

Dropping Ecstasy? Minoan Cult and the Tropes of Shamanism

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Cult scenes illustrated in miniature on administrative stone seals and metal signet rings from Late Bronze Age Minoan Crete are commonly interpreted as “Epiphany Scenes” and have been called “shamanic”. “Universal shamanism” is a catch-all anthropological term coined to describe certain inferred ritual behaviors across widely dispersed cultures and through time. This study re-examines evidence for Minoan cultic practices in light of key tropes of “universal shamanism”, including consumption of psychoactive drugs, adoption of special body postures, trance, spirit possession, communication with supernatural beings, metamorphosis, and the journey to other-worlds. It is argued that while existing characterizations of Minoan cult as “shamanic” are based on partial, reductionist and primitivist assumptions informed by neo-evolutionary comparative ethnologies, shamanism provides a dynamic framework for expanding understandings of Minoan cult. It is of course understood that while this study is a careful, informed analysis of the evidence, it is but one interpretation among others.

Keywords: Minoan; glyptic; shamanism; epiphany; cult

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Introduction

Enigmatic images interpreted as cult scenes depicted in the miniature art of stone seals and metal signet rings have led scholars to describe the religion of Late Bronze Age Minoan Crete as “ecstatic”. Said to involve the consumption of psychoactive substances, spirit possession, and visionary trance states, Minoan religion has also been identified as “shamanic” (Evans 1930, 315; Morris and Peatfield 2002, 2004; Morris 2004; Peatfield and Morris 2012). The word “shaman” derives from the Siberian Tungusic (Evenki) term *šaman*; as a noun denoting “one who is excited, moved, raised” and as a verb “to know in an ecstatic manner” (Jolly 2005, 127; Znamenski 2007; viii). First recorded in 1672, by the late eighteenth century “shaman” was used to describe a Siberian religious specialist who undertook to heal or harm other humans through a dramatic public performance. In contrast the term “shamanism”, a scholarly construct, describes religious phenomena observed across the world which appear similar to the Siberian prototype. There is no consensus on the definition of the term (Hutton 2001; vii; Vitebsky 2001, 161; Jones 2006).¹ Generally however, a “shaman” is said to be a specialist practitioner who intercedes with the non-human “otherworld” on behalf of a human community in order to moderate relationships between that community and other-than-human beings (Harvey 2010, 30). The shaman achieves this through a combination of public performance and the altering of their own state of consciousness. While performative aspects of shamanism appear cross-culturally, the interior psychological states of shamans may vary. Said to interact with an attendant group of spirits, shamans may be possessed by or in dialogue with these spirits, or travel out of their body to meet them (Hutton 2001, 65).²

Already in the early twentieth century Arnold van Gennep (1903) warned that “shamanism” was an imprecise term as it gave the impression that it signified a type of religion when in fact it refers to a technique (Bowie 2001, 191). In the mid-twentieth century Mircea Eliade expanded the term to include all non-Western and pre-Christian European spiritualities in which practitioners underwent altered states of consciousness (Eliade 1989; Znamenski 2009, 197). Viewed as a primordial religion characterized by “ecstatic” states, scholarship on shamanism influenced by Eliade tends to focus on the interior state of the shaman, and to use the term “shamanism” as a synonym for altered states of consciousness (Atkinson 1992, 310). Academic disciplines including religious studies, psychology and archaeology, as well as popular self-actualization and New Age literature, typically apply the term “shaman” in Eliade’s transcultural, “impressionistic” manner, while anthropological ethnographies focus upon single cultural traditions. The latter argue that the psychological component of shamanism is not its defining feature and that it should not be defined in isolation from the individual cultural system within which it is situated (Znamenski 2009, 200; Atkinson 1992, 308).

There are, however, certain tropes of shamanism that have been observed across widely dispersed cultures and through time, leading to the inference of so-called “universal shamanism”, a term positing set tropes or behavioral correlates which may be interpreted as “shamanic” such as the public performance of ecstatic states, spirit communication and shamanic ascent or flight (Atkinson 1992, 308; Díaz-Andreu 2001, 125; Walter and Fridman 2004; Znamenski 2009, 190–191). These commonalities are explained in terms of universal human proclivities; behaviors that

can be exhibited by all humans with normally functioning nervous systems from all known societies and which derive from the shared characteristics of the human brain (D'Aquili and Newberg 1998; Winkelman 2004; Watson 2009, 12–13).³ Generalizing theories of shamanism necessarily impose delimiting parameters around this dynamic and ambiguous phenomenon, drawing in diverse practices from temporally and geographically disparate contexts. It is not the project of the present study to critique this already much discussed term, but rather, to reassess the material evidence from a specifically Bronze Age Aegean context, not as shamanism, *but in light of* “shamanistic” practices.

This study argues that the religion of Late Bronze Age Minoan Crete exhibits characteristics which may be termed shamanistic. Key shamanic behaviors – including use of psychotropic drugs, body postures, ecstatic trance, dialogue with spirits, spirit possession, therianthrope metamorphosis, communication with ancestors, and other-world journeying within a tripartite model of the cosmos – will be analyzed. Pieter Jolly (2005, 127) characterizes shamanic cultures as possessing religious functionaries who draw on the powers in the natural world, including the powers of animals, and who mediate, usually in an altered state of consciousness, between the world of the living and that of the spirits – including the spirits of the dead. Evidence for such practices, drawn from both artwork and the archaeological remains of cult sites, suggests that the cult practices of Late Bronze Age Crete may be understood in this light.⁴ Rather than claiming that practitioners of Minoan religion were “shamans” however, the description “shamanistic” will here serve to describe those aspects of Minoan religion that appear to conform with practices classified under the rubric of universal shamanism.

