment of a clay plaque with a raised border. These artefacts are the principal objects found in the bench shrines dedicated to this deity.*

Groups of female figurines depicting the Goddess with Upraised Arms can be studied from several Minoan settlements in east Crete and central Crete. The figures are often accompanied by bowls supported on tubular stands called 'snake tubes', and sometimes by clay plaques. The bibliography on this group of shrines and their contents is extensive (Alexiou 1958; Levi 1959, 245–249; Gesell 1976, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2010; Eliopoulos 1998, 2018; Day et al. 2006; D'Agata and Van de Moortel, eds., 2009; Day 2009; Tsipopoulou 2009; Gaignerot-Driessen 2014, 2016). The most important sites are Gazi, Gournia, Kannia, Kavousi, Kephala Vasiliki, Karphi, and Chalasmenos, and additional discoveries, including figurines or snake tubes, also come from Kommos (Shaw 1996), Knossos (Hallager 2009, 113), and Kephala Chondrou (Gesell 1985, 42; Platon 1997). Broken fragments of Goddesses have been noted from Karphi, Chania, Kommos, Agia Triada, Juktas, Chamalevri, Kipia/Kalamafki, Agios Ioannis, and Ephendi Christos (for individual references, see Hallager 2009, 208–209).

The arm gesture for the Goddess with Upraised Arms is the essential part of the female figure's posture, but the stance is canonical as well, creating a compelling pose. The figure always stands frontally. The skirt is cylindrical, and in the principal clay figures it is manufactured on a potter's wheel. The entire body, like the head, faces directly to the front. The upper parts of the arms extend horizontally either toward the sides or diagonally toward the front with the elbows bent and the hands raised. The hands are open with the fingers extended to point upwards. The palms can face forward (Tsipopoulou 2009, 125) or they can be turned sideways so that the small finger is forward (Zervos 1956, figs. 805–806) or the hands can be different using both positions (Zervos 1956, figs. 767, 804). The face is neutral without any emotion, and the hair is usually long.

Great variety exists in the crowns worn by the figurines. This feature can either have the appearance of a hat, or it can be a simple band around the head. Several symbols can be present on the crown, rendered either in relief or rising from the band as plastic attachments (Gesell 1985, 41–54; 2004, 133–144; Marinatos 1993, 225–227; Rethemiotakis 2001, 130–134). Crowns can include snakes (Marinatos and Hirmer 1976, pl. 133), horns of consecration (Zervos 1956, fig. 803), circular disks (Zervos 1956, figs. 804–805), poppies (Zervos 1956, fig. 774), one or more birds (Zervos 1956, figs. 771–773), or items of uncertain identification (Zervos 1956,



Fig. 1: Bench or platform at the north of the Inatos Shrine during excavations in 1962 (after Kanta and Davaras, eds. 2011, 20, fig. 11).

fig. 771). All of these images can be regarded as part of the religious iconography of Late Minoan Crete. The large variety of symbolic attributes suggest that the figure has many aspects.

For the origin of the Cretan gesture, two suggestions have been made. Some writers have proposed an ancestor in a faience figure from the Temple Repositories at Knossos who raises her arms and holds what have identified as snakes (for the figure and its context, see Panagiotaki 1999; for the possible connection to the later images, see Gaignerot-Driessen 2014, 489; for a color image see Marinatos and Hirmer 1976, color pl. XXV). Other writers have preferred an inspiration from figurines with raised arms from the Greek mainland where similar images begin earlier than they do in Crete (Kanta 1998, 51; Karageorghis 2001, 325). Both comparisons are with figurines that occur in religious contexts, strengthening the possibility of the relationships.

The parallel from the Temple Repositories at Knossos is an example of a female figure with raised arms found with many other symbolic objects in a shrine context at the west of the central court at Knossos. Manufactured from faience, it depicts a female figure who wears a flounced skirt and an open bodice and holds two cylindrical items above her head, restored as snakes by analogy with another figurine from the same context who has snakes entwined around her body (Marinatos and Hirmer 1976, pl. 70). The date is MM III to LM IA. The analogy with the later figurines is weakened by the fact that the early figure raises her arms to display the snakes, which is a very different gesture from the act of raising the hands by themselves because in the earlier figurine it is the items that are raised that are on display, not the gesture itself. In addition, the arms on the figurine from Knossos are not straight up: they are near a 45 degree angle. It is a unique example that is near but not exactly the same as the later gesture, and, of course, the artefact was buried and not visible to inspire later generations.

The more likely scenario is that the immediate inspiration for the LM III gesture came from Mycenaean Greece (Kanta 1998, 51–52; Karageorghis 2001, 325). In Mycenaean Greece the ‘psi’ figurines and larger figures with raised arms begin earlier than in Crete, and Mycenaean influence in LM III is present throughout Crete in many other venues, including the Linear B texts (Chadwick 1976).

