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Fig 1: Figural Group from Mavrospelio. Herakleion Archaeological Museum HM 8345.  
Drawing from G. Rethemiotakis 1998, fig. 15a.

# Maternity, Children, and ‘Mother Goddesses’ in Minoan Iconography

Stephanie Lynn Budin

## ABSTRACT

This article reconsiders both the presence and role of maternal, kourotrophic, and child-oriented iconography in the Minoan repertoire. Contrary to the received wisdom, the only kourotrophic iconography in Minoan Crete is not a Mycenaean-influenced figural group from Mavrospelio cemetery, but a strongly Egyptianizing plaque from Monastiraki. Furthermore, in spite of the dearth of kourotrophic iconography, images of pregnant/parturient females are both original to and common on the island during this period. Finally, I consider the role of children in the Minoan repertoire, noting especially in what contexts they are prevalent. As the combined data show, the Minoans had no problems with depicting either maternity or childhood in their arts. As such, the lack of an indigenous kourotrophic iconography argues strongly against any notions of a distinctly ‘Mother’ goddess in the Minoan pantheon.

Minoan Crete has long had a problem with motherhood. This is not to say that the Minoans did not have mothers, of course. Rather, the problem has been how to understand the role of motherhood in Minoan religion and society. Nowhere has this played out more fiercely than in the study of religion, where a long-standing debate continues to fester concerning whether or not the Bronze Age residents of Crete worshipped some kind of mother goddess.

What has occupied far less attention, in spite of its obvious importance to the previously mentioned debate, is the role of maternal iconography in the Minoan repertoire. Specifically, did the Minoans have and make use of imagery of females who were pregnant, giving birth, or holding small children? To date, the only aspect of maternal iconography that has been addressed regarding Minoan Crete has been the presence or absence of

kourotrophic iconography on the island, that is: depictions of women holding one or two small children. In 1998 Barbara Ann Olsen published her article “Women, children and the family in the Late Aegean Bronze Age: differences in Minoan and Mycenaean constructions of gender,” in which she argued that the Minoans made no use of kourotrophic iconography whatsoever, in spite of the prevalence of that image to the north in Mycenaean Greece. The only exception to this is a single Late Minoan terracotta from the Mavrospelio cemetery at Knossos, which portrays a female holding up a small boy by the knees. Since its initial publication by Edgar Forsdyke in 1927, it has been accepted that this image portrays either a woman or a goddess holding aloft a (divine) child, thus, a kourotrophos. However, as the only apparent kourotrophos in the Minoan repertoire, the presence this

Mavrospelio figurine has been explained away as an example of intrusive Mycenaean culture. As Olsen suggested, “Since burial of figurines is a more common Mycenaean practice, and given her marked differences from other Cretan figurines, it is plausible that this figurine may have been produced by a Minoan artist commissioned by a Mycenaean mourner. Regardless, nothing about her appearance or function implies her use by a ‘Hellenized’ Minoan rather than by a mainlander on Crete”(Olsen 1998: 389-390).

This “intrusive Mycenaean kourotrophos” has been the only recognized example of the woman-child motif on Bronze Age Crete, a notion more recently reiterated by Jeremy Rutter in his 2003 article “Children in Aegean Prehistory,” (p. 47) and Maia Pomadère in her 2009 article “Où sont les mères? Représentations et réalités de la maternité dans le monde égéen protohistorique” (p. 199, no. 18). Otherwise, goes the current thinking, Minoan Crete was devoid of kourotrophoi, a datum strongly in favour of those who argue against the notion of a Minoan mother goddess.

The issue of maternal imagery in Minoan Crete needs to be reconsidered for a number of reasons. First, the figurine (figural group, really, as it is composed

of two entities) from Mavrospelio is not, in fact, a kourotrophos, and it is wholly Minoan in character and inspiration. Second, contrary to the received knowledge, there is at least one, possibly two, other depictions of kourotrophoi from Minoan Crete. Finally, there is a long-standing icon of maternity from Bronze Age Crete that has received no attention whatsoever: the pregnant-parturient female. This article will first present the evidence that shows that the Mavrospelio figural group needs to be removed from the (extremely short) list of Minoan kourotrophoi. It will then show that the one (or two) other kourotrophic image from Minoan Crete is wholly Egyptian in origin and inspiration. I shall then show that the image of the pregnant-parturient female in the Minoan repertoire, while originally inspired by Egypt, is, in fact, a Minoan creation. Next, I look at the role of children in Minoan iconography and consider why the Minoans chose not to depict them with individual females (‘mothers’). Finally, I shall consider how all these data contribute to the debate regarding the maternal status of any Minoan goddesses. It is my hope that having these data gathered in one place will help to cast light on the construction of motherhood in Bronze Age Crete.

### **The Mavrospelio ‘Kourotrophos’**

During the 1926 excavations of the Mavrospelio (‘Black Cave’) cemetery at Knossos, a small, atypical terracotta figural group (Fig. 1) came to light out

of Tomb VII B, a dual chamber tomb entered by a short dromos and dated to late LM II–LM IIIA1 (Forsdyke 1926-1927: 290; Rethemiotakis 1998: 62).

The figural group is approximately 10.5 cm in height and shows a female (based on costume) holding up before her what appears to be a male child standing erect. The female has long, dark-painted hair hanging to the middle of the back and what might be described as a proto-Mohawk hairstyle. The figurine's arms extend out to the sides and curve in again at the elbows, so that the hands are at chest level. She has a bell-shaped skirt, and her dress is decorated with dark paint, including dashes, dots, and possible floral motifs (Rethemiotakis 1998: 207). In her hands the female holds up the child, face turned to the left, by the legs. The child has his intact arm bent to his chest; the remaining shoulder shows that the broken arm would have been similarly positioned. What remains of the paint on the torso – a semi-ellipse crossed perpendicularly by a vertical dash – may indicate a schematic loin-cloth and knife pattern. There remains dark paint on the knees, and wrists, the latter possibly indicating schematic bracelets. Although the boy's left leg is broken, what remains suggests that it was angled slightly forward of the right leg. The well-preserved right foot has up-turned toes. The boy is attached to the female's body by a bit of clay, in addition to the connection at the hands/legs.

The unique nature of this figurine has been a point of interest since its original publication by Forsdyke. Here the author wrote: "The terracotta idol VII B.9 is a novelty, and a valuable religious

document if the persons represented are divine, putting back into the Minoan age what Farnell has recently called 'an important phenomenon in the history of religion, a Cretan contribution to the development in the Mediterranean of the worship of a Holy Infant'" (Forsdyke 1926-1927: 290-291).

This early interpretation was more recently highlighted by Giorgios Rethemiotakis, who noted:

An epiphany of deities, but in a sepulchral milieu, is most probably represented by the group of a male and a female figure known as the *kourotrophos*, from Mavrospilio. The high dating of this figural group, in LM II-LM IIIA1, is at variance with Evans's correlation of it with the Mycenaean *kourotrophos* since this type is later. In reality the group consists of two figurines with an identical gesture of worship, which were modeled separately and then fixed together with an intervening piece of clay so as to convey the image of a couple which appears frequently in scenes of "*sacra conversazione*". The vegetal decoration of the female figure's garment rather signifies that it is the goddess of nature herself, who appears in epiphany together with her consort, inside the tomb, possibly as protectress of the dead as well as of chthonic powers." (Rethemiotakis 2001: 121)

By contrast, scholars such as Olsen and Rutter have focused on the more mundane, and probably foreign, Mycenaean aspects of this so-called *kourotrophos* (Olsen 1998: *passim*; Rutter 2003: 47). What has not been challenged is the identification of the figural group as *kourotrophic*.