Minoan Crete

Discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century by Sir Arthur Evans, Minoan civilization was named after the mythical King Minos, and initially interpreted with reference to the well-known Classical mythological tales of Pasiphae and the Bull, Ariadne and Theseus, and the latter's killing of the Minotaur in the Labyrinth (Morford and Lenardon 1985). Ubiquitous bull imagery from the palatial site of Knossos and the palace's “labyrinthine” architecture appeared to confirm the myth – but what of the reality? Crete, the largest of the Greek islands, is located in the Mediterranean on the ancient sea routes between Europe, Asia and Africa, a position contributing to its important role in the network of trade and transmission of culture throughout the ancient world (Cline 1994). First inhabited in the Neolithic period (ca.7000–3500 BC), small hamlets and villages remained the dominant feature of Crete until the end of the Early Bronze Age (the Early Minoan III ca.2200–2100/50 BC). From the Middle Bronze Age onwards a more complex society emerged which culminated in the appearance of the first palaces, termed the Protopalatial period (Middle Minoan IB–IIIA-B ca.1925–1750 BC). Destruction of the palaces, probably by an earthquake, and their subsequent rebuilding marked the beginning of the Neopalatial period (Late Minoan IA) around 1700 BC. The Minoan palaces formed the center of administration, storage, religion and trade until their destruction by the Mycenaeans in the Final Palatial period (Late Minoan IB–II) ca.1470–1420 BC, with Knossos itself finally destroyed around 1350 BC (Tomkins 2010; Manning 2010).

The Neopalatial period is characterized by the rebuilding on a more monumental scale of palatial structures destroyed in the preceding Middle Minoan II period. Increased unification across the island is centered on the palace of Knossos and management of agricultural production, surplus storage, trade in commodities, and the expansion of Minoan cultural influence within the Cycladic islands are evident (Driessen, Schoep, and Laffineur 2002; Rehak and Younger 2001). During this period Minoan palatial control was exerted through a system of regional administrative villas and religious sites such as cave and peak sanctuaries. One of the most characteristic material signatures of the palatial administrative system is the seal. Seals, also known as glyptics, were used to secure and identify property, to designate ownership, and as a symbol of office or authority (Boardman 2001, 13; Krzyszkowska 2005, 21), their ubiquitous presence in Minoan Crete reflecting a sophisticated and organized bureaucracy concerned with trade and the exchange of commodities, the accumulation of property and the hierarchical exercise of authority (Weingarten 1986).

Seals and Minoan Religion

Glyptic art is the most extensive body of Aegean Bronze Age representational art and consists of carved seals in the form of seal stones, engraved metal signet rings and the clay impressions (sealings) that the seals are used to produce. Seal iconography was carved directly onto stone or the large, flat bezels of gold, silver, or bronze rings (Boardman 2001, 13; Krzyszkowska 2005, 12–15). Usually under 3 cm in size, the primary purpose of seals was the identification of their

owner, however, because of their decorative aspects, they also functioned as jewelry. Stone seals could be worn on the body as bracelets, necklaces, pendants, or pins (Weingarten 2010, 317). The small hoops of the metal seal rings suggest that they may have belonged to people with very small fingers – perhaps young women and/or children – or been strung upon necklaces rather than worn upon fingers. When found in intact tombs, they usually lie next to the left wrist as if worn on a bracelet, or on the chest as if suspended from a necklace; however, they have also been found in proximity to hands, suggesting they may also have been worn upon fingers (Müller 2005, 171; Dimopoulou and Rethemiotakis 2000, 43; Krzyszkowska 2005, 21; Rehak and Younger 2008, 159; Popham, Catling, and Catling 1974, 223).⁵

While approximately 11,000 seals and sealings are known from the Aegean Bronze Age,⁶ the number depicting human forms is comparatively small. In the Neopalatial period human figures occur on about 10% of seal-types (Krzyszkowska 2005, 137). The most complex and spectacular figurative scenes are engraved on the metal signet rings and are thought to depict human and divine figures engaging in cultic activities (Younger 1988, x; Boardman 2001, 16; Krzyszkowska 2005, 127, 137). Clay sealings attest the existence of at least 334 different signet rings; however, only 102 of these have thus far been recovered archaeologically. As well as depicting cult activities the engraved bezels portray hunting, fighting, chariot driving, and bull leaping scenes (Weingarten 2010, 322). In the absence of deciphered texts from Minoan Crete, glyptic iconography is the

richest and most diverse category of evidence relied upon in the interpretation of Minoan cult.

Previous Research

Early scholarship claimed that Minoan cult involved spirit possession achieved through consumption of psychotropic substances. At the beginning of the twentieth century Arthur Evans, excavator of the palatial site of Knossos on Crete, described Minoan religion as “primitive”, distinguished by aniconic cult objects deriving directly from the landscape such as trees and stones which, according to his evolutionary schema, preceded more sophisticated anthropomorphic sculpture (Evans 1901; Mettinger 1995; Gaifman 2012). Influenced by Tylorian animism, which posited that early religions were characterized by belief in the animate quality of natural phenomena, as well as James G. Frazer who argued for the universality of spirit possession, Evans proposed that the trees and stones of Minoan cult could be temporarily inhabited, or possessed, by supernatural beings such as spirits or deities. Ritual interaction

with these possessed trees and stones subsequently lead to the possession of human participants (Evans 1901; Tylor 1871; Frazer 1890).

Evans proposed that Minoan possession involved the descent of a deity in the form of a bird onto a tree or stone, thereafter possessing a nearby human cult practitioner. Because trees are living things they were thought to function as the permanent abodes of spirits and could act as conduits between humans and the supernatural. Stones, however, required human intervention through ritual to invoke their inhabitation by spirits (Crooks 2013). Evans (1901, 124) saw this theory illustrated in a gold ring from Knossos (Figures 1 and 2) which he described as depicting “an armed God ... descending in front of his sacred obelisk, before which the votary stands in the attitude of sacred adoration”, this being “the artist’s attempt to express the spiritual being, duly brought down by ritual incantation, so as to temporarily possess its stony resting place”.

