

‘Hands on Abdomen’: Unveiling the Polysemy of an Aegean Gesture

Christos Kekes

Abstract *The present study focuses on a widely known Aegean gesture, mainly depicted in Aegean female and rarely male figurines, here referred to as ‘Hands on Abdomen’. In this gestural type, the figures bring their arms towards their belly, on which they lay their hands. The gesture is performed by figurines dated from the Protopalatial through the Postpalatial period in Crete and by Mycenaean figurines of the LH IIIA–B period. The ‘Hands on Abdomen’ gesture has been interpreted variously in the past as a gesture of religious reverence, adoration or supplication, as a shamanic movement to heal a sick part of the devotee’s body (the belly), as a dance movement, or as a gesture performed by Aegean women while praying to a fertility goddess to have a safe pregnancy or conceive. In the present study I attempt to confirm some of the above interpretations based on the archaeological and ethnographical data, as well as to explore other symbolic ideas that may be expressed by the gesture. The ‘Hands on Abdomen’ gesture is thus mainly approached as an expression of the agents’ reverence and as an indicator of female coming-of-age rites performed in Aegean sanctuaries. Furthermore, the gesture might also indicate male and female social status.*

Introduction

The present study is based on part of my recently completed PhD dissertation (Kekes 2021). It focuses on a widely known Aegean gesture, mainly depicted in Aegean clay or bronze figurines from domestic contexts, peak sanctuaries, and caves, here referred to as ‘Hands on Abdomen’. In this gestural type (Fig. 1), standing or seated figurines lay their open palms or closed fists on their belly, sometimes with their hands touching each other. The variety in the morphology of the gesture may entail equivalent differentiations in its semantics, although these are not clear or easy to identify. For example, open hands laid on the belly without touching each other could symbolize the gesturers’ intention to protect their belly (perhaps the fetus in the case of women) and express their vulnerability and humility towards the powerful divine entities. Fists touching each other on the abdomen could be interpreted as a forceful movement that projects the gesturers’ authority. Moreover, the various morphological differentiations could just be different renditions of the same gesture depending on the craftsperson’s choice or skill and the material of the artifact, without bearing any special meaning. On the contrary, these morphological differentiations could even constitute totally different gestures. The ‘Hands on Abdomen’ gesture is usually performed by female figurines, although rarely male figurines place their hands on their abdomen too. Figurines performing the ‘Hands on Abdomen’ gesture are dated from the Protopalatial through the Postpalatial period in Crete, while in mainland Greece this gesture is performed by Mycenaean figurines of the LH IIIA–B period.

Concerning the female figurines, this gesture is usually interpreted as a movement related to fertility, by which Minoan women invoked the worshipped deity to help them have a safe pregnancy or conceive (see *e.g.* Platon 1951, 157; Giannaki 2008, 319–320, 355–356; see also Morris and Peatfield 2014, 60–61). Indeed, many figurines performing this type of gesture display enlarged bellies (Fig. 4; see also an unpublished clay female figurine from the Vrysinas peak sanctuary: Archaeological Museum of Rethymno, inv. no. Π16696). For pregnant female figurines in

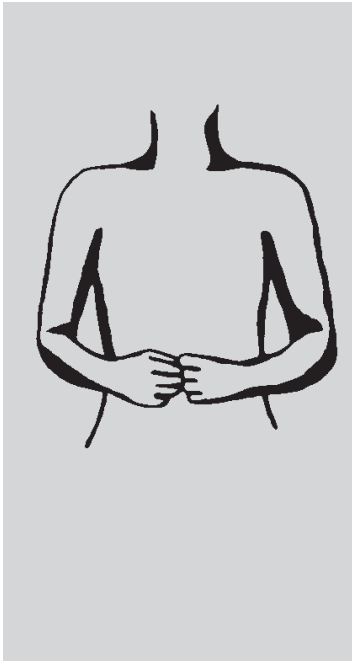


Fig. 1: The 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture (drawing by Christina Antoniadou).



Fig. 2: Protopalatial clay female figurine from the Vrysinas peak sanctuary. Archaeological Museum of Rethymno (after Papadopoulou and Tzachili 2010, 461, fig. 11; courtesy of Iris Tzachili).

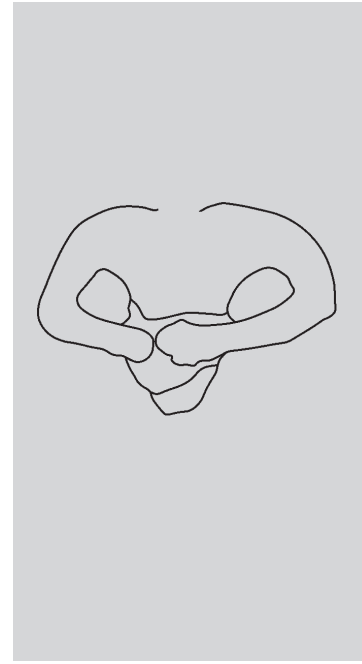


Fig. 3: Protopalatial clay female figurine found at Petsophas peak sanctuary. Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, inv. no. 4876 (drawing by Maria-Louiza Karagiorgou after Rutkowski 1991, pl. XXI: 2).

general see *e.g.* Rutkowski 1991, 86, no. 30; 88, no. 41; 91, no. n2; 94, no. 18, pls. XLI: 5, XLIV: 4, XLIV: 6), a fact that supports the interpretation of prayer to a deity to protect the fetus. What usually escapes researchers' attention when analyzing the 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture, however, is that the same or similar movements are performed, albeit rarely, by male figurines. This means that we must search for other potential symbolic functions of the gesture, without rejecting the above interpretations.