In reality, it is highly unlikely that the Mavrospelio figural group represents

a kourotrophos, as based on two main arguments. On the one hand, there is no other known example of Aegean-style kourotrophic iconography on Crete, either before *or even after* the arrival of the Mycenaeans. To say that the Mavrospelio figurine represents an aspect of intrusive Mycenaean culture overlooks the fact that in no other known instance did kourotrophism accompany the Mycenaeans onto the island (Pomadère 2009: *passim*; Budin forthcoming b: chapter 6). On the other hand, from a more practical perspective, it is not feasible to hold up a child at chest-level by the knees (it certainly seems unwieldy). All other known examples of kourotrophic iconography in the Bronze Age Aegean show the ‘mother’ with a child either to the left breast or shoulder, held under the arm, or with a child seated upon the lap or shoulders of a pair of females (French 1971: Kourotrophoi; Pilafidis-Williams 1998: Appendix III). *No* examples of kourotrophic iconography from the Bronze Age Mediterranean or Near East show the ‘mother’ holding the child by

the knees in this fashion. The pose of the Mavrospelio figurine is so unique and so impractical as to render identification as a kourotrophos quite unlikely.

A final, and more positive argument can be made looking at what is typical of the figural group, rather than what is unique. Specifically, rather than focusing on the female, it is more useful to look at the distinctively Minoan posture of the male she carries. The erect, striding posture with arms to the chest is typical of Minoan religious iconography, common in terracotta, bronze, glyptic, and most famously executed on the chryselephantine, LM IB Palaikastro Kouros. Considering the strongly stereotypical posture of the Mavrospelio ‘child’, I argue that he is in fact not a child, or a miniature consort, but an idol (a statue/tte representing a divinity), and the female, true to her Minoan origins, is no kourotrophos. In this I follow, and very much expand upon, the hypothesis offered in 1981 by Bogdan Rutkowski, “daß die Gruppe aus Mavro Spelio eine Priesterin mit einem Kultbild darstellt” (Rutkowski 1981: 121).

### **Comparanda for the Mavrospelio ‘Idol’**

As stated above, the ‘child’ held by the Mavrospelio female figurine stands erect, left leg slightly forward, with his arms extending out from the shoulders perpendicular to the body, bent at the elbows so that the hands are at chest level. This stance – erect with hands to pectorals – appears throughout the extant Minoan repertoire save fresco

for both males and females, a stereotype which Louise Hitchcock (1997: 113) categorizes as ‘Gesture 4’ in her analysis of Neopalatial bronze figurines, Michael Wedde (1999: 914) ‘Gesture 11’ in his study of Aegean glyptic, and which Alexander MacGillivray (2000: *passim*) refers to as “The Great Kouros in Cretan Art” for males specifically. For the sake



of convenience I shall be using the term ‘Great Kouros’ here to refer to the males in this basic, erect, hands-to-chest pose regardless of medium and making no implications regarding the identity or the divinity of the male(s) portrayed.

Two caveats must be kept in mind when considering comparanda for the Mavrospelio male. The male component of the figurine is only about 5 cm tall, so only a certain level of detail might be expected. Second, the ‘Great Kouros’ motif has a number of variations throughout and within the different media. Some have legs together; some have a striding pose. Some have heads facing forward and slightly tilted back; others have heads twisted to the side (especially the examples from the glyptic). Most are bare-headed, but some wear elaborate headgear. The most consistent features are the erect posture and the positioning of the arms.

What follows is a representative but abbreviated list of comparanda for the Mavrospelio male in the different media. For additional examples the reader may consult my forthcoming article “A Reconsideration of the Mavrospelio ‘Kourotrophos’” listed in the bibliography.

### *Terracotta—Petsofas*

A votive deposit from the Petsofas peak sanctuary dating to the Middle Minoan period brought to light several male terracottas of the ‘Great Kouros’ type ranging in height from 10 to 17 cm (Rutkowski 1991: 22). The legs of

the Petsofas terracottas were rendered together, feet touching, a fact that may have been necessitated by the small bases on which the majority of these figurines stood. While the figurines varied slightly in quality and, of course, state of intactness, almost all shared the following characteristics. The males stood erect, with up-turned heads and slightly bowed legs (Myres 1902-1903: 362). They all have extremely narrow waists and broad shoulders. As expected, the arms extend out from the bodies from 60 to 90 degrees, bend sharply at the elbows, and the consistently clenched fists with thumbs on top are positioned over the pectorals (Rutkowski 1991: 54). Many wear bracelets and/or armlets. The feet are well rendered with slightly up-turned toes, such that the excavator suggested that the males may have been wearing boots (Myres 1902-1903: 363). Rutkowski was of the same opinion, claiming, “It appears that the figurines of men were never represented barefoot.” (Rutkowski 1991: 28) All examples wear loin-cloths, either fully modelled in clay or painted over a bulging cod-piece. The more elaborate examples have fully rendered, three-part loin-cloths consisting of cod-piece, cloth, and dagger. All the extant examples were attached to bases, either circular or rectangular, and were thus intended as standing images.

These male terracottas were found in rock crevices throughout the sanctuary, under the sanctuary’s later LM I floor on the main terrace, and in regions to the

east and south of the built-up area. They were accompanied by terracotta female figurines mostly in the ‘outstretched arms’ posture, although some examples were also marked by the hands-to-chest pose; animal figurines (especially cattle); and even model furniture and geometric objects (Rutkowski 1991: 16-21). The apparently mundane clothing of the males and females, and the sacrificial identity of the animals, led Myres to argue that the figurines were intended not to represent deities, but instead human votaries. Rutkowski was of a similar mind, suggesting that the male and female votives from the Petsofas peak sanctuary were representations of worshippers, not deities (Rutkowski 1991: 55).

### ***Bronze***

A few Minoan examples of the ‘Great Kouros’ exist in bronze. An Old Palace example brought to light in 1973 from Mt. Jouktas shows a 6 cm tall male with poorly rendered facial features, a kilt-like skirt, and minimally rendered legs. The upper body, however, shows the standard type of broad shoulders with arms extending outwards and bending sharply at the elbows, clenched fists held over the pectorals (Verlinden 1984: #9; Sapouna-Sakellerakis 1995: #81). Efi Sapouna-Sakellerakis has suggested that the kilt may identify the figurine as a priest (Sapouna-Sakellerakis 1995: 48). A second, unique example dates to MM III–LM IA, what Colette Verlinden refers to the “Style Classique”. This statuette,

10.5 cm in height, comes from a grave in the temenos at Katsaba. It has a very well-rendered face and the standard pose except, much like the terracotta figurines from Petsofas, the legs are together and stand upon a round, conical base. Also unique is the statuette’s hat, which is very long and conical. The image has long hair, tresses of which appear over the shoulders upon the chest. Also like the figurines from Petsofas, the bronze is dressed in the three-part loin-cloth consisting of belt, cloth, and cod-piece (Verlinden 1984: #93; Sapouna-Sakellerakis 1995: #97). A Late Minoan III, 7 cm tall figurine comes from a tomb at Psychro (Sapouna-Sakellerakis 1995: #15). Much like the terracottas from Petsofas, the bronze figurine stands upon a small base and has slightly bowed legs. Pectorals and phallus are clearly rendered, and the figurine’s fists touch in front of the chest slightly below the modelled pectorals.

### ***Glyptic***

One of the most informative glyptic depictions of the ‘Great Kouros’ is a Late Minoan seal reputedly from Kydonia (*PM* IV, 467, fig. 392; Moss 2005: 39). Here, the male stands in standard pose upon Horns of Consecration. To his right, he faces a winged agrimi, while behind him, to his left, stands a Minoan Genius holding a handled jug. The Horns of Consecration establish the religious setting of the scene, as do the fantastic creatures on either side of the male. The male in the scene is clearly a god.

A seal and sealing, both from Iraklion, offer a further interpretation for the hands-to-chest posture. The sealing from Knossos (*CMS VIII: 248*) shows the god in standard posture with well-developed, carefully delineated musculature. He wears an elaborate headdress. On both sides of the god sit large canines, whose ‘leashes’ the god holds to his chest in his hands. The ‘hands-to-chest’ gesture thus refers to the god’s identify as a ‘Master of Animals’. The seal from ‘Poros’ (*CMS II.3: 193*) has a similar ‘Master of Animals’ theme. Once again the god stands in standard pose between two animals, this time lions.

