do-ra pe-re: The Ritual Processions of the Aegean 2nd Millennium B.C. Re-visited

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Abstract *One of the most important practices (apart from libations and communal feasting, animal sacrifice included) of the official cult in the Aegean during the 2nd millennium BC is ritual processions. Since the rulers expressed their authority not through political or warrior imagery, but through the manipulation and control of ritual, Aegean Late Bronze Age two-dimensional iconography, especially wall paintings, provides rich documentation while additional evidence is offered by related representations on other media such as on golden signet-rings, seal-stones and clay sealings, painted sarcophagi, and stone and clay vessels. Due to space limitations, this paper focuses on the participants in ritual processions and the pictorial formula that enables the viewers to identify them. Prompted by selected examples, two of which I have recently re-examined, I discuss the messages conveyed on the one hand by the bodies of the worshippers in line (female, male, or even supernatural creatures, as the so-called Minoan 'genii') carrying cult equipment and offerings in their outstretched hands (i.e.* do-ra pe-re *in Mycenaean Greek, transcribed as δῶρα φέρει in ancient Greek) for a supposed deity (or her impersonator), and on the other hand by the clothing they wear.*

Introduction

In the 'realm of images' of the 2nd millennium BC Aegean, ritual processions hold a major place (Immerwahr 1990, 53, 88–90, 114–118; Boulotis 1995) as they constituted one of the most important practices of the official cult, apart from libations and communal feasting, animal sacrifice included (Hitchcock *et al.* 2008; Wright *et al.* 2004). Since the rulers communicated messages of authority not through political or warrior imagery, but through the manipulation and control of ritual, Aegean Late Bronze Age two-dimensional iconography, especially wall paintings, provides rich documentation while additional evidence is offered by related representations in minor arts (seal images, relief art, figurines). Undoubtedly, both categories shared a common palatial iconography that essentially originated in Neopalatial Crete and was later adopted in Mycenaean Greece (Blakolmer 2019, 49).

The Pictorial Formula – the Participants

Ritual processions are formed from an organized body of active participants (in Aegean Bronze Age religious iconography, mainly human and occasionally supernatural creatures) walking in a formal or ceremonial manner. The human figures (male and/or female) rendered in line, one by one or in pairs, "as if walking in palace corridors" as Anne Chapin (2020, 378) recently pointed out, seem to communicate "messages of strength, order and stability". Moreover, thanks to the repetition of common characteristics (even with slight variations), they emphasize "the organizational principle of visual harmony" (Chapin 2020, 378). These men and women, generally interpreted as indistinct cult celebrants, as members of the elite, or as members of privileged Minoan and Mycenaean social groups (Blakolmer 2008, 257), are easily recognisable due not only to their attribution of the Aegean skin color convention (dark red for men and white for women) but also to their attire. The most prominent among them are considered to be members of the priesthood, priests or priestesses. Priestesses, especially, are ambiguously interpreted either as

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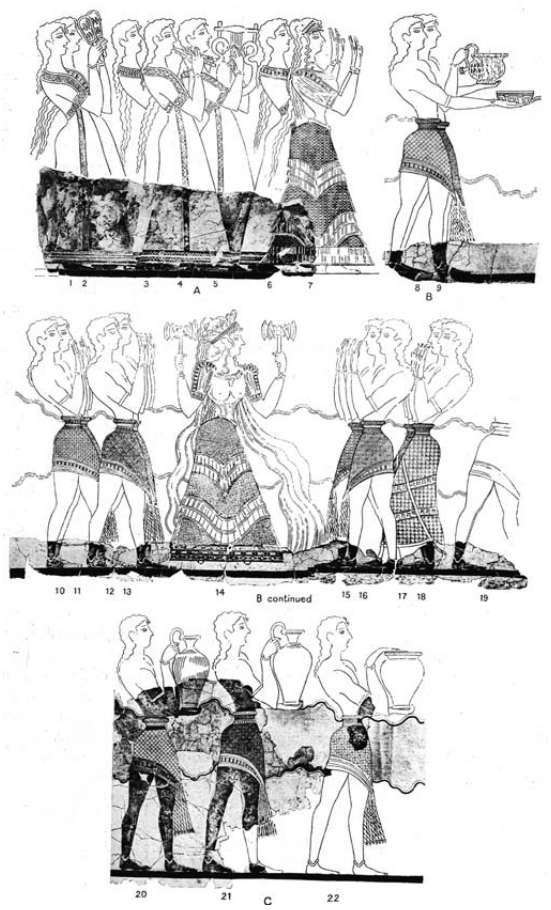

Fig. 1: Successive groups of the "Procession fresco" from Knossos. Restored drawing by E. Gilliéron, fils (after Evans 1928, 723, fig. 450).