An Overview of the 'Hands on Abdomen' Gesture in Aegean Art

The 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture is represented in Aegean art as early as the Neolithic period (see *e.g.* Mina 2014, 130, 142, fig. 4; 143, fig. 5; 160, table 1). However, in the present study emphasis is placed on artifacts dating mainly to the Middle and Late Bronze Age originating from Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece.

During the Protopalatial period in Crete, the 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture is frequently performed by clay figurines from peak sanctuaries. An example of this type of figurine is a standing female figurine of the Protopalatial period found at the peak sanctuary of Vrysinas, Rethymno (Fig. 2). Only the upper part of the body and the top of her skirt are preserved. The figurine brings her arms towards her abdomen and lays her hands on it, touching each other. The palms are not depicted in detail, so it is not certain if they are to be perceived as open or closed in fists.

A figurine of uncertain gender (Fig. 3) was found at the Petsophas peak sanctuary and is now in the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion (Rutkowski 1991, 72, no. 57). According to Bogdan Rutkowski (1991, 72, no. 57), it is a male torso which was probably deposited at the sanctuary as a votive human body part. This means that it belongs to the category of human limb and body part models that were deposited at peak sanctuaries and indicated a disease of the corresponding parts of the devotees' bodies, for the healing for which they prayed or thanked the divinities for (see *e.g.* Myres 1902/3, 374–375, 381; Platon 1951, 109–110, 114, 120–121,



Fig. 4: Clay shrine-model found at Galatas, MM IIIA, Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, inv. no. 32613 (after Rethemiotakis 2010, 294, fig. 28:1; courtesy of Giorgios Rethemiotakis).



Fig. 5: Clay seated female figurine from Phaistos, LM I period, Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, inv. no. 1775 (drawing by Maria Chadou after Rethemiotakis 1998, pl. 1:122a).

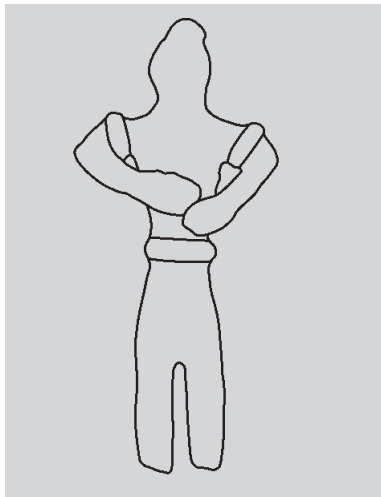


Fig. 6: Postpalatial bronze male figurine found in the Psychro Cave, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, inv. no. AE 19 (drawing by Maria-Louiza Karagiorgou after Verlinden 1984, pl. 60:135).

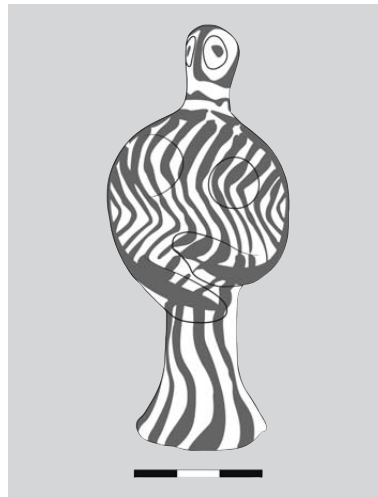


Fig. 7: Mycenaean clay female 'phi' figurine from Argos, LH IIIA, Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels, inv. no. A 1191 (drawing by Maria Chadou after French 1971, pl. 15:b).

143, 145, 156–157; Rutkowski 1991, 32–34, 57; Jones 1999, 5–6, 13, 24, 33, tables 1–2; Papadopoulou and Tzachili 2010, 454; Sakellarakis 2013, 71–72; Morris and Peatfield 2014). The figurine slightly extends the arms and turns the forearms towards the belly. It lays the left hand, palm open, on the abdomen, on the kilt, and the right hand to the right of the belly. The hands are not touching each other.

The conoid-shaped end of the torso could indicate that the figurine is, in fact, a female rather than a human limb or a male figurine, on which the breasts are not rendered (at least not plastically). The torso would be joined to a hollow skirt and at the point of the join a belt would

be applied, of which a small part is still preserved. At least, this is what may be concluded from the examination of clay female figurines of similar technological characteristics derived from peak sanctuaries (see *e.g.* Morris, O'Neill and Peatfield 2019, 56–58, figs. 5, 7).

A special find came to light during the excavation of the Galatas palatial complex (Fig. 4), in a building of MM IIIA date and religious character (Rethemiotakis 2010, 293). It is a clay shrine-model, partly preserved, containing a seated female figurine. The model is interpreted as a shrine based on the pair of the structures of uncertain significance commonly termed 'horns of consecration' surmounting the entrance. The seated female figurine is placed inside the entrance and lays her arms on her enlarged belly, the hands not touching. She is interpreted by the excavator as a goddess related to fertility (Rethemiotakis 2010, 296).