The detailed information offered by the glyptic strongly supports the hypothesis that the ‘Great Kouros’ in this medium is not only a god rather than a mortal votary, but that he is conceived of as a ‘Master of Animals’, even supernatural animals. Although this detail may vary according to medium, cult, or context, the divine identity appears certain at least by the LM Period.

### ***The Palaikastro Kouros***

The finest, and best-known, cognate of the Mavrospelio male is the Palaikastro Kouros, a chryselephantine statue dating to LM IB. Discovered in over a hundred pieces over the course of three separate seasons of excavation (1987, 1988, and 1990) at the urban site of Palaikastro (Sackett *et al.* 2000: 21), the Kouros, at 0.5 meters in height, is the largest known version of the ‘Great Kouros’ type. The body of the statue is composed primarily

of hippopotamus tooth ivory; its eyes are rock crystal, its hair serpentine; the wholly reconstructed (and thus somewhat theoretical) kilt, knife, and cod-piece were of wood covered with gold leaf. The statuette also wore gold leaf sandals. The jewellery is of a substance known as Egyptian blue, and gold bracelets are also hypothesized (Moak 2000: *passim*). All in all, the work is of the highest quality of execution and made with the finest materials that could be found in, or imported into, Crete. Although the Kouros had to be reconstructed from scores of damaged pieces, the current understanding of its reconstruction reveals the stereotypical posture of erect male with left leg slightly forward in a striding pose. The shoulders are relatively broad with the arms bending away from the body at approximately 60 degrees, bending sharply at the elbows, with the clenched fists held at the pectorals. The head is slightly tilted back and appears to be looking to the right. Musculature and veins were carved with extreme detail especially in the feet and hands. The hair shows what Mark Moak calls an abbreviated Mohawk – a ridge running along the top of the head from forehead to nape, with a stippling pattern on the rest of the head indicative of fairly recent shaving (Moak 2000: *passim*). Based on the criteria established by Robert Koehl and Anne Chapin for determining age in Minoan males, this fact, as well as the figure’s bodily proportions, indicates that the Kouros is an adolescent, possibly on the threshold of young adulthood (Koehl

2000: 134-137; Chapin 2007: *passim*). Tenons under the feet indicate that the Kouros was intended to stand.

Unlike the votives from Petsofas, the Palaikastro Kouros is understood to be a deity for the following reasons. To begin, an important development in Cretan prehistory at the threshold of the Late Minoan period was increased contacts with Egypt, a fact which may have induced the Minoans to begin representing their deities in concrete, anthropomorphic form (MacGillivray 2000: 123-125). As such, the iconography that formerly served to depict mortals came to take on divine associations, with the difference between mortal and immortal rendered not so much by different iconography as by the use of precious materials and the placement of the object itself. The precious materials have already been commented on above. Concerning placement, the majority of fragments of the statuette came to light by a building (5) that has been identified as a town shrine, based on its placement within Palaikastro's urban center, its fine paving and workmanship, and the presence of ritual items such as a rhyton

found in context (Driessen 2000: *passim*). The tenons on the Kouros's feet and the recovered base in fine fabric strengthen the argument that the Kouros was a cult statue erected within the shrine. Finally, and very much unlike the examples from Petsofas, the Kouros is the only known statuette to come from the Building 5 shrine context (MacGillivray and Sackett 2000: 166). Rather than a series of male images, the Palaikastro Kouros existed in splendid isolation. Pulling together all these indicators, the excavators reasoned that the image must portray a deity.

Thus a number of factors tend to support its identification as a cult figure rather than a votive. We have noted the focusing of attention by the architectural environment. This is supported by the use of luxury materials, the great care devoted to the figure's manufacture and the extraordinary quality of the finished object. There is also the attractive hypothesis that the associated fragments of a gold-spangled blue object formed a base representing the starry sky on which he walked (MacGillivray and Sackett 2000: 166).

### **The Mavrospelio Male: God or Votary?**

Upon the original discovery of the 'Great Kouros' motif amongst the terracotta figurines at the sanctuary at Petsofas, Myres (1902-1903: 380) argued that the every-day nature of the figurines' clothing suggested that the anthropomorphic terracottas represented "not the deity

but the votaries". Rutkowski (1991: 55), writing over half a century later, echoed these sentiments, claiming that, "all the gestures described above may be defined as pertaining to adoration (or more strictly, prayer) in a way that the votary expects the deity to grant his request".

Many later scholars have also suggested that both the terracottas and the bronze depictions of this character should be understood as a votary, thus a rendering of a mortal worshipper and not a divine icon (Marinatos 1993: 117; Morris and Peatfield 2004: 45-46).

Nevertheless, by no later than LM I there appears to be a change in the Minoan iconography of the 'Great Kouros'. In the glyptic the 'Great Kouros' is depicted with supernatural animals, thus placing him outside the realm of the mundane. He may stand upon Horns of Consecration, thus establishing him not only in the Minoan religious domain, but in the divine realm. His presence with, and power over, animals also renders him more than mortal, and connects his identity with the Minoan 'Master

of Animals' type. Likewise, Louise Hitchcock, in her gendered analysis of bronzes in the 'Gesture 4' posture noted the sacral contexts and elaborate personal adornment of male bronzes in the hands-to-chest posture. Based on these data she argued that males, but not females, in this posture were used to indicate power and authority (Hitchcock 1997: 116-123).

The evidence strongly argues for the identification of the 'Great Kouros' as a god, possibly a Master of Animals, at least as early as the LM IB period, and almost certainly so by LM II. The chronology plus iconography both then argue that the male held in the arms of the LM II-III A Mavrospelio figurine should be identified as a manifestation of the 'Great Kouros' as deity.

### **Child or Idol?**

An important final consideration in the identification of the male component of the Mavrospelio figural group is whether we are to understand him as an idol held by a presumably mortal woman (priestess?), or if he is a divine child held by a goddess. If the latter is true, then we do in fact have a kourotrophic image. If the former is true, then we have an as-yet unparalleled depiction of a Minoan female carrying an idol. The problem in either case is that both interpretations lack parallels in the Minoan repertoire, and thus it is not entirely possible to fall back on close cognates for either hypothesis. However, what does

appear in the Minoan repertoire does, I believe, support the hypothesis that the Mavrospelio figurine depicts a mortal woman holding aloft an idol meant to represent an adolescent or adult male deity.

To begin with absolute basics, the presence of cult idols is attested in the Bronze Age Aegean in Minoan, Cycladic, and Mycenaean regions. Looking specifically at relatively large-scale, three-dimensional statues or statuettes (as opposed to glyptic or fresco representations), an extremely conservative and well-known reckoning would comprise no less than the 'snake

goddesses' from the cult repositories at Knossos, the Palaikastro Kouros, the large-scale terracotta statues from Aghia Irini on Kea, The 'Lady of Phylakopi' on Melos, as well as the smaller scale terracotta statuettes from the cult centre at Mycenae (Laffineur 2001: 387-388). Cult idols of appropriate size are thus documented in the cultural milieu of the Mavrospelio figural group.

Conversely, there are no examples of distinctly Aegean kourotrophic iconography in Minoan or Mycenaean Crete. Perhaps just as important in this instance, there are also no known depictions of specifically juvenile male deities. The Minoan religious iconographic repertoire offers many examples of male deities. One of the most commonly rendered is our 'Great Kouros' who appears as a Master of Animals in the glyptic and is portrayed by idol-sized statues. The other most commonly cited god icon appears as a male standing erect and holding forth in one hand a staff (Wedde's Gesture G8; Wedde 1999: 914), such as is seen on the so-called 'Master Impression' from Khania and in smaller glyptic media. A final, possible god image is preserved in the *sacra conversazione* scenes of the glyptic medium. In no instances do the proportions, hair-styles, or postures indicate that a child is being portrayed; all extant, clearly-identifiable gods in the Minoan iconography appear at best as older adolescents, if not adult males (Koehl 2000: 135; Moss 2005: 41; Chapin 2007: *passim*). Because the posture of

the Mavrospelio male conforms to that of the 'Great Kouros', the comparative evidence strongly suggests that he is intended to represent an adolescent or a fully grown male, not a child or infant.