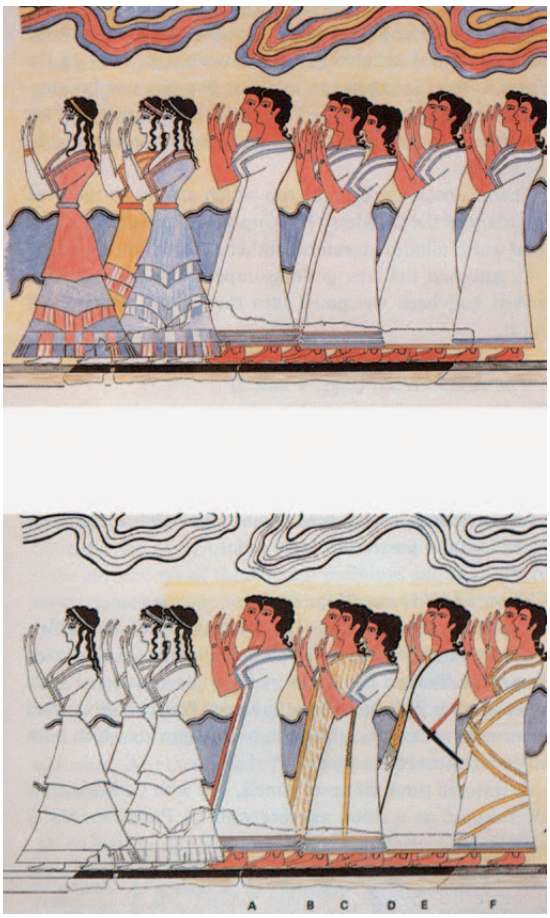

Fig. 2: Cameron's reconstruction proposal of figures from the "Procession fresco" at Knossos (after Cameron 1987, fig. 6).

such or as goddesses, which, in theory, are difficult to differentiate, since priestesses assume the visual characteristics of the goddesses. It is no accident that scholars have been divided in their opinions (*e.g.* the discussion in Boloti 2014, 261–262).

Case Study 1: Minoan Crete

The most characteristic Minoan example of ritual procession comes from the LM II–LM III A1 Corridor of the Procession Fresco in the Palace of Knossos (Evans 1928, 719–736). The life-size figures (mostly male, with some women included), painted on both sides of the corridor, wear different types of garments (kilts, long robes, hide-skirts) which may suggest different status and age groups (Marinatos 1993, 52). Although Arthur Evans (1928, 723, fig. 450) (Fig. 1) and Mark Cameron (1975, 138–139) (Fig. 2) restored the figures with raised arms in a position of worship, "the few fragments of arms that have survived depict the men as carrying vessels or, in one case a garment" (Marinatos 1993, 51–52, referring to a reconstruction proposed by Boulotis 1987). Actually, Christos Boulotis argued for a single register of figures in separate scenes of offering, among which, almost at the beginning of the eastern wall of the aforementioned corridor, he placed an imposing female figure receiving a long-fringed cloth from a male figure (Fig. 3; Boulotis 1987, 150, fig. 8). This contrasts with Evans' suggestion of numerous ribbons hanging freely on either side of her dress (Fig. 1). It is important to stress here that, unlike in an oriental palace or temple where a king ruled (Marinatos 1993, 53), the central figure in the Knossian Procession Fresco is a woman, who was interpreted by Evans as a 'goddess' (see figure 'no. 14' of Group B in the restored drawing by E. Gilliéron, fils: Fig. 1). This woman, as I recently proposed (Boloti

Fig. 3: Boulotis' reconstruction of the "goddess" from the "Procession fresco" at Knossos (after Boulotis 1987, 154, fig. 8).

Fig. 4: Reconstruction of the "goddess" from the "Procession fresco" at Knossos by the author; drawing by N. Sepentzoglou (after Boloti 2019).

Fig. 5a: The Hagia Triada sarcophagus, side A (after Marinatos – Hirmer 1986, pl. XXXIII).

Fig. 5b: The Hagia Triada sarcophagus, side B (after Marinatos – Hirmer 1985, pl. XXXII below).