Evans later proposed that dancing, chanting and consumption of psychoactive substances were additional methods



Figure 1. Gold ring from Knossos, Crete. (AM1938.I127. CMS VI.2 No. 281 [CMS])



Figure 2. Gold ring from Knossos, Crete. (CMS VI.2 No. 281 [CMS])

through which Minoans achieved ritual possession, suggesting that the Minoan practice was analogous to Saami shamanism (Evans 1930, 315).⁷ The Sacred Grove and Dance fresco from Knossos depicts female figures engaging in what Evans described as an “orgiastic dance” accompanied by incantatory chanting, while the scene depicted on a gold ring from Vapheio (Figure 3) illustrates a female dancing while a male figure pulls on a tree, thought by Evans to depict the ritual harvesting of psychoactive fruit (Evans 1930, 68, 142). Influenced by comparative mythology stemming from Indo-European studies, Evans suggested

that this fruit was the source of “the juice ... like the Soma of the Vedas, that supplies the religious frenzy, and at the same time implies a communion with the divinity inherent in the tree ...” In Evans’ framework the female figure is “thrown into an ecstatic frenzy by the juice of the sacred fruit ... [and] ... falls entranced on the shield of her male consort” (Evans 1930, 142; Ackerman 1991; Wasson 1967).⁸ Evans identifies further evidence for the use of psychoactive substances in a scene depicted on the Tiryns Ring (Figure 4), which he interprets as a group ritual in which a chalice containing the juice of a sacred tree was shared by



Figure 3. Gold ring from Vapheio, Greece. (CMS I No. 219. [CMS])



Figure 4. Gold ring from Tiryns, Greece. (CMS I No. 179 [CMS])



Figure 5. Gold ring from Mycenae, Greece. (CMS I No. 126 [CMS])

all participants (Evans 1936, 392). A female figure depicted on a Mycenaean ring (Figure 5), in which a male figure pulls upon a tree, is described by Evans as “waiting for the fruit that shall inspire her ecstatic trances” (Evans 1936, 177).

However, Evans is unclear regarding what this trance-inducing substance actually was. Evans was incorrect in identifying clusters of grapes on the Mycenae Acropolis Ring (Figure 6), from which he inferred consumption of wine, as the plant in question is in fact a tree laden with fruit (Evans 1936, 394–395; Tully, forthcoming). Evans further identifies fig, pine, cypress, and plane trees depicted in

Minoan glyptic art, none of which has psychoactive properties, while grape vines never appear in cult scenes (Evans 1901, 101).⁹ As a result of Evans’ analysis however, terms such as “possession”, “ecstatic trance”, and “orgiastic frenzy” became prevalent in the discussion of Minoan religion, and in combination with putative psychoactive drug use, suggested that Minoan religion was characterized by complete loss of control (Nilsson 1950, 275; Warren 1981, 1990; Niemeier 1989; Cain 2001).

More recently, Christine Morris and Alan Peatfield have refigured scenes said to depict “possession” as “altered states of consciousness” – non-ordinary bodily



Figure 6. Gold ring from Mycenae Acropolis, Greece. (CMS I No. 17 [CMS])

states in which sensations, perceptions, cognition and emotions are modified, not necessarily distinguished by a loss of control (Morris and Peatfield 2004, 39).¹⁰ Rather than being possessed by a being originating in a location external to the ritual participant, and aided in this venture by the ingestion of psychotropic substances, Morris and Peatfield (2004) propose that Minoan spirits or deities are experienced whilst in a trance state facilitated by particular bodily postures performed by the ritual participant. Approaching Minoan religion from the perspective of embodiment, their analysis relies on the concept of mind-body synthesis, exemplified in shamanic practice. According to this model physical action can affect emotional and psychological states and therefore be used to access altered states of consciousness. In this analysis of Minoan religion the mind-body connection functions as both the method and the vehicle through which communication with the otherworld is achieved, shamanic activity apparently overcoming the modern distinction

between body and mind (Morris and Peatfield 2004; Huskinson and Schmidt 2010, 14).

Morris and Peatfield suggest that ecstatic states can be achieved through fasting, sensory deprivation or concentration, sound, rhythmic movement, and physical gestures. They claim that rather than being possessed, shamans are in fact entranced, theorizing that trance states have a neurological basis and are accessible to all humans with normally functioning nervous systems (Morris and Peatfield 2004, 36–37, 40). Minoan glyptic art and figurines from peak, rural and cave sanctuaries evince a formalized, repeated repertoire of physical gestures. Held for extended periods of time, these gestures are thought to represent one method for achieving the trance state (Morris and Peatfield 2002, 2004; Morris 2004; Peatfield and Morris 2012).¹¹ This idea is based on anthropologist Felicitas Goodman's (1986, 1988, 1990) experiments with various restrictive body postures derived from ethnographic examples of shamanistic rituals which, in

combination with “sonic driving” (the repetitive application of sound), produced altered states of consciousness.