The Goddesses with Upraised Arms are mostly associated with bench shrines. The shrines are typically small chambers built within settlements. They are equipped with benches to support the female figurines. Associated cult equipment includes cylindrical stands (often called ‘snake tubes’) to support conical bowls called kalathoi. Usually, the kalathos is a separate piece, but in a few examples bowl and stand were manufactured as a single object. At Kavousi, the figurines and the cylindrical stands and their kalathoi were made as matched sets (Gesell 1999), a clear proof that they were intended to be used together. Other items in the shrines can include plaques, pithoi, and other vessels. The sharing of similar symbols between different communities suggests that by LM III C the religious elites on the island of Crete had managed to develop a shared ideological belief-system that was focused on common symbolic images.

Because of the ambiguity in the visual style used in Crete at this time, the identification of the female figure or figures represented by these clay sculptures has not been completely obvious. The issue has been discussed in detail by Florence Gaignerot-Driessen (2016, 21–22), who

points out several factors in favor of their identification as worshippers rather than divinity. She makes four key arguments against divinity:

1. Because the Minoans had both male and female deities, and male cult figures are missing, the female ones should be missing also.
2. The symbolic images on the tiaras are extremely varied, and they do not suggest any one specific deity.
3. The clay fabrics, which are similar to those used for cooking pots and storage vessels, are not aesthetic enough for cult images.
4. The appearance of the figurines in groups rather than as single images suggests that they were votives rather than cult images.

These are all valid points, and they properly call attention to the ambiguity present in archaeological material in the absence of sufficient written records to explain what is being portrayed. New information on this issue is now available from the detailed study of the finds from the shrine of Eileithyia in a small natural cavern in south central Crete at modern Tsoutsouros, the ancient settlement of Inatos. This site is particularly pertinent both because it contained benches (Fig. 1) along with four of the artefacts that are regularly present in the bench shrines with the female figures with upraised arms: the female figurines themselves (Figs. 2–3), cylindrical stands of the ‘snake tube’ class (Fig. 4), kalathoi to place on the stands (Fig. 5), and a plaque (Fig. 6). What is different is that images of women with upraised arms continued to be placed in the cave in later times, during the Early Iron Age. One of them is even shown riding on a horse or donkey (Kanta and Davaras, eds., 2011, 123).

In 1962, after a police investigation in which Costis Davaras pretended to be a German antiquities buyer in order to gain the confidence of looters, an official police raid confiscated 600 looted objects from a major shrine in a cave dedicated to Eileithyia and arrested the culprits. A rescue excavation followed, and the objects from the cave shrine were placed in the Archaeological Museum in Heraklion.

This is a remarkable assemblage of objects. Eileithyia was a goddess of childbirth and motherhood. The objects in her shrine include a long series of items in many classes. Over a hundred pieces are made of gold. Many are also made of silver, bronze, and copper. The shrine was