Furthermore, unlike the other two common portrayals of Minoan male deities, the 'Great Kouros' never appears in association with other anthropomorphic beings in the extant Minoan repertoire. The *sacra conversazione* male, by his very nature, appears with at least one goddess/female. The Master Impression type god appears in the glyptic with both males and females, as well as animals. By contrast, when the 'Great Kouros' appears in media that allow for scenic interaction (mainly glyptic), he is shown either within horns of consecration (Kydonia Seal), or mastering animals. Even the Palaikastro Kouros, scattered as he was, was found singly: "The total lack of evidence for other associated figures, especially in this kind of sealed destruction deposit, suggests that the Kouros was displayed alone." (MacGillivray and Sackett 2000: 166) In short, none of our evidence suggests that the specific type of god represented by the Palaikastro Kouros and the Mavrospelio figurine appeared in interaction with another deity, much less as a very diminutive partner to a female (as might be argued for the *sacra conversazione* type).

By contrast, the very existence of the Palaikastro Kouros shows that the 'Great Kouros' can and did appear in idol form, at a size that would be comparable to that

of the male in the Mavrospelio figurine if we are to assume that the female is of average height. As such, based upon the existence of appropriately sized idols of this exact iconographic type in contrast to the absence of kourotropic iconography, child-aged male deities, or ‘Great Kouros’ deities depicted with other anthropomorphic beings in the extant Minoan repertoire, I argue that the male component of the Mavrospelio figurine should be identified as an idol.

This argument is further bolstered when considering the possible identity of the female component. The gesture of the Mavrospelio female – holding up a miniature male – is somewhat unique. The qualification is necessary because although the figurine itself is unique, the constituent parts are not. The ‘boy’ is but one more example of the ‘Great Kouros’ type. If we were to remove the ‘boy’ from the female’s arms, the female herself would be standing in a standard Minoan posture of worship or ecstasy. This posture was common for figurines both at the Petsofas and Atsipadhes peak sanctuaries, and is, like its male counterpart, common in the Minoan terracotta repertoire (Rethemiotakis 1998). However, unlike the ‘Great Kouros’ or the ‘Goddess with Upraised Arms’ motif, there are no later data which argue that this image comes to be identified as a goddess.

Furthermore, we might consider the female’s hair-style. As established by Davis (1986), Chapin (1997/2000: 8-12) and Koehl (1986: 100-103; 2000:

134-137), hair-styles are common age identifiers for both boys and girls in Minoan iconography. Younger children had their heads shaved with only one or two tresses emerging over the forehead and/or at the back crest of the scalp. These tresses would continue to grow even as the scalp may have been repeatedly shaved, thus allowing for very long tresses and depictions of children and adolescents with differing lengths of hair on different parts of the head. Koehl used such a criterion when establishing the adolescent age of the Palaikastro Kouros, and the same criterion might be applied to the female component of the Mavrospelio figurine. Much like the Palaikastro Kouros, the female has an abbreviated Mohawk running along the crest of her head from mid-scalp and ending in a long tress that falls down her back to just above waist level. Based on the parameters established by Davis, Chapin, and Koehl, this would place the female at mid-adolescence, at an appropriate age for coming-of-age or rites-of-passage rituals. This strongly argues against the notion that the female in question is a kourotrophos, as she is too young to be depicted with her own progeny. However, her depiction at the age of initiation may offer a clue as to why she is shown carrying an idol of an adolescent, and thus similarly aged, male deity (Rehak 2007: *passim*).

In the end, the Mavrospelio figural group is not kourotropic at all. The tiny male figure held by the bell-skirted female is of a standard iconographic

type in the Minoan repertoire since the Middle Minoan period. Although the earlier manifestations of the icon appear to represent a mortal male, by the Late Minoan period the evidence from both the glyptic and the Palaikastro Kouros makes it clear that the ‘Great Kouros’ had indeed become a deity. As the

Palaikastro Kouros makes explicit, such idols did exist in Late Minoan Crete, and the identical iconography of the Kouros and the Mavrospelio male argues persuasively that what the female is holding is not a child, but a divine idol of well-known type.

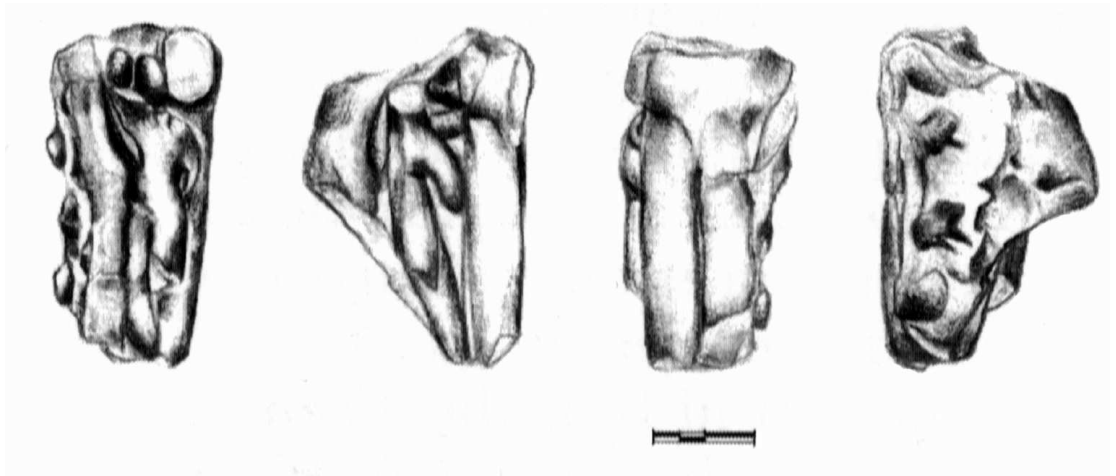


Fig. 2: Barbotine Plaque from Monastirkai, Amari, Crete.  
 Drawing from A. Kanta and A. Tzigounaki 2001, Plate XXXVII b. Used with kind permission.

### The Monastiraki Kourotrophos

The one attested ‘kourotrophos’ from Bronze Age Crete thus does not exist. This does not mean that there was, in fact, no Minoan kourotrophism. In 2001 Athanasia Kanta and Anastasia Tzigounaki published a fragmentary terracotta from the site of Monastiraki in the Amari Valley of central Crete (Fig. 2). The terracotta consists of two three-dimensional anthropomorphic figures attached to a barbotine plaque. The

standing, larger figure, preserved from neck to knee to a height of 6.7 cm is clearly female based on the presence of a large, preserved breast. The smaller figure, preserved head to legs to a height of 5.6 cm, is an ungendered individual whose head reaches to the female’s breast. The smaller figure is standing, with one arm curved to the chest (towards the breast); the larger female embraces the smaller figure with her right arm. Her left arm is



missing, but Kanta and Tzigounaki note that the remains of the left arm appear to have been oriented towards the smaller figure's head. Kanta and Tzigounaki (2001: 152) date the plaque to MM IIA, approximately between 1800-1750 BCE.

Although Kanta and Tzigounaki (2001: 152) originally compared the plaque to a much later ivory plaque from Syrian Ugarit, it is clear that the Monastiraki plaque is a tiny rendering of the well-known Egyptian Divine Wet-Nurse. This icon, which is first attested in the burial complex of King Sahure, the second king of 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty Egypt, shows a rather diminutive pharaoh standing face-to-face before a larger goddess who offers her breast to the king's lips. Although in Sahure's case the king is shown dressed in full royal regalia (*nemes* headdress, beard, kilt with bull tail), later depictions of the Divine Wet-Nurse show the king in humbler attire, sometimes even as a smaller child. At least six portrayals of the Divine Wet-Nurse motif are known from the Old Kingdom, each one in the funerary temple of a king: Sahure and Niuserre at Abusir, the complexes of Unas, Pepi I and Pepi II at Saqqara (the last of whom had two such depictions). Although no anthropomorphic examples are yet known from the Middle Kingdom, contemporaneous with the Middle Minoan period to which the Monastiraki plaque belongs, the re-emergence of the image in the early New Kingdom indicates that the motif continued in use

through the intervening time.