Psychoactive Drugs

Both Evans’ theory of drug-induced trance and Morris and Peatfield’s hypothesis of trance naturally induced through the adoption of certain body postures may be correct. While there is no evidence that the classic hallucinogens associated with shamanic trance such as the fly agaric and psilocybin mushrooms, the peyote cactus, ergot, henbane, or datura grew in Bronze Age Crete (Helvenston and Bahn 2005),¹² evidence suggests that the Minoans did have access to both opium and alcohol. A small limestone half capital from the Palace at Knossos, dating to the Late Minoan I period (1700–1580 BC) may be the earliest representation of a poppy capsule in the Aegean world (Merrillees 1999).¹³ The poppy goddess from the Late Minoan sanctuary at Gazi wears a headdress decorated with incised poppy capsules, and a clay cylinder found in its vicinity has been interpreted as a tool with which to smoke opium (Marinatos 1937, 287). Globular rhyta with painted scars from Mycenaean Mochlos evoke the scored poppy pods from which opium could be harvested (Niegorski 1999). In addition, a Minoan-style gold ring from Mycenae (Figure 6) depicts a female figure holding a bunch of opium poppies, gold and rock crystal dress pins in the shape of poppy pods were also found at Mycenae, and there is archaeobotanical evidence for opium at Tiryns (Collard 2008, 59; Kroll 1982; Amott 2005). Opium consumption may have triggered an altered state of consciousness characterized by euphoria and visual

hallucinations (Yaniv 2006, 28; Collard 2008, 60–61). Evidence for alcohol consumption in conjunction with ritual has been found in caves in Crete (Tyree 2001, 45) and may have functioned to produce the “frenzied” effect proposed by Evans. Alcohol functions differently to opium, suppressing inhibition and facilitating commensality rather than individual reverie (Jay 2010, 81). It could also be used as a “carrier” to which other substances may be added, and may have been used in this way as a substitute for opium, itself perhaps the singular province of a select category of cult practitioner (Hoffman and Ruck 2004, 115).

Body Postures

Altered states of consciousness can, on the other hand, be achieved through mental and physical activity without recourse to drugs, as Morris and Peatfield propose and as Yogic practitioners over the centuries would attest (Wilson 2004, 88). Morris and Peatfield’s (2004) theory that the Minoans used body postures to trigger visionary states relies on ethnographic comparanda and remains hypothetical as no formal physical experiments testing their claims have been published. In 2005 Erin McGowan applied a modified form of Goodman’s experimental techniques to test whether Minoan ritual gestures can induce altered states of consciousness (McGowan 2006). The experiment was conducted within a darkened room approximating a cave-like environment in conjunction with sonic driving through shaking a sistrum. Each of the adopted gestures resulted in participants experiencing altered states of consciousness of varying visual and aural complexity. Morris and Peatfield, in conjunction with

contemporary shamanic practitioner Robinette Kennedy, a student of Felicitas Goodman, have since undertaken physical experiments with Minoan postures and sonic driving, including at the Minoan peak sanctuary of Atsipadhes on Crete, reporting multisensory effects involving visions and sensations of bodily transformation (Kennedy 2011; Peatfield and Morris 2012).¹⁴ While such experiments expand the range of interpretive possibility, they are delimited by our own frame of reference and cannot definitively replicate Minoan practice.

Gold Rings

Scenes depicted upon gold signet rings appear to illustrate ecstatic trance, dialogue with spirits, and possession, and are traditionally interpreted as “Epiphany Scenes”. “Epiphany” is a category of religious experience well known within the study of Minoan religion. First identified by Martin Nilsson in the late 1920s, and elaborated upon 30 years later by Friedrich Matz, Minoan epiphany was further defined in the mid-1980s by

Robin Hägg as occurring in two different forms: envisioned and enacted epiphany. Hägg (1983, 184–185) explains envisioned epiphany as a vision seen by an individual or group of worshippers either spontaneously or through cult practices. Recently it has been suggested that, rather than depicting visions, such images represent subjective “feeling” states (Morris 2004; McGowan 2006). Such a state may be further emphasized by the depiction of figures with “aniconic” heads (Figures 3, 7, 8, 26) possibly signifying the shamanic “shift of self” involved in a trance state (Morris and Peatfield 2002, 114; Kyriakidis 2004). Envisioned epiphanic images appear as small hovering objects, birds, animals, and human figures, while in scenes of enacted epiphany the role of a deity appearing before worshippers is performed by a human substitute who acts as the personification of the deity.¹⁵ In the apparent absence of cult images, envisioned and enacted epiphany are thought to be the methods by which the Minoans interacted with the divine in ritual.



Figure 7. Gold ring from Isopata, Crete. (CMS II.3 No. 51 [CMS])



Figure 8. Gold ring from Mochlos, Crete. (CMS II.3 No. 252 [CMS])

Ecstatic Trance

Envisioned epiphany, in which human figures perceive hovering objects, may be explained as entoptic phenomena.¹⁶ Entoptic phenomena are produced by the human optic system, and include a range of luminous images independently of any external light source, including incandescent, shimmering, moving, and rotating forms such as grids, zigzags, lines, dots, spirals, and curves. Entoptic phenomena can be induced by psychoactive drugs, fatigue, sensory deprivation, intense concentration, sonic driving, hyperventilation, and rhythmic movement, as well as migraine and schizophrenia. Entoptic phenomena can be divided into phosphenes which derive from within the eye, and form constants which originate beyond the eyeball but within the optic system. They are distinguished from hallucinations, which derive from the brain, but the two can occur concurrently (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988, 202–203). Entoptic phenomena are interpreted according to cultural expectations which may explain why some of the Minoan examples resemble recognizable objects from elsewhere in the Minoan cultural vocabulary including Cretan script signs, cult stands,

double axes, rhyta, and bucrania (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988; Kyriakidis 2005) (Figures 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 13, 14).