A fragmentary, headless, clay seated female figurine of LM I date with 'Hands on Abdomen' comes from Phaistos (Fig. 5) and is now in the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion (Rethemiotakis 1998, 37, 126, no. 122). It was probably found in Room 10 of the West Wing (Pernier 1902, 43; Rethemiotakis 1998, 54), a bench sanctuary according to Geraldine Gesell (1985, 127). The figurine brings the arms diagonally towards the belly, on which she places her hands. The hands are not depicted in detail, so it is not certain if the figure lays her open palms or closed fists on the belly. The legs of the figurine are not preserved.

Bronze figurines perform the 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture too. One such standing male figurine (Fig. 6) was found in the Psychro Cave and is now in the Ashmolean Museum (Verlinden 1984, 206, no. 135). The figurine is standing with its arms extended. The forearms are turned diagonally towards the abdomen, on which the open palms are placed. The right hand is placed a little higher than the left. The figurine was dated by Colette Verlinden (1984, 146, no. 135) to the beginning of the Postpalatial period (14th century BC).

The form of the Mycenaean 'phi' figurines (Fig. 7) assimilates the gesture examined in the present study. The female figurines of this type turn the arms towards the belly in a semicircular movement, although in some cases it is not certain whether they are indeed laying them on the abdomen or placing them on the hips.

Approaching the Symbolic Function(s) of the 'Hands on Abdomen' Gesture

Previous interpretations

Usually, figurines from sanctuaries (Figs. 2–3, 6) are perceived as representations of the visitors to these sacred sites and referred to as adorants or supplicants; consequently, their gestures are often interpreted as movements of reverence, adoration, supplication, prayer or thanks to the worshipped deities (see *e.g.* Myres 1902/3, 368, 380; Platon 1951, 157; Verlinden 1984, 51, 57; Rutkowski 1986, 87–88; 1991, 55–56; Marinatos 1993, 117; Sfakianakis 2016, 210).

Some researchers follow alternative interpretative paths. Characteristically, Christine Morris and Alan Peatfield (2002, 2004, 2014; Peatfield and Morris 2012) emphasize the experienced, embodied character of Minoan gestures, considering them to be body movements that the visitors to the peak sanctuaries performed during shamanic rituals, in order to communicate with the transcendent world or to achieve the healing of a disease. In this context they discuss the 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture as a shamanistic movement for the healing of a disease in the devotee's belly (see also Giannaki 2008, 319–320, 355–356). Moreover, Dimitris Sfakianakis (2016, 210), studying the anthropomorphic figurines from the Vrysinas peak sanctuary, suggests that this could be a dance movement.

The female figurines with 'Hands on Abdomen' (Figs. 2, 5) are further interpreted as representations of devotees praying to a (female) deity for a safe pregnancy, especially when the figurines display enlarged bellies, or to conceive (see *e.g.* Platon 1951, 157; Giannaki 2008, 319–320, 355–356; Morris and Peatfield 2014, 60–61). Moreover, experiments have shown that this gesture is generally perceived by modern viewers (and possibly by ancient viewers and performers as well) as a movement related to fertility, nurturing, and motherhood (Steel 2020, 8–9). However,

we must bear the possibility in mind that the various morphological versions of the gesture served different symbolic functions.

Venerating the divine in the Aegean Bronze Age

The gesture I examine here falls into the 'closed' gesture type, in which the hands are turned towards the person performing the gesture or touch a part of their body. It is a movement that focuses the viewer's interest on a particular part of the performer's body, their belly. The 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture belongs to those movements that usually are called 'auto-contact' or 'self-touching' movements. Self-touching movements that hug the body, according to social anthropologists and psychologists (Morris 1977, 102, 134; Argyle 1988, 198), express the insecurity of the performers and their need for comfort and self-protection. Desmond Morris (1977, 102, 134–135) refers to this kind of gesture as 'body-cross' movements, that is, movements that create a protective barrier with the arms across the front of the body. These gestures are always performed by people entering the personal space of other people (Morris 1977, 135). People approaching their social superiors or standing in front of them perform self-touching gestures more often, as Michael Argyle (1988, 198) notes.

I have stated elsewhere (Kekes 2018, 228; 2021, 59) that gestures of this type may project:

- a) A performer's emotion (see also Morris 1977, 102–105; Argyle 1988, 198; Giannaki 2008, 320). For example, in Egyptian art when a figure touches its head with one or both hands, it expresses sorrow (see *e.g.* Wilkinson 1992, 35).
- b) A physical state of the performers. For example, when a figure turns its open palm towards its mouth this could mean that the figure is speaking (Kekes 2016, 2–7).
- c) A property of the performers and their social identity. For example, the gesture of female figures touching or revealing their breasts may be related to fertility or identify them as adult women or mothers/nurturers (see *e.g.* Weihartner 2012, 292; Platon 2014).

Based on the above observations, the 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture could initially be perceived as an expression of humility and respect on the part of devotees approaching the worshipped deity or standing in front of them.

The Aegean human figurines of this type, both male and female, primarily focus the viewer's attention on their abdomen, one of the most vulnerable parts of the human body, if not the most vulnerable. The arms/hands laid on the body is a passive stance that may show the person in front of whom it is performed that the gesturer is harmless. If the Aegean figurines are placed in a religious context, by projecting their passivity and vulnerable nature they may express their humility and reverence to a superior: that is, the honored transcendent entity whom they approach.

A further typical example showing the vulnerability of the human body is the bronze male figurine of the Postpalatial period found in the Cave of Psychro (Fig. 6). The form of the figurine intensely projects a sense of passivity, respect and/or thanksgiving, by the way it touches its belly with its open palms.