The remains of the Monastiraki plaque show a simplified version of this Egyptian Divine Wet-Nurse motif: A slightly smaller individual faces a larger female who holds her breast to the smaller individual in a suckling posture. The tiny size of the plaque precludes more expressive detail, as does, even more so, the lack of remaining painted decoration. There can be no doubt that the Monastiraki plaque derives from the Egyptian Divine Wet-Nurse. The standing posture of both the goddess and the suckling 'child' is utterly unique in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, where kouroutrophic iconography otherwise takes the form of a female, seated or standing, holding a small child to the left breast or shoulder. Other examples of the standing suckling group, as the example from Ugarit cited by Kanta and Tzigounaki, also derive from this long-lived Egyptian prototype.

A second Minoan example of the Egyptian Divine Wet-Nurse motif may exist on the extremely fragmentary remains of a plaque from a cave sanctuary in Elenes, Crete, originally excavated by Spiridon Marinatos in the 1930s (Kanta and Tzigounaki 2001: 153). What remains of the plaque includes the plaque itself with two preserved limbs, two detached limbs, and an anthropomorphic figure preserved from head to hips which in stance and posture resembles the smaller individual from the Monastiraki plaque. An apparent lock of hair on this individual's head

suggests an identity as an adolescent (see above). Based on the similarities between this figure and that of the Monastiraki plaque, as well the plaque ‘format’ itself, Kanta and Tzigounaki argue that this piece was similar in most respects to the Monastiraki plaque, and likewise showed a scene of nursing. If so, then we have a second example of the Egyptian Divine Wet-Nurse in Crete.

As noted above, the Monastiraki plaque dates to no later than the MM IIA period, c. 1800-1750 BCE, a period when there are clear contacts between Crete and Egypt (Cherry 1990: 41-45; Phillips 2008: *passim*). The context of the Elenes plaque, as well as its

similar iconography, would place it at a similar date (Kanta and Tzigounaki 2001: 153). Both the iconography and the dating permit an identification of these kourotrophic images as within an Egyptian cultural milieu.

We can say, then, that Minoan Crete was not only exposed to kourotrophic iconography by Egypt in the Middle Minoan period, but that it accepted that iconography just enough to have produced one or two local examples. The fact that these plaques are the exclusive portrayal of kourotrophism in the Cretan Bronze Age reveals that the Minoans, having been introduced to the image, failed to take any interest in it.

### **Pregnancy and Parturition in Minoan Art**

For all its prevalence among mammals, pregnancy is not a common theme in art. In the ancient Near East and Mediterranean only a scant handful of pregnant females appear in the iconographic record. Chalcolithic Cyprus produced numerous microlite figurines and pendants that show what has been interpreted as parturient females crouched in labour (Bolger 1994: 15). A cache of stone and terracotta figurines from Kissonerga in south-western Cyprus depict females in various stages of pregnancy and parturition (Bolger 1992: *passim*). A few pregnant or parturient females likewise appear on the scenic compositions of the Cypriot Early Bronze Age, each one only a few centimetres in height (Bolger 2003: 115–117). The 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty

Pharaoh Hatshepsut, in advertising her divine birth, allowed images of her mother pregnant to appear on the walls of her temple at Deir el-Bahri, an extreme innovation in Egyptian decorum (Spieser 2004: 61). The most famous examples of the pregnant/parturient female are perhaps the seated female from a granary at Çatal Hüyük and the series of *Dea Gravida* figurines from Iron Age Phoenicia and its colonies (Culican 1969: *passim*).

If depictions of pregnant or parturient females are rare in Near Eastern and Mediterranean art generally, it is interesting to note that the motif shows up with surprising frequency in the Minoan repertoire, both in terracotta and in amuletic forms. In both instances

the figure rendered is the same: a crouched female with swollen belly. As with the Monastiraki kourotophos, the inspiration is Egyptian. However, unlike the kourotophic iconography, the Minoans adopted the image with grand abandon, and a good argument has been put forth that it was the Minoans and not the Egyptians who first gave rise to this image of the pregnant-parturient human female. To understand how this came about we must briefly look at the better known examples of this motif in Egypt: the Egyptian *Gravidenflasche*.

### ***Gravidenflasche***

There were two distinct styles of medicinal container prevalent in New Kingdom Egypt, which Emma Brunner-Traut dubbed *Muttermilchkrüglein* and *Gravidenflasche*. The *Muttermilchkrüglein* is a clay flask some 10-17 cm in height in the form of a clothed, kneeling woman holding a child upon the lap or on the back – in short: a kourotophos. The *Gravidenflasche* is a 9-20 cm tall vessel in travertine, clay, ivory, or even alabaster in the form of a nude woman with a swollen belly, either standing or with knees pulled to the torso, with pendulous breasts and arms to the stomach (although examples playing musical instruments also exist). The standing variety is certainly understood to be pregnant; those with knees to torso may be understood as giving birth (Brunner-Traut 1970: *passim*). The *Muttermilchkrüglein* contained products made with milk, probably the milk of a

woman who had given birth to a son, per the ancient Egyptian pharmacopoeia. The *Gravidenflasche* contained oils and unguents for the use of pregnant women, possibly to help avoid stretch marks (Janssen and Janssen 1990: 3; Toivari-Viitala 2001: 171-172; Spieser 2004: 56). Both types of container first appear in the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and last for approximately 100 years, between the reigns of Thutmosis III and Amenhotep III (Bourriau 1982: 101).

No examples of the *Muttermilchkrüglein* ever appeared on Crete (once again emphasizing the Minoan disinterest in kourotophic iconography). By contrast, numerous ceramic and small stone portrayals of the *Gravidenflasche* came to light on the island starting in the Proto-Palatial period (Phillips 2008: Chapter 17). Dating to the MM II period are a figurine from Phaistos and vessel protomes from Phaistos (Fig. 3) and Malia, all in the shape of spherical nude females with rounded bellies, pendulous breasts, and hands on the knees or torso (Phillips 2008: #s 451, 452, and 378). A contemporary or slightly later pendant in rock crystal comes from Knossos (Phillips 2008: #312). This amuletic example is highly enlightening, for it shows a Cretan version of the ‘pregnant-parturient mother’ motif that never appears in Egypt. An alabaster example imported from Egypt itself discovered at Katsamba and dating to the LM IIIA1 period was converted into a rhyton (Phillips 2008: #119). Three final ceramic examples date to the LM IIIA2-C (or