Dialogue with Spirits

Entoptic phenomena can appear in diverse forms including animals, people, and monsters (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988, 202–203). Minoan glyptic provides examples of hovering insects, birds, and human figures. Birds and insects are naturally flying creatures; however, the insects in question are often depicted in unnaturally oversize scale (Kyriakidis 2005, 147) (Figures 9, 10, 13, 25, 27, 28, 29). While the hovering human figures can be female or male, and wear the same flounced skirts and kilts typical of the other figures in these scenes, they appear comparatively small in size, and are always facing or in proximity to the full-size human figures (Figures 1, 2, 6, 7, 11). Hovering anthropomorphs never appear alone in an epiphanic scene. Minoan glyptic art is usually interpreted in two dimensions, however it has been claimed that the small-sized, hovering anthropomorphs should be interpreted from a three-dimensional depth perspective, and that

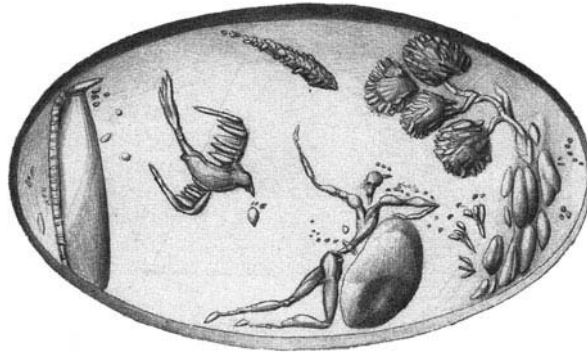


Figure 9. Gold ring from Sellopoulo, Crete. (HM 1034 [Marinatos])

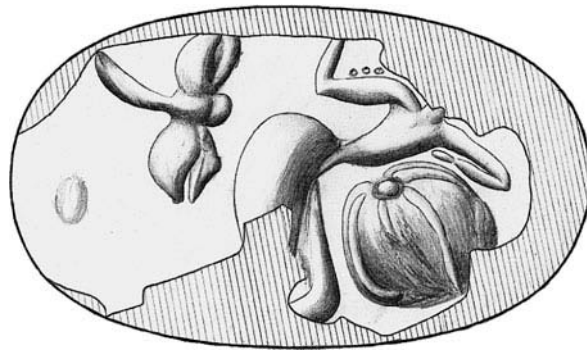


Figure 10. Clay sealing from Zakros, Crete. (HM 1154. CMS II.7 No. 6 [CMS])

they only appear to be small because they are in fact far distant in the back of the field. However, many examples have downward-pointing feet suggesting that they are not standing upon the ground, while some have long hair which curves upwards as though they are descending through the air. The figures may represent ancestors, numina, spirits, or deities. These images then may be interpreted as scenes of imminent *enstasy* – the arrival of spirits for the purpose of interaction with a human being (Huskinson and Schmidt 2010, 7). An ear and an eye depicted on the Ashmolean Ring (Figure 11) suggest

that the anthropomorphic figures, creatures and objects of envisioned epiphany may have been both seen and heard. If depicting an act of communication between a human figure and a spirit being, it is likely that such images represent the subjective state of the human practitioner rather than a performance for an audience.

Possession

While images of envisioned epiphany can be interpreted as depicting the ecstatic trance state and the enstatic dialogue with spirits, scenes of enacted



Figure 11. Gold ring, unknown provenance. (AM 1919.59 CMS VI No. 278 [CMS])

epiphany may represent states of possession in which the supernatural being has entered into the body of the human figure. Enacted epiphany is primarily, though not exclusively, performed by female figures. Most examples depict a seated female figure, a position of authority in Minoan figurative art (Rehak 1995),¹⁷ but standing male and female figures do also occur (Figures 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 24). The seated figures appear calm and still, while the standing figures appear more kinetic; some may be dancing. While the envisioned epiphanic deity may only be

seen or sensed by one person, the enacted epiphanic figure is meant to be seen. Rather than depicting the subjective state of an envisioned epiphany during which the practitioner sees and communicates with supernatural phenomena, in scenes of enacted epiphany the human figure communicates with other humans as a representative of the supernatural being. Possession could thus function as a system of communication in which elite figures mediate between the numinous and mortal worlds (Huskinson and Schmidt 2010, 2–9).

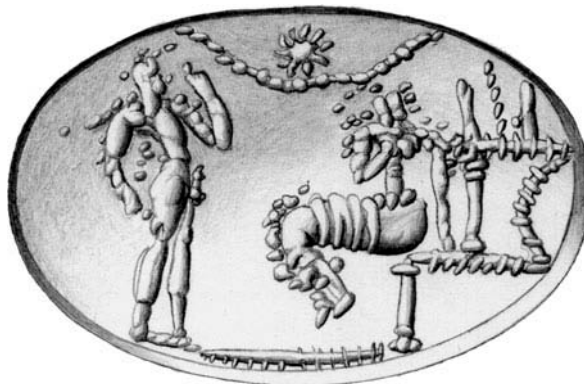


Figure 12. Gold ring Thebes, Greece. (CMS V No. 199 [CMS])



Figure 13. Gold ring from Archanes, Crete. (HM 989 [Marinatos])



Figure 14. Gold ring, unknown provenance. (CMS XI No. 29 [CMS])

Therianthropic Metamorphosis

While gold rings are a prestige artistic medium, images engraved upon stone seals may have represented shamanistic activity undertaken by lesser elites. Glyptic from Zakros depict composite figures combining female anthropomorphs with parts of birds, goats, cows, deer, lions, and trees (Figures 15, 16, 17, 18, 19) and may have represented “imaginary creatures”, “monsters”, and “demons” (Hogarth 1902; Weingarten 2009). It has been suggested that the artist responsible for these images may have suffered from schizophrenia (Gill 1981, 85–86). The hybrid figures from

Zakros may reflect a spectrum of human activity ranging from masked and costumed performance, to the subjective experience of therianthropic metamorphosis as part of a trance state (Simandiraki-Grimshaw 2010, 94; Krzyszkowska 2005, 152). Some images depict the complete disintegration of both the human and the animal and may represent the liminal stage in the process of transformation between human and animal forms (Figure 19). Like the enacted epiphany observed in the scenes on gold rings then, these images may once again depict the enactment by humans of non-human beings, in



Figure 15. Clay sealing from Zakros, Crete. (CMS II.7 No. 126 [CMS])