The 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture as an index of female coming-of-age rites

The above interpretation does not appear to concern all the figurines performing the 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture. It probably cannot be applied, for example, in the case of the seated female figurine inside the shrine-model from Galatas (Fig. 4), which is usually taken to be a goddess. If we interpret the gesture as a movement of respect, then to whom does a goddess show reverence? And if the figurine is not actually a goddess, but a mortal woman, then why is she placed inside a shrine? As we will see, the gesture can accommodate various other interpretations, even in the case of the seated figurine. This does not mean that the interpretative approach of the performers' religious reverence is to be rejected.

In the case of female figurines (or at least some of them), the focus on the abdomen through the placement of the hands on this area – in this way the gesture acquires *indexical* properties – could be symbolically connected with pregnancy, as other researchers have proposed (see above). This is more apparent in the case of figurines that display enlarged bellies (Fig. 4). Moreover, Katerina Giannaki (2008, 356–359) states that when the arms/hands are turned inwards, the votaries are expecting to receive or receiving divine energy and reserving it for themselves. Could the laying of hands on the belly be a movement that symbolically renders them a ritual conduit of divine energy in order for the votary to conceive? Based on Giannaki's interpretation, this is possible. So, by laying their hands on their belly, Aegean female figurines might *indexically* project their physical state of pregnancy.

The 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture in the case of seated figurines (Figs. 4–5) could just be due to the anatomy of the human body, without having any particular symbolism. When one is seated, one rests one's hands on the belly or the thighs. Other seated male and female figurines, however, perform various gestures (see *e.g.* Platon 1951, pl. E': 1; Dimopoulou-Rethemiotaki 2005, 105). Consequently, the 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture must be a deliberate choice by the craftsperson. That is, the gesture appears from the start to be preselected and meaningful. Furthermore, Mycenaean standing or seated figurines with their 'Hands on Abdomen' ('phi' figurines) are dated to LH III A–B; afterwards, the figurines mainly perform the 'Upraised Arms' gesture ('psi' figurines) (Steel 2020, 2). According to Louise Steel (2020, 9), the various gestures performed by Mycenaean female figurines per period are associated with significant social roles which some (or all) Mycenaean women acquired. Based on the figurines' gesture, it appears that in the Mycenaean perception of the LH III A–B period, nurturing and motherhood, social and physical reproduction, were the most significant female social roles (Steel 2020, 9).

Mycenaean figurines are often found in religious spaces and graves (see *e.g.* Vettters 2016, 45–46). Consequently, the gesture is further imbued with both a religious and a chthonic symbolic meaning. The latter is probably related to the expectation of the deceased's rebirth through the fertile properties of the goddess. Melissa Vettters (2016, 44–46) also imbues these figures with a protective role of liminal spaces, as many of them are found in hearths and at entrances of domestic spaces, and at tomb entrances.

The figurine inside the clay shrine-model from Galatas (Fig. 4) may represent a female divinity, since the model is probably a religious building, as it is surmounted by a pair of 'horns of consecration'. Deities or deified humans in models are also found elsewhere, for example in the famous clay house or shrine-model from Tholos Tomb A of Kamilari (see *e.g.* Dimopoulou-Rethemiotaki 2005, 171). The divine nature of the woman in the shrine-model from Galatas is also denoted by her seated posture and the use of a footstool on which she places her feet. These are two familiar characteristics of the iconography of divine figures (or of their representatives, priests and priestesses) in Aegean art (Marinatos 1993, 190; Rehak 1995; Morris 2001, 248; Rethemiotakis 2010, 297; Günkel-Maschek 2016). Based on her gesture, emphasizing the abdomen, it is probable, as Giorgos Rethemiotakis (2010, 296) states, that the female divinity is associated with fertility: she is a pregnant goddess and a protector of pregnant women. However, in my opinion, it is not improbable that childbirth is represented inside a specially shaped space, in which Minoan women would be isolated to give birth or during menstruation, as evidenced by ethnographic data (see below).

The female figurines from peak sanctuaries performing the 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture are interpreted as devotees invoking the goddess to help them have a safe pregnancy, as we have seen. When the figurines do not display iconographical evidence that would indicate their pregnant status (such as enlarged bellies or shaped breasts), they are probably praying to the goddess for her intervention in order to conceive.

Moreover, the votive human limbs found at peak sanctuaries underline the invocation (or thanks) of the devotees for the satisfaction of their needs, for their well-being and the healing of various diseases from which they suffered (Myres 1902/3, 381; Platon 1951, 114, 120–121,

156–157; Rutkowski 1991, 57; Marinatos 1993, 117; Sakellarakis 2013, 71–72; Morris and Peatfield 2014). The divine reciprocation is the primary aim of prayer (Rutkowski 1991, 55). The worshippers offer something to the deities and entreat them to accept their offerings, expecting something from them in return (Platon 1951, 157; Sakellarakis 2013, 70). This has to do with the three 'obligations' of the 'gift', as Marcel Mauss (1966, 37–41) defined them: the 'obligation to give' (on behalf of humans), the 'obligation to receive' and the 'obligation to repay' (on behalf of the divinities). According to Yannis Sakellarakis (2013, 72), the votive limbs are deposited as a token of thanks, after the satisfaction of the devotees' needs, such as the healing of their illnesses, by the divinities. In this case, it is the deities who offer and the mortals who receive and return the offering. This interpretation also concerns the male figurines that place their hands on their abdomen. By performing this gesture, Aegean men and women might have been showing the worshipped deity or deities the sick part of their body to be cured.