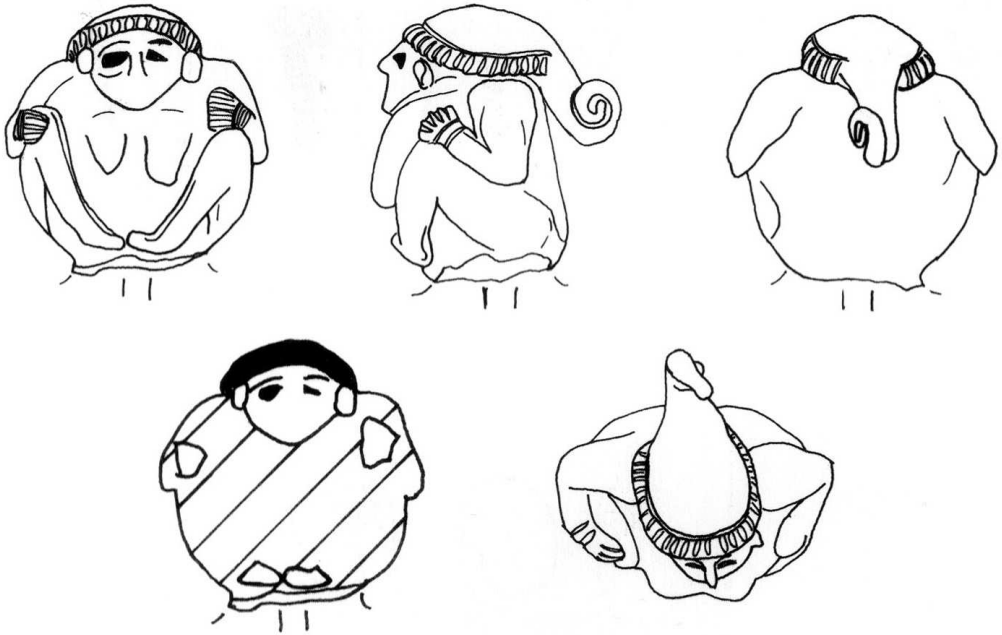


Fig. 3: Protopalatial Parturient Female Protome from Phaistos. Published in Phillips 2008. Permission kindly granted by Verwaltungsstelle der phil.-hist. Klasse Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften.

possibly Subminoan) periods. The one from Gournia and dating to LM IIIA2-B and that from Aghia Triadha dating to LM IIIC-Subminoan show a variation on the *Gravidenflasche* style, whereby one arm is held to a breast, the other to the head (Phillips 2008: #s 78, 35, and 123). The example from Aghia Triadha has a small vessel upon the head, which Jacqueline Phillips has interpreted as a possible misunderstanding of an Egyptian headdress or, more likely, the pouring apparatus topping the Egyptian vessels (Phillips 2008: 216).

It had been assumed that the Minoan depictions of the pregnant-parturient females are adoptions and adaptations of

the Egyptian *Gravidenflasche*. However, two data make the rather strong argument that the Minoan ‘*Gravidenflasche*-style’ females are actually a *Minoan* development, later adopted in Egypt. To begin, Phillips in her 2008 masterpiece on *Aegyptiaca* on the island of Crete makes the critical observation that the earliest of the Minoan ‘adaptations’ dating to MM II are in fact earlier than the anthropomorphic *Gravidenflasche* known in Egypt. This chronological quandary might be resolved if one considers that the inspiration for the admittedly non-Minoan parturient females was not so much the anthropomorphic *Gravidenflasche*, but

portrayals of Taweret, the Egyptian hippopotamus goddess of children and childbirth who herself was, no doubt, the inspiration for the later *Gravidenflasche* (Carinci 2000: 33-35; Spieser 2004: 57). This goddess, being hippopotamine in form, had the pendulous breasts and full belly diagnostic of the Egyptian and Minoan parturient females.

The second datum arguing for the Minoan origin of the motif is that of Egyptian decorum. Although, as discussed, the Divine Wet-Nurse is a long-standing motif in Egypt, dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty until, technically, the present day in depictions of the Madonna and Child, pregnancy itself was not commonly depicted. As stated above, the earliest known portrayal of an obviously pregnant woman dates to the reign of Hatshepsut in the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (Spieser 2004: 60-61), a period when the rules of Egyptian decorum were being renegotiated (Baines 1991: 138). This depiction still predates the earliest Egyptian *Gravidenflasche*, which date to the reign of Thutmose III (Lilyquist 2005: 64; Roehrig *et al.* 2005: 233; Phillips 2008: 214). Almost ironically, then, the *Gravidenflasche* is as atypical of Egyptian artistic norms as it is of the Minoan. It is only in the later 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty that the motif is adopted in Egypt.

The hypothesis of Cretan origins is further strengthened if we consider distinctively Minoan aspects of the so-called *Gravidenflasche*. Here I refer specifically to the EM-MM I ceramic

vessels commonly called ‘Vessel-Goddesses’. These vessels from burial contexts show anthropomorphic beings with rudimentary heads, arms, frequently breasts (which may be pierced), and which occasionally hold objects such as jugs. Some are decorated with paint – indicating clothing or sexual attributes – and/or ceramic fixtures. The EM IIB example from Myrtos Phournou Koryphi is a fine example. This ceramic vessel has a long neck topped by a tiny, rudimentary face with moulded nose and rendered eyes and hair. The arms are applied strips of clay, and the left arm holds a well-rendered jug/pitcher. The breasts are tiny dots of applied clay. A cross-hatched ‘skirt’ (?) and pubic triangle are painted in red. The over-all silhouette of the vessel is bell-shaped, with the narrow neck and head and the broad, rounded body.

The vessel, as many in this category, is clearly female, associated with liquid/pouring (jug, (pierced) breasts), and has a rounded belly that could be associated with pregnancy. So much may also be said of the Minoan ‘*Gravidenflasche*’, especially the ceramic examples. The chronology would allow for an adoption and adaptation of the Egyptian Taweret figurines combined with ‘Vessel Goddess’ iconography and even ideology into the Middle Minoan *Gravidenflasche* which was then exported to Egypt. If this origin hypothesis is correct – that the Minoans adopted the pregnant-parturient female motif from Egyptian Taweret forms – then an interesting corollary

hypothesis presents itself. Since the Egyptian-style pregnant-parturient female form appears in Crete before the anthropomorphic *Gravidenflasche* appears in Egypt, then it is possible that

Crete was in fact the inspiration for the anthropomorphic form of the image, which they then passed on to Egypt (Phillips 2008: 217).

## Children

The Minoans were clearly not averse to portraying women as pregnant. Based on the finds from Monastiraki and possibly Elenes they knew of and could fabricate for themselves kouroutrophic iconography. Furthermore, the Minoans were not opposed to portraying children in their art, especially in the Neopalatial Period (c. 1700 – c. 1450 BCE), but even earlier as well. Concerning these periods, both Jeremy Rutter (2003: 36-43) and Irini Papageorgiou (2008: *passim*) have amassed impressive catalogues of portrayals of children of all age groups in the Minoan repertoire, ranging from infants such as the small bronze figurine from the Diktaian Cave at Psychro and the ivory ‘toddlers’ from Palaikastro, all the way up to adolescents. In many instances, especially in terracotta, fresco, and the glyptic, males and females of different age groups are portrayed together, often in apparent ritual settings but in at least some cases in scenes of daily life. There is clearly no aversion to showing adults, including women, with children. And yet, once again, the specific image of woman holding or nourishing child – the kouroutrophos – is lacking from the repertoire.

Different hypotheses have been put

forth regarding this lacuna, focusing alternately on the role(s) of women or children in Minoan art and society. Barbara Olsen, studying kouroutrophism from a feminist perspective, suggested that the Minoans were more inclined to present women’s public roles in society rather than private, domestic duties. As such, women were portrayed in public processions, dances, conversations, and administering rituals, but were not shown in their more domestic tasks as mothers (Olsen 1998: 390). By contrast, Rutter (2003: 49) considered the issue from the perspective of the children themselves, claiming that “The Minoans...are far more intent on tracking the experience of their young through various stages of life as either individuals or members of peer groups rather than as components of nuclear families.” Kouroutrophism is thus absent because the focus for the Minoans was on the children themselves, not their familial relationships.

### *Infants and Small Children in Minoan Art*

Iconographic depictions of younger age groups are worth considering here, as they reveal much concerning the Minoan understanding of children’s

place within society, and thus may offer an explanation of why the kouroutrophos never ‘caught on’. The evidence will show that although Minoan children were often depicted with members of alternate age grades, nothing about the depictions suggests the notions of intimacy generally or family specifically.