Figure 16. Clay sealing from Zakros, Crete. (CMS II.7 No. 145 b [CMS])

these cases most commonly bird or animal in form. In contrast to the entoptic phenomena characteristic of envisioned

epiphany however, these hybrid images may portray the *interior* experience of an intense trance state that could have been



Figure 17. Clay sealing from Zakros, Crete. (CMS II.7 No. 177 [CMS])

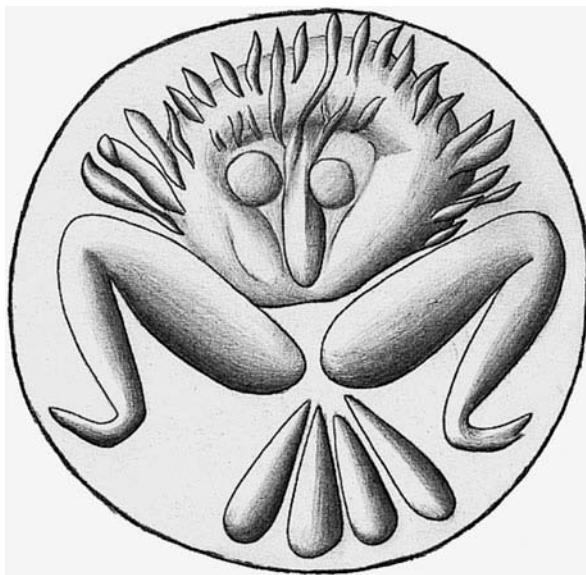


Figure 18. Clay sealing from Zakros, Crete. (CMS II.7 No. 119 [CMS])

induced by any of the shamanistic methods already discussed.

Another type of typically Cretan therianthropic metamorphosis involves the

human-bull hybrid known from Greek myth as the Minotaur. Half bull, half man, glyptic images of Minotaurs date to the Mycenaean period on Crete (1490–



Figure 19. Clay sealing from Zakros, Crete. (CMS II.7 No. 170 [CMS])

1300 BC) and may have been inspired by the earlier Neopalatial images – and actual practice – of bull leaping (Figures 20, 21, 22, 23). Like scenes of bull leaping, Minotaurs in glyptic art usually appear in contorted poses signifying exaggerated movement (Schlager 2008; Krzyszkowska 2005, 207; Simandiraki-Grimshaw 2010, 96). Minotaur imagery may be connected with the mastery of animals. Successful mastery over the bull, symbolized by the perilous athleticism of bull leaping, may have brought with it a symbolic merging of bull leaper and powerful male animal, appropriating qualities of strength and virility amalgamated in representations of the bull-man hybrid. The later Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur in the Labyrinth also incorporates shamanistic tropes including the use of a rope or thread to symbolize a spirit path, a symbolic *katabasis* or journey to an “Underworld”, and a bird

(crane) dance (Morford and Lenardon 1985, 413–425).

The Labyrinth of Greek myth may recall the multi-roomed Minoan palace at Knossos, the killing of the Minotaur by Theseus symbolizing Mycenaean domination of Crete during the Late Bronze Age. Theseus was the son of Poseidon, a deity worshipped by the Mycenaeans (Weilharter 2012). In the myth Theseus triumphs over Zeus’ son, King Minos of Crete, by killing the “monster” within Minos’ palace.¹⁸ Both Poseidon and Zeus were represented by bulls, the former impregnating Minos’ wife Pasiphae by proxy, perhaps symbolizing a human and spirit-animal sexual alliance or a marriage alliance between a Mycenaean *wanax* (ruler) and the Minoan queen of Knossos. Ioan Lewis (2003) defines shamans as people who welcome “possession” as an aspect of sexual and/or marital relationship with otherworld persons.



Figure 20. Gold ring, Knossos, Crete. (AM 2237. CMS VI.2 No. 336 [CMS])



Figure 21. Stone seal from Phaistos, Crete. (CMS III No. 363. [CMS])

Tripartite Cosmology

That the Minoans perceived a tripartite vertical cosmology, characteristic of shamanic conceptions of the world (Eliade 1989, 259),¹⁹ is suggested by the location of Minoan cult sites upon mountain peaks, in rural earthly domains, and within subterranean caves. As mentioned above, gestures represented in clay and bronze figurines

found at such sanctuaries may reflect physical techniques performed during ritual in order to induce an altered state of consciousness. Glyptic iconography depicts cult activity thought to have taken place at peak, rural, and cave sites (Figures 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 14, 25, 26, 27). Minoan architecture references these natural locations, underscoring their importance. Tripartite shrines,



Figure 22. Stone seal from Chania, Crete. (CMS VS3 No.150 [CMS])

stepped altars, and openwork platforms may represent mountains in architectonic form, the latter sometimes surmounted by a female figure or a tree (Figures 12, 13, 24), while Lustral Basins and Pillar Crypts within palatial architecture may evoke sacred caves (Preziosi and Hitchcock 1999; Hitchcock 2007; Crooks, Tully, and Hitchcock *Forthcoming*).

Communication with Ancestors

Glyptic scenes in which human figures kneel before and clasp large baetylic stones (Figures 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 25, 26, 27) may represent communication between mortals and their ancestors (Crooks 2013). Possession by ancestors, deceased shamans, other dead humans or animals is characteristic of shamanism (Eliade 1989, 82–83, 339–344; Hutton 2001, 40, 59, 72–73, 116). Minoan baetyls can have funerary associations and may have acted as abodes for the dead.