It is very likely, however, that, besides the religious rituals, rites of passage were also performed at the peak sanctuaries, or at least some of them, and at other kinds of sanctuary (see *e.g.* Marinatos 1993, 123; Lembesi 2002, 281; Platon 2014). For example, at Piskokephalo specific groups of figurines are probably related to coming-of-age rites and others to wedding ceremonies (Platon 2014, 66–68, 70–77). Moreover, the archaeological evidence from the Psychro Cave and the Kophinas peak sanctuary indicates the performance of male rites of passage at these religious sites (Watrous 1996, 52–53, 89–90, 95, table 4; Rethemiotakis 2014; Spiliotopoulou 2015, 286–290; 2018, 1:143–146, 163–167, 200–225). Might the female figurines performing the 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture fall into this ritual context? And how might the gesture be interpreted in this light?

From ancient times to the modern day, it is usual for the passage from one stage in the life of an individual to another (either an age or a social group) to be officialized through specific public rituals (see *e.g.* van Gennep 1960; Kopaka 2009, 186–187; Mavrouti 2016). An individual's entrance into the Christian community is signaled by their baptism. The acquisition of a university degree is officially validated by the swearing-in ceremony. Stages considered significant in a woman's life are, for example, birth, menarche, marriage, pregnancy and labor.

As I have already said, the 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture could be related to the stage of pregnancy. Nevertheless, the gesture could also be linked to another of the above intermediate stages: menstruation. Menstrual pain sometimes leads to the placement of the hands on the belly. In this light, the female figurines found at peak sanctuaries and performing the 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture could *indexically* denote that the women are in pain, that they are menstruating. Especially the female figurines that do not display enlarged bellies or fully developed breasts, an indication of their young age, could be interpreted as girls entering the stage of menstruation, that is, of fertility. The rendition of breasts on the figurines does not negate the above interpretation, since menstruation appears, of course, in the lives of girls at an early age (usually between 12–14) but follows them through most of their lives, when they are biologically fully developed women. Since the figurine from Petsophas (Fig. 3) appears to actually represent a female, based on the technological characteristics I described previously, it strengthens my hypothesis that young girls can perform the 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture, too, as the figurine does not display breasts (at least not plastically). In this case, the gesture might function as an *index* of menstrual pain.

In this context, perhaps menstruating women could participate, during their menarche or periodically, in associated public rituals (van Gennep 1960, 67–69, 87; Kopaka 2009, 186–187). The women may have visited the religious sites seeking the blessing of a fertility goddess or for the alleviation of their pain. Besides, the healing of various illnesses was one of the reasons one would visit a peak sanctuary, as I have already mentioned.

Meanwhile, perhaps young girls experiencing their first menstruation dedicated their 'impure' or 'powerful' menstrual blood (as it is usually perceived in various cultural environments) or other kinds of symbolic offerings to a fertility goddess (as a Thera wall painting I will discuss later may imply), followed by purification rites. Menstruating women in Ancient Egypt were iso-



Fig. 8: *The Adorants Fresco, Xeste 3, Akrotiri, Thera, LM IA (modified by the author after Marinatos 2014, 132–133, 137; courtesy of Nanno Marinatos).*

lated in special huts outside the settlements, built specifically for this purpose, or in specific spaces inside their houses (McDowell 1999, 35, no. 11; Meskell 2000, 427–428). Menstruating women and/or menstrual blood were perceived as ‘impure’ by the ancient Egyptians (Tyldesley 1995, 149). The Egyptian term referring to menstruation (*‘hsmn’*) sounded similar to an Egyptian word for ‘clean/purify’, as well as that for ‘natron’ (Faulkner 1991, 178; Frandsen 2007, 82–84), which was used as a purification material during the mummification of the deceased (Kousoulis 2004, 103–104), suggesting that Egyptian women were in a period of purification during their menstruation (Tyldesley 1995, 149; Frandsen 2007, 82–84).

Correspondingly, in past cultures or in modern traditional societies menstrual blood is often perceived as ‘unclean’, as well as ‘powerful’, having magical, healing or destructive, properties (e.g. Pliny, *Natural History*, XXVIII. 77–86; Delaney, Lupton and Toth 1976, 7–13; Knight 1991, 375–376; Hoskins 2002; Das 2008; Dammary 2016, 92–113; Maharaj and Winkler 2020, 163–167; Rothchild and Piya 2020, 922). Menstrual blood can also be offered to a divinity (Delaney, Lupton and Toth 1976, 7); rarely, however, since menstrual blood is often perceived as ‘impure’ and is not a proper offering to the divine. This phenomenon can be observed in past cultures,¹ as well as in modern traditional societies or unconventional religious communities. A characteristic modern example of this practice is a group of Neopagan women, raised as Catholics, who visit churches dedicated to Mary Magdalene, whom they consider the ‘protector of menstruation blood’, and ritually dedicate the blood of their first or every menstruation to ‘Mother Earth’ (Fedele 2014).