2014, 248–250; 2019), was most probably clad in a long robe with a frontal vertical band and a polos headdress (Fig. 4), which seem to constitute a Mycenaean unisex garment prevalent in Crete as well as on the Greek Mainland from LH II/LM II onwards (Boloti 2019, 6–14). Although her face and feet are turned to the right, I believe that her upper and lower body were rendered entirely in frontal view, thus underlining her connection to both male groups who surround her. The position of her hands, however, remains ambiguous, since the double axes which Evans assumed that she held (Fig. 1) are speculative. If we adopt the idea that she is offered a long cloth, it seems reasonable to assume that her left hand was somewhat extended to receive the offering.

Long robes with a vertical band, although simpler than the aforementioned female garment, are also worn by six male processional figures (see Group A in the restored drawing by E. Gilliéron, fils) on the east wall of the Corridor of the Procession Fresco (Fig. 1), and apparently by four more men on the west wall (Boulotis 1987, 148–150, Group D, figs. 3, 5). The former, preserved only in their lower half, were restored by Evans as musicians (Evans 1928, 721–722, fig. 450) following the example of the lyre- and the flute-players (sides A and B respectively) on the Agia Triada sarcophagus (Fig. 5; Militello 1998, 155–163), although it seems that the second one wears a shorter version of this garment (Militello 1998, 291).

Case Study 2: Mainland Greece

Unlike in Minoan Crete, female ritual processions seem to predominate in the iconographic programs of the Mycenaean palatial centres (Immerwahr 1990, 114–118; Boulotis 1995). Identification of this activity is made possible by the figures' position in the ceremonies and/or, at least in some cases, by their attire which diverges more or less from the standardized dress types (*i.e.* more elaborate examples or pieces of attire accompanied by accessories, like headdresses). Noteworthy is the sartorial similarity between goddesses and priestesses, which generally applies to the iconographic codes of that era (attested mostly in glyptic imagery). As a consequence, their identification is often ambiguous, especially in the case of fragmentary wall paintings (Boloti 2014, 261–262). Despite differences in iconographic details, concerning the outfit of the participants and the objects carried (*cf.* ivory pyxides, vessels of precious metals, necklaces and flowers, as well as a female idol and clothing, as Boulotis [1979] suggested for the example from Tiryns), the exclusive participation of women in these processions, in combination with the nature and evident similarity of the offerings, "indicate[s] the possibility of a significant supra-regional festival, probably in honour of a female divinity, as part of the Mycenaean religious calendar – a spring festival to judge by the offerings of lilies and wild roses in the processions at least at Thebes and Pylos" (Boulotis 2000b, 1116). Evidently, the existence of a religious calendar according to which the offering of valuable 'gifts' (for the transliterated Mycenaean Greek phrase *do-ra[-qe] pe-re* [= δῶρα [τε] φέρει], which is attested four times in the Pylian Linear B tablet Tn 316, see Ruipérez and Melena 1996, 193–196), took place either occasionally or, in the context of a sanctuary, is clearly attested in the palatial Linear B archives from Knossos and Pylos (Melena 1974; Boulotis 2000a).

Next to the aforementioned life-size female processions in the Mycenaean palaces, small-scale processions with male participants have been detected, so far, at Pylos (Lang 1969), Argos (Tournavitou and Brecoulaki 2015) and Mycenae (Iakovides 2013). Only one female figure participates in the procession depicted in the wall-painting of Vestibule 5 (Fig. 6), dated to the final LH III B phase of the Pylian palace (Lang 1969, 64–68, 5H5–15H5, pl. 119). The fresco, "a late reminiscence of the Knossian offering-bearers" according to Sara Immerwahr (1990, 118), represents almost exclusively men, c. 30 cm in height. They proceed to the left, arranged on two levels, with an oversized bull in the middle, the presence of which implies in all probability a sacrificial ritual. The majority of the male participants wear long ceremonial bordered robes, while fewer are dressed in kilts. The aforementioned woman, on the other hand, of the same size as the men, is clad in a flounced skirt, a typical garment of the Minoan and Mycenaean elites, which, in combination with an elaborately varied tight bodice, was also worn in ceremonial contexts as amply documented in different artistic media (wall-paintings, glyptic, etc.). A number of female cult functionaries, and among them priestesses, apparently wore the same skirt – a type at-