In images featuring baetyls the human figure either leans their head upon the baetyl as though asleep (this pose has also been interpreted as mourning; Persson 1942, 88) or faces away from it toward other full-sized human figures or miniature hovering figures, creatures, or objects. Images in which the human figure presses their head against the baetyl (Figure 26) may indicate verbal or silent communication with the numen of the stone, while those in which the human figures look away suggest that the baetyl itself is not the focus of the activity, but rather that it is one part of a more elaborate ritual sequence. Evidence of food and liquid offerings in the vicinity of actual baetyls however may indicate that cultic attention was directed toward the stone itself (Crooks 2013). Enacted epiphanic figures may represent ancestors or chthonic deities, while swooping birds, as Evans suggested, may signify a deity in ornithomorphic form. Ritual activity

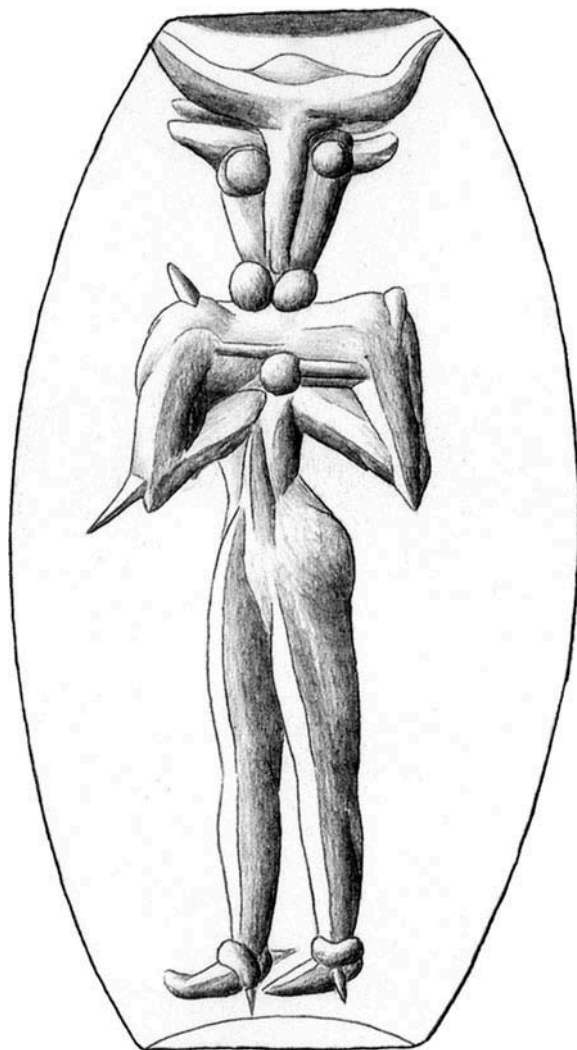


Figure 23. Stone seal from Chania, Crete. (CMS VS3 No.154 [CMS])

oriented around the stone may have invoked the ancestors as intermediaries between the human and superhuman realms (Crooks 2012, 2013, 7, 15–19, 42, 58), or facilitated the possession of the human participant by a deity or ancestor, baetylic numina thus functioning to transform human actors into sites of manifestation for otherworld beings (Keller 2002).

Journey to the Otherworld

The traversal of cosmic realms – sky, earth, and underworld – sometimes through the conduit of a sacred tree, is a common trope of shamanism (Eliade 1989, 259–274). Trees, as well as columns and pillars, feature prominently in Minoan cultic iconography. Glyptic imagery depicts human figures clasp- ing and apparently vigorously shaking trees



Figure 24. Clay sealing from Chania, Crete. (CMS VSIA No. 176 [CMS])



Figure 25. Clay sealing from Ayia Triada, Crete. (CMS II.6 No. 4 [CMS])

(Figures 3, 5, 13, 27), and in two examples this occurs in proximity to a kneeling human figure hugging a baetyl (Crooks 2013, 55). In each instance of tree-shaking the legs of the figure are bent at the knee, sometimes with one leg kicked backwards, a posture suggestive of energetic movement which has been interpreted as a frenzied state characteristic of some forms of possession (Marinatos

2009; Tully, *forthcoming*). Tree shaking may have been a technique through which ritual practitioners travelled out of their bodies in an ecstatic trance state in order to interact with the other-than-human beings located on other cosmic planes (Huskinson and Schmidt 2010, 7; Walsh 2001, 33).

Sacred trees feature in many images of Minoan ritual and were evidently an



Figure 26. Stone seal from Knossos, Crete. (Str. Ex. No. 80/1229. [Warren, BSA])



Figure 27. Gold ring from Kalyvia, Crete. (CMS II.3 No. 114 [CMS])

important component of Minoan cult sites (Tully 2012). The Ring of Nestor (Evans 1925, 1930; Pini 1998; Krzyszkowska 2005, 334–335; Marinatos and Jackson 2011) (Figures 28, 29) perhaps provides the strongest evidence for the importance of the tree in Minoan cosmology. This ring depicts a very large, centrally

positioned tree, its vertical trunk and horizontal branches dividing the scene into a quadripartite composition. The presence of supernatural and powerful animals – including the Minoan Dragon, griffin, lion, and bird-headed women – and the positioning of human figures sitting and standing on the branches of the tree,



Figure 28. Gold ring, unknown provenance. (AM 1938.1130 CMS VI.2 No. 277 [CMS])



Figure 29. Gold ring, unknown provenance. (AM 1938.1130 CMS VI.2 No. 277 [CMS])

suggest that this is not a realistic scene, but rather a mythical or metaphysical space. Evans (1930, 151) suggests that we are here observing a depiction of the Underworld, on the basis of two butterflies in the upper left of the scene which he interprets as “souls”. Whether the image depicts a celestial or chthonic location, the presence of an enormous tree structuring the scene suggests that the Minoans may have conceptualized the sacred tree as *axis mundi*, facilitating

mobility to otherworld locations through ritual.