There are other examples in Aegean art that may be symbolically linked with menstruation. A characteristic example is the Theran Adorants Fresco in Xeste 3 (Fig. 8). Drops of blood can be observed on the surface of the ‘horns of consecration’ surmounting the building on the right. According to Nanno Marinatos (1984, 74–84), the red drops on the ‘horns of consecration’ indicate the performance of blood libations; she connects this activity with initiation rituals, the burgeoning of nature, animal sacrifice, and human bleeding (Marinatos 1984, 74–84). Iriini Papageorgiou (2011–2012, 46) also perceives the ‘horns of consecration’ as the ritual center of li-

¹ Matthew Dillon (1997, 202) initially stated that Athenian girls dedicated their menarche clothes to Artemis Brauronia, although in a later publication he argued that the clothes did not actually have menstrual blood on them (Dillon 2002, 250, 359, n. 73). However, other scholars, too, have suggested that some of the clothes dedicated to the goddess were used as sanitary bandages during men-

struation (Giuman 1999, 59–61; 2002, 100–101; Calame 2002, 57–61).

² The two miniature stone ‘horns of consecration’ found in a lustral basin at Phaistos were also painted red (Gesell 1985, 128). Red pigment was probably used by Minoans for coloring cult material (Gesell 1985, 23). Yet might the red color on the ‘horns’ symbolize blood?

bations with the blood of a recently sacrificed animal. Christos Doumas (1992, 129) also claims that the scene involved blood flowing on the ‘horns’ and relates it to an initiation ritual, without any further analysis. On the contrary, Gesell (2000, 954) considers the red drops to be saffron styles gathered by the saffron-gatherers depicted in the upper zone and relates their deposition to coming-of-age rituals. Her opinion is not widely accepted by other scholars (see *e.g.* the discussion of her paper in Gesell 2000, 957; see also Poole 2020, 148, n. 65).

Katerina Kopaka (2009, 188–189) considers the young girl wearing a veil to have experienced her menarche. She is probably walking away from the building that she was isolated in during her menstruation. Might the blood on the ‘horns of consecration’ represent the menstrual blood of the young girl, which has been dedicated to a transcendent entity related to fertility?² On the contrary, Marinatos in some recent publications connects the blood on the ‘horns’ with the seated female figure who is bleeding, whom she interprets as the Goddess of Nature, also depicted in the Saffron-gatherers Fresco (Marinatos 2014, 134–135; 2015; she also proposed this theory in her recent lecture in Vienna, 2021, titled “Wounded Goddess and Rituals of Blood”). However, we must bear in mind the iconographic composition of the wall painting and the proxemics of the figures; it would be more sensible to connect the blood on the ‘horns’ with the young girl wearing a veil, as she is depicted closer to the gate crowned by the ‘horns of consecration’ than the other figures, and she is probably walking away from the gate, as she is turning her head in that direction (see also Boulotis 2011, 267).

Another element that could link the activities represented in the wall paintings of this specific space with menstruation is the symbolic connection of saffron with menstrual blood. Besides being an offering to Potnia, the Goddess of Nature, saffron may also have been used as a palliative medication for menstrual pain (see also Marinatos 1984, 65; Papageorgiou 2011–2012, 51, 105, n. 1; Mavroudi 2016, 11). Moreover, during historical times, the young girls (of prepubescent age) who served Artemis Brauronia wore saffron tunics, their color referring to human blood.³ The girls removed the tunics when they stopped serving the goddess, as they had experienced their menarche (Dillon 1997, 202; Papageorgiou 2011–2012, 105, n. 1).

Even if this hypothesis is true, it does not necessarily prove the dedication of the blood of the menarche, or of menstrual blood in general, to a Minoan divinity during a female coming-of-age rite at Minoan sanctuaries. Despite the fact that the Theran wall painting (Fig. 8) cannot be directly linked with the archaeological material and the gesture I examine here, it is worth noting that the ‘horns of consecration’ bearing drops of blood are connected with the female gender, as is also the case with the shrine-model from Galatas (Fig. 4).⁴ Moreover, one of the probably various symbolic aspects of the ‘horns’ symbol might be related in the Aegean perception to vegetation (symbolically connected with fertility), as many scenes of women offering plants (see *e.g.* *CMS* I, nos. 86, 279, 410; V Suppl. 1B, no. 113) or the representation of ‘horns’ on altars combined with plants (see *e.g.* *CMS* I, no. 231; III, nos. 262, 345) demonstrate. Another element that might symbolically and functionally link the building depicted in the wall painting with the shrine-model is their archaeological context. The Adorants Fresco decorates the walls of a lustral

3 Saffron stems are reddish-orange and yellow. Saffron tunics symbolized the blood of a bear killed in Artemis’ sanctuary at Brauron, although the service of the young girls to the goddess Artemis as ‘arktoi’ (bears) was a clear initiation rite to puberty (Sourvinou-Inwood 1988, 119–134; Dillon 1997, 201–202; Giuman 2002; Papageorgiou 2011–2012, 105, n. 1).

4 However, the ‘horns’ in Aegean art are frequently related to the male gender, too, usually having a religious symbolism. The most characteristic scenes are to be found on *CMS* I, no. 292, where a standing male figure greets a floating male figure, probably a god, who is appearing in front of a building surmounted by ‘horns’, and *CMS* V

Suppl. 1A, no. 142, the so-called Master Impression (Hallager 1985), where a male figure, probably a god, is represented standing on buildings crowned by ‘horns of consecration’. A male figure, perhaps an adorant, is standing before a sanctuary with ‘horns of consecration’ on *CMS* II 8, no. 272. The ‘horns of consecration’, as the buildings surmounted by them, probably served various functions depending on the archaeological and ritual contexts, the social identity of the participants, the cultural environment, the chronological context, etc. In the present study I intend to further explore one of the probably many potential symbolic aspects of this symbol in relation to the female gender.

basin, an ‘adyton’, ‘a place of separation’ according to Marinatos (1984, 73–74), and the shrine-model was found in a building that also includes a ritual space of this kind (Rethemiotakis 2010, 293). Lustral basins, according to Dario Puglisi (2012), might be spaces related to female initiation rituals. Kopaka (2009, 191) also considers that lustral basins would be ‘ideal places to “hide” female events, for a limited attendance, and could thus be used like “women’s rooms” hosting menstrual and/or birthing seclusion, and cleansing and changing of clothes’.