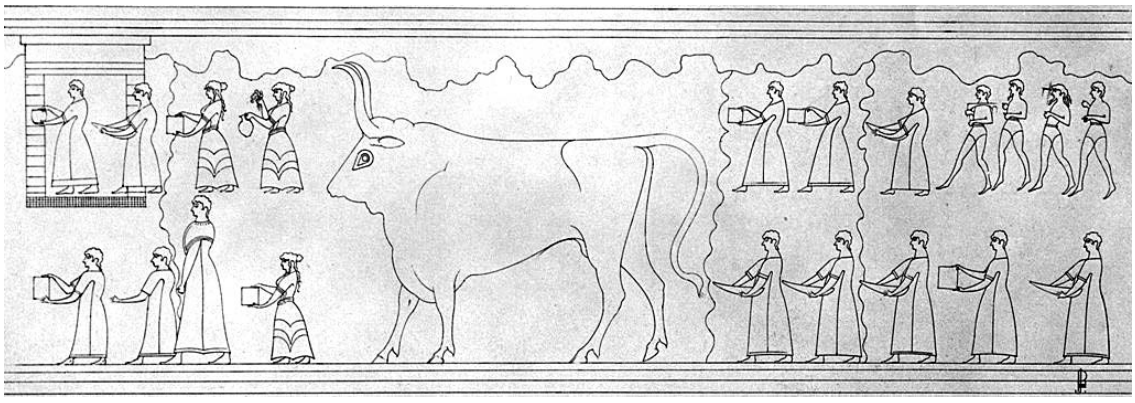

Fig. 6: Palace of Pylos, vestibule 5, wall sketch (after Lang 1969, pl. 119).

tested in the case of female divinities as well. Therefore, would just the presence of the Pylian woman in the procession justify her identification as a priestess? This assumption is quite plausible indeed, given the ritual character of the scene and its meaningful setting in the vestibule of the throne room. Nevertheless, the fragmentary state of the figure and the poor preservation of the fresco do not provide further distinctive features about her identity or about the role she played in this particular ritual.

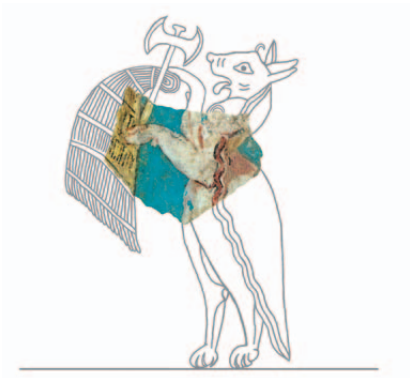

Fig. 7: Reconstruction of the fresco fragment 40Hne from Pylos by the author; drawing by N. Sepentzoglou (after Boloti 2016, 510, pl. CXLVII d).

Despite the predominance of a coded visual language in the expression of religious attitudes it is reasonable to assume the existence of local variants of the established priestly attire, on a diachronic as well as on a synchronic level, and even within the same community. The related iconographical evidence from mainland Greece (frescoes from the palatial centres) as well as from Crete (the sarcophagus and frescoes from Agia Triada and the Procession Fresco from Knossos) implies the existence of variations. Moreover, the latter can be attributed to the ranking of religious functionaries and duties as it is attested in the Linear B tablets.

Case Study 3: Mainland Greece

Among the supernatural figures which appear in Aegean Bronze Age religious iconography, only the so-called Minoan 'genii' were usually rendered as groups. While in Minoan glyptic from MM II onwards, these creatures are mainly engaged in two types of human activities: libation (*i.e.* vegetation rituals, carrying the characteristic libation jug) or hunting (usually carrying hunted – presumed to be sacrificial – animals), on the Greek Mainland they appear to participate in rituals, often in processions (Boloti 2016). In this light, the 'genius' on fresco fragment 40 H ne from the Palace of Pylos (Fig. 7) which carries a sacred knot or dress and a double axe, as I have recently proposed (Boloti 2016), might have been part of a broader composition, most probably of processional character. The final goal of the procession could easily have been a female divinity such as *e.g.* the seated one depicted on signet-ring *CMS* I, no. 179 from Tiryns (Fig. 8), or the standing one shown on sealing *CMS* I, no. 379 from Pylos. Would this have been the 'Goddess of Nature', whose realm included vegetation, animals and consequently hunting activities in which 'genii' also participated? Plausibly.