Two vase paintings from the First Palace Period (1900-1700 BCE) may depict, in crude fashion, young girls. These are the Kamares Ware pedestal table and ‘fruit’ bowl from Phaistos. The table depicts three anthropomorphic individuals who appear to be dancing. All have bulbous lower halves which probably are intended to represent the full skirts of the Minoan wardrobe, and thus we might identify these figures as female. The figure in the center of the composition is approximately 50% larger than the two on either side of her, and she holds floral motifs in both of her hands. There are three additional crocus-like flowers on the edges of the composition. The two smaller individuals ‘dance’ on either side of the central figure. They are heraldically arranged, with one arm above the head, one curving to the waist, creating a symmetrical S-curve. Based on the larger size of the central figure, it is likely that the smaller two characters are intended to represent children. The Phaistos bowl depicts two bulbous-bottomed females as on the table. However, here there are two larger females on the edges of the composition ‘dancing’ on either side of a conical form emerging from the

ground line with an anthropomorphic head at the top. A single crocus-like flower adorns the composition. While admittedly speculative, it is possible that the emerging head is to be understood as juvenile. In both instances, the table and the bowl, it is likely that religious rituals are depicted, possibly even representations of vegetation goddesses and/or worshippers (Goodison and Morris 1998: 120-123).

Dating from the same period are two bronze figurines of toddlers which Papageorgiou dubs ‘adorants’. These figurines, one from the peak sanctuary at Mount Jouktas and one without provenance, have relatively large heads on relatively small bodies, short legs, narrow shoulders, and, most diagnostic of all, shaved heads, a consistent feature of depictions of early childhood throughout the Minoan Bronze Age (Davis 1986: 399–401; Papageorgiou 2008: 89; Chapin 2009: 178).

A small bronze figurine dating to Late Minoan IA discovered at the Diktaian Cave by Evans shows an infant crawling on hands, knees, and toes. The head is bald and the limbs plump; all in all a highly realistic depiction of a baby (Verlinden 1984: #38; Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1995: #49; Rutter 2003: 37; Papageorgiou 2008: 89; Chapin 2009: 178). A roughly contemporary bronze figurine is now in the Mitsotakis Collection at the Khania Archaeological Museum. This image, preserved from the knees up, shows a child in the standard worshipping pose of Middle and Late Minoan terracotta

votive figurines – standing straight with the right hand to the forehead, the other arm stretched straight down the body with left hand resting upon the lower hip. The head is shaved save for a single lock on the back of the head, a motif consistent in Minoan iconography for the depiction of young children (but older than fully bald infants). The sex of the child, to judge from the lack of rendered genitalia, is female. If so, this is the only known example of a female portrayed in the nude in Minoan art (Papageorgiou 2008: 90-91).

From the same period come two ivory figurines of small boys from Palaikastro. The first, mostly intact, shows a small infant/toddler crouching on the ground. He has the shaved (stippling is clearly visible on the scalp) and relatively large head typical of Minoan depictions of extreme youth. The genitalia are clearly rendered, and the facial features are carefully delineated. The second figurine is a slightly older boy, also identifiable by genitalia. He stands upright with his remaining one arm held straight down the body with the hand resting on the thigh. Once again, the head is clearly shaved (Rutter 2003: 37-38; Papageorgiou 2008: 89-90; Chapin 2009: 178). A final ivory image dating to Late Minoan IB comes from the palatial building at Archanes. Here, only the head remains, with an ivory tenon that certainly fitted into the socle of the figurine's body. As with the previous two examples, the face is well rendered and the head is shaven, rendered with a clear stippling effect

(Papageorgiou 2008: 90).

The most famous image of a small child coming from the ancient Aegean is the Ivory Triad from Mycenae, considered to be of Minoan craftsmanship in spite of its find spot. This small ivory depicts two adult females in full Minoan garb (tight bodices and flounced skirts) sitting side-by-side. They share a shawl, and the female to the right (the viewer's left) has her left arm around the shoulders of the other. The female to the left has her right hand upon the back of a small child who is crawling upon the knees of both women. The child has the typical shaved scalp of youth, and a relatively large head. Unlike the figurines discussed previously, this child is clothed in garb similar to, although less elaborate than, that of the two women. For this reason, Jeremy Rutter (2003: 39) argues, and John Younger (2009: 209) agrees, that the child should be understood as female.

Several seals and sealings depicting apparent religious rituals show young girls. Strongly reminiscent of the First Palace Period table stand from Phaistos discussed above are three seal stones, two dating to the Neopalatial Period, one to Late Minoan IB. The first, from Mochlos, shows a larger female with large breasts and flounced skirt possibly dancing between two smaller individuals (*CMS* II.3: n. 218). These smaller figures, about 2/3 the size of the central figure, have the same flounced skirts and are in identical dance poses. The second is a sealing from Mycenae but in Minoan



style (*CMS* I: n. 159). Once again, there are three females in a row. The central figure, with large breasts and full skirts, is twice the size of the two girls on either side of her. Otherwise, they are in identical costumes and have identical postures. The third example, a sealing from Late Minoan Haghia Triadha (*CMS* II.6: n. 1), once again shows the three females motif: a larger female in the centre flanked by two smaller but otherwise identical girls. To the right of these three females is a Minoan tree shrine, establishing the religious context of the scene. A more unique seal in gold from Mycenae shows a larger female, with large breasts and flounced skirt, seated under a tree and holding flowers in her up-raised hand. Approaching her are three females, the first of whom is half the size of the other two. The smaller female is dressed in clothing similar to the larger two (all three have variations in skirt pattern and head gear), and all three have one hand out, reaching or offering flowers to the seated figure. A 'floating' labrys in the centre of the scene established as religious context, and it is possible that the female under the tree is a goddess. Behind the tree under which the 'goddess' is seated is another tiny female in flounced skirt; she holds up both hands to a branch of tree. In this example, then, we appear to have two girls, two adult females, and either a seated woman or goddess (Rutter 2003: 42-43; Papageorgiou 2008: 91).

Late, and unique, in the Minoan repertoire are a group of terracotta

models dating to the end of Late Minoan IA. These models are strongly reminiscent of the scenic compositions of Early Bronze Age Cyprus, and like their Cypriot parallels, these models come from funerary contexts – the later annex rooms to the Middle Minoan tholos at Kamilari. Two of these models depict people of different scales, such that children with adults are probably intended. On the first model, four large adults sit against a wall with four small, round tables before them (one table per person). Two smaller individuals stand before the seated four. The arms of one of the 'children' are broken; the other holds forward a cup to one of the seated people. The scene is completed by two columns depicted on the corners of the model opposite the wall. Although originally identified as a cult scene with smaller humans making offering to larger deities or possibly dead ancestors, Rutter (2003: 40) suggests that the smaller, nude individuals may simply be children. Thus, a dining scene featuring adults and boys in attendance may be possible instead.

The second model certainly depicts a domestic scene with woman and child. Here, on a round floor a woman with large breasts kneels at a grinding board. Just behind her left elbow in a modelled doorway is a much smaller figure who is schematic but clearly anthropomorphic. The doorway suggests that the scene takes place either indoors or immediately outside of a residence. The smaller size of the person in the doorway indicates that

s/he is a child. This is, to date, the only known domestic scene even remotely reminiscent of home life or parental relations in the Minoan repertoire (Rutter 2003: 40).

Finally, there are the frescoes of Thera to consider. Although these are not from Crete, or presumably made by Minoans even though discovered elsewhere as with some Mycenaean materials, there is such a strong cultural continuity between Minoan Crete and Thera that the wall paintings tend to be used when studying Minoan culture.