Without negating the religious character of the ‘horns of consecration’ symbol, I am suggesting that, at least in some cases, buildings surmounted by them could be special spaces in which Bronze Age Aegean women were isolated during rites of passage related to menarche or childbirth, before they could be reintegrated into their communities. Besides, a space may have various secular and/or ritual uses of very different character, as Vangelis Kyriakidis has shown (Kyriakidis 2007, 14–15. See also Goffman 1966, 21; Kekes 2021, 63). As Puglisi (2012, 207) notes, decorative ‘horns of consecration’ or models of this symbol have also been found in lustral basins at Zakros, Phaistos and the Little Palace at Knossos (see also Gesell 1985, 93, 128, 140; 2000, 954–955). In this light, the seated female figurine inside the shrine-model from Galatas could be interpreted not as a pregnant goddess, but as a mortal woman who has been isolated in a special space to give birth. Even if she is indeed a goddess related to fertility, this does not invalidate my previous suggestion.

In this context, the female figurines performing the ‘Hands on Abdomen’ gesture probably represent women who visit holy places during their menarche or during every menstruation, to invoke a fertility goddess and/or beg her to make their menstruation easier or even to dedicate their menstrual blood or other offerings to her, as I hypothesized previously. Moreover, young girls, as well as mature women, might visit these holy sites to be secluded from the rest of the community during their menstruation.

Throughout the ages and in various cultural environments, menstruating women are isolated in special spaces either inside or outside the settlements or inside their houses for a few days or even for a much longer period, before they can be reintegrated into the community.⁵ In extreme cases, this period can be a very painful one for young girls, as they undergo both psychological and physical violence (Delaney, Lupton and Toth 1976, 29–30; Rothchild and Piya 2020, 922–924). At the other end of the menarche ritual spectrum are the celebrations performed to honor young girls during their menarche or their reintegration in the community after their seclusion, when they have acquired a new social (and not only social) status (Fane 1975, 70–71, 95–96, 101–102; Delaney, Lupton and Toth 1976, 30–31; Dammary 2016, 65–91; Gottlieb 2020, 150). Indeed, in southern India, menarche is related to rituals in honor of a menstruating goddess, and girls experiencing their first menstruation are perceived as goddesses too (Cohen 2020, 121–122).

If such rites of passage were performed in Minoan sanctuaries, during menarche or later, these were probably special occasions, gatherings of the female population of the local communities: if not all the women of a community, then at least those belonging to the immediate circle of the initiates. Through these ritual activities the bonds between the women of a community would be solidified, the female identity crystallized, and the power of the female gender projected to the males.⁶

⁵ Eliade 1958, 41–44; van Gennep 1960, 67–68, 87; Delaney, Lupton and Toth 1976, 8, 24–32; Buckley 1982; McDowell 1999, 35, no. 11; Meskell 2000, 427–428; Hoskins 2002, 318–320; Cicurel and Sharaby 2007; Ellen 2012, 107–129. See also the chapters concerning the menarche rituals of various tribes of India in Nanjundayya and Iyer 1928.

⁶ See *e.g.* Buckley 1982; Cicurel and Sharaby 2007;

Perianes and Ndaferankhande 2020. Characteristically, Chris Knight (1991, see esp. Chapters 11–14) attempts a Marxist approach to the collective, synchronized menstruation in hunter-gatherer societies as a form of ‘sexual strike’, a demonstration of the solidarity and power of the female gender, which has the potential to define when and if there will be coitus with the men of the community in exchange for food, as they are motivated to hunt prey for the women.

Their archaeological context is crucial for understanding the symbolic function of the gesture of female figurines, as those from caves may also have a chthonic symbolic meaning (see also Davaras 1976, 43; Rutkowski 1986, 64–65; Kanta 2011, 29). Consequently, the 'pregnancy' interpretation in this case appears to be more suitable if the figurines are symbolically linked with rebirth. However, in this case, too, the gesture could indicate menstruation (which is certainly related to fertility) and the isolation of menstruating women or their visit to the cave to offer their blood or other more proper offerings to a female deity with chthonic attributes.

Gesture(s) of authority and social identity?

One last point must be made concerning the potential social dimensions of the 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture and of its morphological variations. The economic value of the bronze figurine from Psychro Cave (Fig. 6) projects the financial status of the devotee. Might the figurine's gesture also have indicated the devotee's high social status?

The large quantity of votive weaponry found in the Psychro Cave, according to Watrous (1996, 52–53, 89–90, 95, table 4), demonstrates the performance of male rites of passage in the cave during Postpalatial times. The above bronze male figurine could be a votive offering of a young Minoan who had reached adulthood. Its gesture, can be perceived, on the one hand, as a movement of reverence and thanksgiving, as we have already seen. On the other hand, if we place the figurine in the context of a male rite of passage, the gesture might accommodate other symbolic meanings. As the votary was the center of attention during the ritual, the gesture of the figurine might express his awkwardness and (temporary) social status and identity, as an initiate.