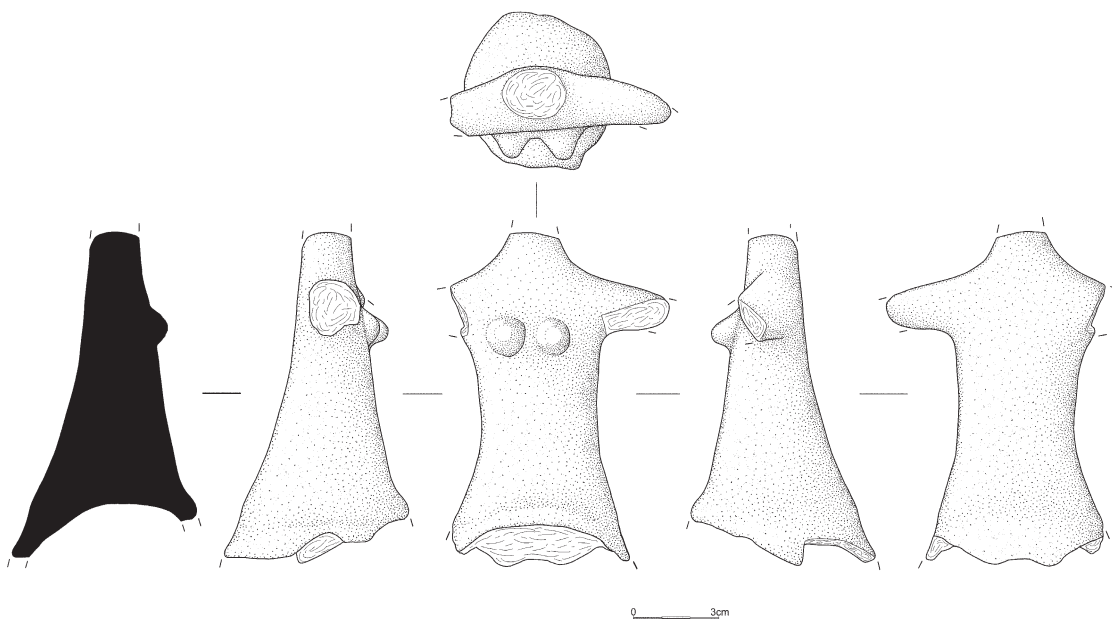


Fig. 2: Broken clay female figurine wearing a garment with open bodice, with upraised arms, LM III B–III C, HM P13290; ht. 11.5 cm (drawing by Doug Faulmann).



Fig. 3: Bowl with a clay figurine of the Goddess with Upraised Arms from the Inatos Shrine, Early Iron Age, HM unnumbered; ht. 10.2 cm (after Kanta and Davaras, eds. 2011, 124, no. 120).

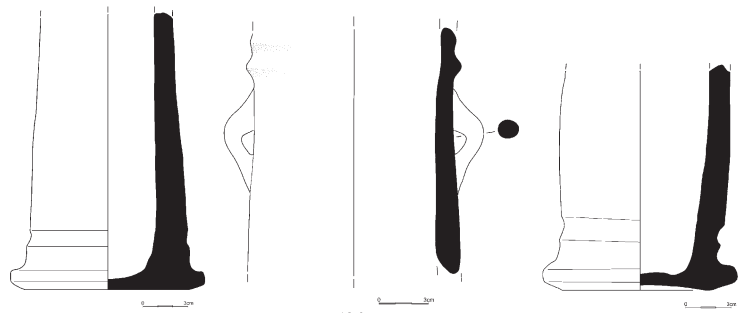


Fig. 4: Three sherds of cylindrical stands of the snake tube type from the Inatos Shrine, Early Iron Age, HM unnumbered; preserved hts. 19, 19, and 16 cm (drawing by Doug Faulmann).



Fig. 5: Kalathos from the Inatos Shrine, mended from sherds and partly restored, Early Iron Age, HM unnumbered; ht. 7.2 cm (photo by Yiannis Papadakis-Ploumidis).

Fig. 6: Corner of a clay plaque with a raised outer border from the Inatos Shrine, Early Iron Age, HM unnumbered; preserved width 5.5 cm (photo by Yiannis Papadakis-Ploumidis).

visited by all levels of society, including the elite. It also had international connections, and almost a hundred objects are in an Egyptian style. The earliest date is in the Early Bronze Age, and the sacred cave continued to be used until the time of Imperial Rome. Finally, the shrine was ruthlessly destroyed, and the offerings were smashed and left in the cave.

Most of the objects deposited in the cave would have been gifts from expectant mothers hoping for a safe childbirth. The large tradition of clay figurines from the shrine illustrates all stages of motherhood. It includes the image of a man pursuing a woman as a metaphor for courting, couples engaged in sex, pregnant women, female figures reclining in preparation for childbirth and supported by a second female figure (presumably the goddess or a midwife), an unborn child symbolically arriving on board a ship, mothers holding their young baby, and an older child in a crib. The figurines present positive images, with illustrations of the hopes and prayers of the worshippers for a happy and healthy mother and child.

Beginning in LM IIIB, the shrine had a section devoted to the Goddess with Upraised Arms (Figs. 2–6). It had figurines of the female figure along with her snake tubes, the kalathoi they supported, and even one example of the clay plaque with its typical raised border. The cave also contained benches at both the north and the south side of the underground room. The remains of the bench on the south side were not photographed or described, but the one at the north side of the room was in better condition, and it was photographed (Fig. 1). It consisted of a low, level platform. It was empty at the time of excavation in 1962.

Several examples of a female figure with raised arms were discovered in the shrine. The earliest clay figurine in the series is unfortunately badly broken, and the lower part is missing

(Fig. 2). Its garment with the open bodice shows that it is no later than LM III B. The skirt is hollow, and it widens at the preserved lower part, as on the figurines from the bench sanctuaries. The upper arms are extended laterally, which is similar to the gesture of other Goddess with Upraised Arms figures. The date fits with the snake tubes and kalathoi. Later figures added to the shrine are more complete, and they show the complete gesture (Fig. 3). The figure with the raised gesture stands in a bowl, and a scar on the clay indicates that a second figure, now missing, once stood in front of her. The style suggests that this pair of figures comes from the Late Geometric period.