The Final Goal of the Procession(s) – Conclusive Remarks

The final goal of the procession would have been an enthroned figure, female in all probability (Rehak 1995, 103), a goddess or a high priestess possibly impersonating the divinity. A plausible candidate is the fragmentary polos-crowned 'White Goddess', from the northwest plaster dump of the palace of Pylos (Lang 1969, 221), in conjunction with a half-size woman dressed in a long robe with a vertical central band, from the same dump (Fig. 9). The half-size woman, whose feet overlap with a carved footstool, ivory in all probability judging by its white colour, finds its closest parallel in the composition of the aforementioned signet-ring from Tiryns *CMS* I, no. 179 (Fig. 8). There, the procession of 'genii', which approaches an enthroned 'goddess', designates respectively the aforementioned Pylian woman as a leading processional figure, a high priestess in all probability, as reasonably argued by Lang (Lang 1969, 85, 50Hnws: priestess' feet). This long

Fig. 8: The golden signet-ring CMS *I, no. 17 from Mycenae (after Mylonas 1983, 187, fig. 141).*

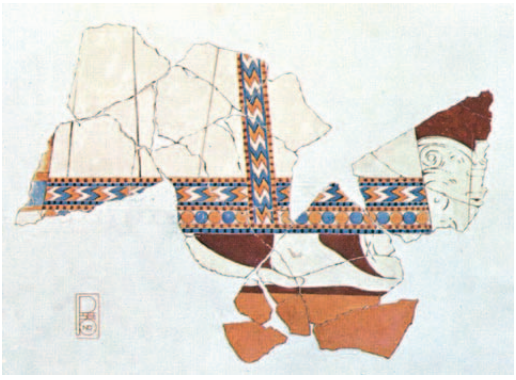

Fig. 9: Palace of Pylos, the Priestess' feet (after Lang 1969, pl. N).

robe with a vertical central band, of which only the lower part has been preserved, is decorated with linear and architectural motifs on its elaborate border divided into two horizontal bands: zigzags in the upper band, as well as in the band that goes up the side of the garment, and alternating blue and yellow beam-ends in the lower one. Without commenting on the dress-type, Lang rightly noted the structural similarity of the latter with the aforementioned much earlier garment of the 'Goddess' no. 14 from the palace of Knossos (Fig. 1; see the recent analysis in Günkel-Maschek 2020, 252–261), which I reconstructed as a long robe with vertical band too (Fig. 4).

Since Aegean iconography was a strictly 'palatial' concern, the imagery of processions in 2nd millennium BC imagery highlights the prime fields for display and negotiations of power. Especially the frescoes which "would have been viewed by a variety of visitors, from bureaucrats to crafters" (Hitchcock and Nikolaidou 2013, 517) constitute an expression of piety which indicates the strong connection between human (political) and divine power since the latter legitimized the former. Evidently, among the strategies employed by elites to maintain political authority is the embracement of religion, since the latter, as Nanno Marinatos eloquently points out "was the primary means of enforcing the authority of the rulers" (Marinatos 1993, 111), and it "could unify the population in a peaceful manner" (Marinatos 1993, 75). Wall paintings (which in Crete constitute the only expression of monumental pictorial art), especially, give us insights into the ideology of the ruling classes. The frescoes are above all meaningful images, mirrors of a mentality, or even propaganda, interacting with other art forms, such as seals and signet-rings, which probably never held a leading position compared to other media, *e.g.* frescoes, which were more suitable for the depiction of narrative scenes. Seals and signet-rings nonetheless played decisive roles as transmitters and distributors of representational motifs as well as propagators of iconographical concepts and messages. Since seal images originate in mural decoration, they reflect more or less standardized palatial iconography, such as the abbreviated representations of ritual processions, found on a series of both seals and seal impressions, mainly of the LM I period (Günkel-Maschek 2020, 190–206, 234–248), thanks to which we may fill in the gaps in successive stages of Minoan rituals (Warren 1988, 20–23).

In Aegean Bronze Age procession iconography the prominent gesture remains the outstretched hands, either of the participants who hold offerings or cultic utensils possibly for the preparation of a festival (Marinatos 1993, 53), or of the high-priestesses which seem to receive them on behalf of the gods (*e.g.* the Knossos Procession Fresco in case study 1). Especially in the case of fresco fragment 40 H ne from the Palace of Pylos (case study 3), the role of the participants is played by a supernatural figure, a Minoan 'genius', which seems to simultaneously hold a cultic utensil and an offering (Boloti 2016).

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