The same could be said of the female figurines, too. I previously interpreted their gesture as an indicator of their physical state (menstruation or pregnancy). Furthermore, as the menstruating girls might participate in a coming-of-age rite, the figurines' gesture could also demonstrate to the viewer their social identity as initiates to adulthood.

As I have already mentioned, the morphological variations of the 'Hands on Abdomen' gesture observed in the Aegean figurines could be different versions of the same gesture, with or without differentiated symbolism, or they could even be perceived as totally different gestures. Sometimes the figurines appear to place their fists instead of the palms on their belly. This could be the case with the clay female figurine from the Vrysinas peak sanctuary (Fig. 2) if it is resting its fists rather than its flat hands on the belly. This representation is probably due to the material of the figurine and the craftsman's choice not to render the hands in detail. However, one must explore the possibility that this rendition is deliberate and meaningful. If this is the case, then the fists placed on the belly might be seen as a dynamic movement, in contrast to the passive posture of laying the palms on the abdomen. This vigorous rendition of the hands might further project the high social status and authority of the gesturer.

Elsewhere, I have interpreted the fist that is placed on the belly – a gesture performed by bronze male figurines at the end of Neopalatial and in Postpalatial times – as a gesture of reverence and/or an *index* of social status (Kekes 2021, 630–634). Thus, it is possible that the votary who offered this female figurine (as well as the votaries dedicating other figurines of this type) belonged to the elite of the local community/-ies or, as I said above, acquired a (temporary) high social status, as an initiate to adulthood.

The hands of the above figurine are slightly touching each other. One could perceive this rendition as a different gesture to that which I examine in this paper. The gesture of the hands joined in front of the belly is observed more clearly on a male Neopalatial bronze figurine from the peak sanctuary of Agios Georgios sto Vouno, Kythera (Sapouna-Sakellaraki 2012, 60, fig. 64a). Its gesture may indicate the votary's high social and possibly religious status. The figurine wears a hieratic garment, so could be a priest praying respectfully to the worshipped deity. The figurine's economic value clearly shows us that the votary who deposited the figurine belonged to a higher social class. By analogy, the figurine from Vrysinas may be praying to a deity, with her gesture also identifying her as a member of the local elite, perhaps a priestess.

Conclusion

Generally, researchers interpret the Aegean ‘Hands on Abdomen’ gesture variously, based on the identification of the social identity of the figurines performing the gesture or the ritual actions taking place at the sites where they have been found. Some researchers consider the figurines to be representations of the votaries, and consequently approach their gesture as being relevant to the religious practices performed at the Minoan peak sanctuaries (gesture of reverence, adoration, or supplication). Others focus on embodied practices and perceive the gesture as a shamanic movement intended to heal a sick part of the devotee’s body. This interpretative approach is similar to my hypothesis that the hands are placed on the abdomen in order to indicate the area in which the men and women devotees feel pain – menstrual pain in the case of women – also seeking comfort and cure. Above and beyond all the different aspects, the ‘Hands on Abdomen’ gesture appears to express the vulnerable, mortal nature of human beings.

In conclusion, as is commonly the case, the social identity of Aegean figurines and their archaeological and ritual context largely define the symbolic meaning of their gestures. A sense of religious reverence towards the divine is apparent from the way some figurines place their hands on their belly. Placing the figurines of this type in a religious context, their gesture could be perceived as a passive movement expressing humility and respect towards the divine.

In the case of female figurines, whether mortals or deities, the ‘Hands on Abdomen’ gesture sometimes appears to further indicate their fertility and physical state (menstruation, pregnancy, or childbirth). Moreover, through the gesture the social status of the women represented by the figurines is semiotically projected to the viewer. Aegean menstruating women probably participated in public (coming-of-age and other) rituals. They could visit holy sites to offer their first (or every) menses or other more proper offerings to a fertility goddess, or to pray to or thank the goddess for the magical gift of fertility. Furthermore, they might be isolated from the rest of the community at these sites or in specific places within their settlements or homes during menstruation (or childbirth). In this light, they could acquire a significant social status; in the case of young girls, as individuals entering adulthood. Indeed, as I have mentioned previously, in modern India young girls experiencing their menarche are perceived as goddesses. Their significant (although temporary) social status originates from their physical state of menstruation. It is possible that Aegean women, too, acquired, on specific occasions, a significant (but temporary) social status due to their fertility and their physical state (menstruation, pregnancy).

If the male figurines, too, are placed in the context of male rites of passage performed at Aegean religious sites, then in their case, too, the gesture may have functioned semiologically as an indicator of male social status, as it demonstrated the social identity of the performers as initiates to adulthood. In fact, Puglisi (2020) talks about the possible existence of an ‘age class’ system in Minoan Crete, where the social status and roles of Minoans were determined by their age. By entering adulthood, Minoan men and women acquired a significant social status, and potential rituals of coming-of-age signaled their passage.

Based on the above analysis, the ‘Hands on Abdomen’ gesture sometimes appears to express the authority and social identity of the performers. However, given that even the slightest differentiation in the gesture’s form could mean that it is a different gesture or convey a totally different symbolism, we must bear in mind that touching hands placed on the belly may actually be a different gesture to that which I discuss here.

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