Conclusion

The evidence presented here has shown that Late Bronze Age Minoan religion exhibits characteristics that can be described as shamanistic. Examination of behaviors classified under the rubric of universal shamanism, including the consumption of psychoactive drugs and the enactment of special physical

postures as methods for achieving trance, confirms the utility of reconsidering Minoan religion in light of shamanic tropes. The further re-figuring of Minoan epiphany and hybridity in light of shamanistic practices such as ecstatic trance, dialogue with spirits, possession, therianthropic transformation, communication with the dead, and traversal of other worlds, provides compelling evidence for the presence of shamanistic elements within Minoan cult activity. Further research, particularly the archaeobotanical analysis of psychoactive plants in Bronze Age Crete, and the refinement of experiments with Minoan postures, may shed more light on this fertile area of inquiry.

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Notes

1. Piers Vitebsky (2001, 161) suggests that the term "shamanry", like wizardry, could be used for the shaman's activities, "shamanship" could describe the shaman's professional quality, and the plural "shamanisms", be used because of the lack of a unifying ideology.
2. Graham Harvey (2010, 31) questions the focus upon the psychological state of the shaman and the utility of the term "spirits", suggesting instead that shamanism is characterized by relationality in which a shaman negotiates communal wellbeing between humans and other life forms within their environment.
3. Watson (2009, 12–13) defines universals as "relatively stable human characteristic of innate or 'hard wired' biological structure, including species-typical architecture of perceptual information-processing mechanisms and other relevant aspects of neuroanatomy".
4. Without recourse to historical sources, the iconographic evidence from Minoan Crete remains ambiguous. While the present study seeks to expand our interpretive range through analogy with shamanism, the result remains but one interpretation among many.
5. Popham (1974, 223) suggests that the rings may have been worn between the first and second knuckles of the finger, making them easier to stamp impressions with.
6. The seals and sealings are published with bibliography in the *Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel (CMS)* series.
7. The Saami, whose traditional territory is northern Scandinavia spanning modern-day Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia, practice a form of shamanism similar to the canonical Siberian type (Hutton 2001, 137).
8. It is generally agreed now that the object on this shield is a sacral knot rather than a mourning figure.
9. Evans did identify *Crocus* in the Knossos Linear B tablets, a plant reputed to have narcotic properties, see note 12; however, did not suggest that it might be psychoactive (Evans 1899).
10. "Altered State of Consciousness" is usually abbreviated to the acronym "ASC" and, according to Atkinson (1992, 310), has been the buzz-word in interdisciplinary studies on shamanism since the early 1980s.
11. Loeta Tyree (2001, 41–42) endorses Morris and Peatfield's interpretation of Minoan gesture and Altered States of Consciousness in regard to figurines, in this case, from caves.
12. An African variant of the sea daffodil (*Pancratium Trianthum*), a plant depicted in Minoan fresco, glyptic and ceramic decoration, is used as a psychoactive substance by the Bushmen from Dobe, Botswana; however, the Aegean version (*Pancratium Maritimum*) does not appear to have such properties (El-Hadidy et al. 2012). Saffron is another plant depicted in

- Aegean art; the Cretan variety is *Crocus cartwrightianus*. Safrol, the predominant part in oil of saffron, deriving from *Crocus sativa* was used as a medical narcotic in the ancient Mediterranean (Emboden 1979, 49). Saffron may have been used medicinally on Crete (Day 2011, 371). Henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*) is mentioned in the Ebers Papyrus ca. 1500 BC (Helvenston and Bahn 2005, 41). Sabine Beckman (personal communication 19 October 2014) identifies two Cretan varieties of henbane, *Hyoscyamus albus* and *Hyoscyamus aureus*, and has observed datura growing in Crete although it is most probably a late import. However, we do not know what level of alkaloids the henbane varieties contain and whether they were used in the Bronze Age. Minoans may have been familiar with mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*), the blue lotus (*Nymphaea caerulea*), and hemp (*Cannabis sativa*), mild psychoactive plants that grew in Egypt (Manniche 1989, 88–89, 123, 132–134). Beckman has suggested that mandrake may be one of the best candidates for a Minoan hallucinogen (unpublished presentation given at the 9th International Congress of Ethnobiology in Canterbury, 2004). Another potential candidate for a psychoactive plant possibly used in Minoan Crete is ivy (Sherratt 2004, 330).
13. The most ancient evidence for opium poppy use comes from the Mediterranean, specifically Italy (Merlin 2003, 302).
 14. Contemporary Western shamanic practitioners, also termed “Neo-Shamans”, mainly derive their practice from anthropologist-turned-shamanic-teacher, Michael Harner, and his method of “Core Shamanism” which teaches that anyone can enter an altered state of consciousness or trance and progress to activities such as divination and healing (Harner 1980; Atkinson 1992; Wallis 1999). Morris and Peatfield have apparently been working with Kennedy on Minoan gestures since 1998 (Kennedy 2011, 20–21; Morris and Peatfield 2002, 116; 2004, 53), but only mention their own physical experiments explicitly in Morris and Peatfield 2012, 241.
 15. Or is the human being “played” by the deity? Mary Keller (2002) suggests that possessed humans are played like an instrument by ancestors, deities, and spirits.
 16. Kyriakidis (2005) has suggested such floating objects are astronomical constellations.
 17. The rocks and constructed openwork platforms that female figures sit upon may be symbolic of mountains, further enhancing the idea of authority (Crooks, Tully, and Hitchcock *Forthcoming*). The Knossos throne features a “baetylic” back that also may evoke a mountain (Crooks 2013, 53).
 18. The Minotaur was also, technically, a son of Poseidon. In the Skoteino cave near Knossos rock protuberances are carved to resemble monstrous animals. Paul Faure interpreted this as the original Labyrinth (Burkert 1979, 91).
 19. While Siberian shamanism envisions a three-layered cosmos, not all shamanic conceptions of the world are tripartite (Vitebsky 2001, 17).

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