The fact that, in addition to the figurines, the assemblage also included the other objects usually associated with the bench shrine tradition, including the cylindrical stands (Fig. 4), their kalathoi (Fig. 5), and a clay plaque (Fig. 6), suggests that the items were placed in the shrine as a set. All of the main cult furniture associated with the bench shrines that existed above ground in many towns and villages in Crete was also present among the objects found in the cave. The most likely scenario is that a bench shrine with Goddesses with Upraised Arms was placed in the shrine when this phenomenon was popular in Crete at the end of the Late Bronze Age. It persisted there for some time. Additional examples of the figure with the upraised arms were still being added to the shrine as late as the Geometric period. When it was excavated, the remains were broken and scattered and completely mixed, both by the destruction of the shrine and by the later illegal looting. Nothing was preserved *in situ* when the site was excavated.

A difference between this shrine and those above ground is that, unlike the bench shrines that were in the settlements, which went out of use at the end of LM III C, the figure with the typical gesture continued to be part of the Inatos shrine into the Protogeometric and Early Geometric periods. Another very important difference is that, unlike the situation in the above-ground bench sanctuaries, at Inatos it is very easy to distinguish between deity and worshipper. The worshippers are always pregnant. Even during the Protogeometric and Early Geometric periods, when stylistic simplification was so extreme that no signs of clothing or jewellery were depicted, pregnancy was always shown (Kanta and Davaras, eds. 2011, 28). Even with the figurine pairs engaged in sex, the female is pregnant. This fact must have been part of the essential identity of the worshipper. It was why she was offering the prayer.

The female figure with the upraised arms is never depicted at Inatos as pregnant. This must be because she is the goddess. This same iconography is present on the figurine of the female figure riding a horse or donkey, who is also not pregnant. Worshippers do not ride steeds, as is shown by a long series of parallels usually called the “*Dea micenea a cavallo*,” a phrase used by Doro Levi (1951; see also Voyatzis 1992). In fact, strong other evidence also exists from elsewhere to show that the figure with the upraised arms is a goddess. Chief among these pieces of evidence is the scene of an enthroned female figure with this gesture depicted facing the open doorway of a small model of a building, which must be a temple or shrine (for an example from Archanes, see Marinatos and Hirmer 1976, fig. 145). The iconography is very explicit. The seated female figure with upright arms is a goddess who is depicted as the focal point of the axial orientation through the open door, as is canonical in later Greek temple arrangements (on the issue, see the recent article by Günkel-Maschek [2016]). Votaries are never shown as single figures who are enthroned facing a doorway.

With the conclusion that the figure with upraised arms must be a deity, one must still address the four objections that have been raised for this situation. For the first of the four issues against the representation of a deity (that male deities are missing from Minoan iconography), we might say that male deities are uncommon in both Mainland and Cretan iconography, but the ivory kouros from Palaikastro (MacGillivray et al. 2000) and the seal of the master impression with a male figure rising over a city from Chania (Hallager 1986) show that they do exist, so female ones could also be present. For the second objection (that many symbols are present on the tiaras), the varied symbols might mean that this was a great goddess with many aspects. For the third objection (the use of coarse clay for the large figures), the use of coarse clay was ne-

cessary for technical reasons. It was always used for large clay images with thick walls to keep them from breaking because the addition of temper allowed gases to escape with rising temperatures in the kiln. The last objection, the issue of multiple figures, is more complex, and it requires additional discussion.

If one accepts that the figure with upraised arms is a deity, this is not the end of the story. The ambiguity raised by the multiple figures still remains, and it must be explained. Several possibilities exist. The number of goddess figures varies greatly, from just a few to 30 at Kavousi. They cannot represent the number of individuals in a community, but they could be the number of families or the number of clans, or the members of some other social group who are permitted to have this particular image represent the deity for them. Another possibility is that a figurine was carried in a procession annually and then deposited in the shrine. The figurines could also represent special occasions or particular aspects of the divinity or something else. Without written records, it is difficult to assign an exact meaning.

The veneration of the Goddess with Upraised Arms at Inatos differed from her worship at the village shrines in several ways. First, the cult objects are smaller. They are never as large as the images elsewhere, and their inclusion of a second figure in the imagery placed inside a bowl (as in Fig. 3) is certainly not paralleled elsewhere. The custom of the bench sanctuaries in the settlements did not outlast LM III C except at outlying places like Inatos where the use of the gesture continued for many years. The absence of ‘snake tubes’ and plaques from the later periods shows that the custom had changed with time, and the symbolic meaning was being adapted to the new conditions. Whether the worshippers identified the figure as an aspect of Eileithyia or as a completely different entity is an open question that cannot be decided by the surviving evidence.

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