According to research by Ellen Davis and Anne Chapin, the frescoes depict no fewer than six age grades, discernable by hair styles, clothing, bodily proportions, and colouring. Of all these age grades, only the youngest category concerns us here. The youngest children portrayed on the Theran frescoes appear to be between the ages of five and nine. Diagnostic iconographic criteria for males as delineated by Chapin (2007: 239) are:

- Head size relative to overall height
- Shoulder width relative to overall height and thickness of the waist
- Leg length relative to torso length and overall height
- Relative curvature of the spine and softness of the belly
- Relative muscular development
- Size of the genitals
- Relative height

An additional, although somewhat less diagnostic feature is hair style, where younger children have a shaved head with only two short locks, one in the back of the head and one above the brow (Davis 1986: 399-401). There are two boys who fall into the youngest age group, and, like the boys portrayed in other media of Minoan art, they are both shown nude. The first boy appears in Room 5, western wall, of the West House. He has the blue scalp indicative of shaving, with only tiny sprigs of hair fore and aft. He stands facing entirely to the side towards another boy whose more muscular body and slightly longer locks suggest that he is somewhat older (Doulas 1992: 52). An even younger boy appears in Room 3b of Xeste 3. This small child is nude with rounded shoulders and a slightly protruding belly. His head is blue with only two slight sprigs of hair on his forehead and crown. He faces another nude boy with shaved head who is almost twice his size with far more musculature. The fact that this latter male is also a boy, and evidently so much older than the first child, suggests that the first boy must be very young indeed, probably only just past toddler years (Doulas 1992: 146).

Girls, like boys, might be type aged based on their hairstyles, although Chapin (1997/2000: 8-12) argues that breast development is a better diagnostic criterion. While generally a good indicator, breast development is unhelpful with the one apparent young girl in the Akrotiri repertoire, whose

dress does not reveal the upper torso. This girl is located in Room 5 of the West House and is typically referred to as 'The Priestess' because she carries a brazier. Her head is shaved, once again with two locks of hair. The back lock is quite short, but the forelock is longer than usual for such small children, and it was originally believed that there was a snake upon her head. The extreme youth of the girl, in spite of the long forelock, is evident in her facial features and body: unlike other Theran girls, the 'Priestess' has very rounded cheeks and there is no attempt to indicate breasts whatsoever. The girl gives the appearance of being around six-seven years old (Doumas 1992: 56-57).

There are just under twenty known images of children from Minoan Crete and its orbit, and at best half of those are toddler-age or younger. We have perhaps nine images that can be understood as infants or babies: the bronze 'adorants', the worshipping little bronze girl, the bronze figurine from the Diktaian Cave, the ivory boys from Palaikastro and Archanes, the girl from the Ivory Triad, and the unsexed child from the grain-grinding model from Kamilari. Of these nine examples, only two, the Kamilari example and that from the Ivory Triad, show babies in a scene with other people. For the most part, infants, when they are portrayed at all, are portrayed singly. Apparently they are not social creatures.

By contrast, most other children are portrayed in social interaction with

others. The children from Thera, with the exception of the 'Priestess' appear with other people, often other, older children, but also with adults. The boy from Xeste 3 appears with two older children and a full grown man. The boy from the West House likewise appears in a panorama with several older boys. The two girls on the seal from Mycenae appear with older women, possibly older girls, and a full-grown female (goddess?) in the centre of the scene. The other seals, sealings, and dishware show girls dancing in sync with older females, perhaps not merely dancing in unison but learning the (ritual) dances.

### ***Social vs. Personal***

I would argue that the Minoan interest in children is ultimately of a social nature. They appear both within age groups and with members of different age groups always engaged in social settings. Although the grain-grinding model from Kamilari may be the single extant exception to this, other depictions of post-toddler children show them interacting in a social setting with other members of the community. This strongly suggests that children were valued in Minoan society as *members* of that society. By contrast, there appears to have been less interest in humans too young to take part in socialization – the infants who appear alone, outside of context. In some ways this brings us back to the original ideas of Olsen and Rutter, but with a twist. We might suggest that the nature of Minoan art, at least of the sort that shows children,

is essentially public in conception, thus eschewing the more personalized form of the kourotrophos.

Such an idea is bolstered when we consider the media in which Minoan depictions of children were rendered. Here we have bronze, ivory, steatite, glyptic forms, and frescoes. Only the terracotta models of Kamilari stand out as being in humble fabrics. This general lack of low status fabrics stands in sharp contrast to the majority of kourotrophic images in other parts of the Mediterranean and Near East, where simple terracottas, often mass produced, were the norm. Not only are Minoan children portrayed in social settings, the media in which they are depicted are likewise for public and/or prestige display, be that the elaborate displays of the frescoes or the status markers on seals.

This notion of status display also applies to the solitary infants, as well as the Ivory Triad. Once again, all examples are in prestige media – ivory and bronze. Furthermore, when provenance is known, they come from religious or palatial contexts. It is likely that the exceedingly rare depictions of infants in the Minoan repertoire had some kind of personal votive function, and the contexts in which such functions were appropriate were extremely limited. Images of infants may be dedicated in cave shrines, perhaps reminiscent of ‘baby’ Zeus, but only one comes from a peak sanctuary – the bronze toddler from Jouktas, where terracotta figurines

of adults and even body parts were far more common.

There are very few categories of elite kourotrophoi throughout the Near East and Mediterranean. The Egyptians have their long-lived Divine Wet-Nurse and their 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty ‘Tutors’. A single example in ivory comes from the Levant, but this itself is only part of luxury furniture intended mainly for private use. Kourotrophoi appear on a handful of cylinder seals from Akkadian Mesopotamia, often royal or at least pertaining to the royal household. These few subcategories pale in comparison to the many, many examples of kourotrophoi in simple terracotta, the medium that dominated the repertoire in the Levant, Mesopotamia, Cyprus, and Mycenaean Greece.

If kourotrophic iconography is largely absent from Minoan Crete, so too are its contexts. It is mostly within the domain of the personal that we find kourotrophoi in the other regions of the Mediterranean and Near East. They are prayers for fertility and safety, depictions of daily life, and access to magical forces. When shown in prestige media such as bronze or the glyptic, kourotrophic iconography served to highlight the relationship between the child and nurse/mother. Mesopotamian queens could advertise their status as Queen Mother through such imagery, just as the Egyptian Pharaoh established his close, personal ties with goddesses such as Hathor and Isis. Even the humbler, mass-produced Early Cypriot kourotrophoi appear to

have embodied aspects of lineage and familial relationship in early Cyprus. By contrast, the Minoans did not express the personal in such a fashion, and certainly not a personal that involved children. And, as Rutter (2003: 49) argued, there appears to have been little interest in

expressing familial connections in ancient Crete. All in all, one might argue that the Minoans did not adopt kourotropic iconography because not a single use of kourotropism was relevant to them.

### Rejection

What all this leads to is the ultimate fact that the Minoans *actively* rejected the image of the kourotrophos – the female who intimately nurtures and supports an infant. As the data show, the Minoans had no qualms about portraying children, children with other children, and children with adults in their art. The Minoans readily depicted pregnant, possibly even parturient, females in different media from the Middle Minoan through the Subminoan. They could even render plaques showing the Egyptian Divine Wet-Nurse motif, where a larger goddess nurses a standing individual who was at least tall enough

to reach the goddess's breast unassisted. Thus, what kourotropic iconography does exist in the Minoan repertoire still does not display an infant with a female, but an older, standing individual before a slightly taller goddess. In spite of all of the constituent elements and exposure to kourotropic iconography from both south (Egypt) and north (Mycenae), the Minoans simply were not interested. Nothing in their iconographic record indicates that a (divine) mother of a (divine) child had any place in their creative consciousness. When presented with the notion, they rejected it. The nurturing mother is non-Minoan.

### Mother Goddesses?

And so we return to the original point of interest: Was there a Minoan Mother Goddess? In the absence of the kind of written records that identify Ugaritic Athirat and Phrygian Kybele as mothers in spite of their non-kourotropic iconography, we are forced to deal exclusively with imagery when analyzing the Minoan pantheon. On the one hand, this lack of written evidence, especially

in the light of the aforementioned comparanda, forces us to recognize that iconography is far from a perfect reflection of the religious ideology it is meant to embody. The pictures do not necessarily reveal the whole truth. On the other hand, by determining what the Minoans did choose to render, we may get a peek into their world view, concerns, and priorities. Unfortunately,

our analyses of their material culture tend to say even more about our own world views, concerns, and priorities, and the question of the Minoan Mother Goddess has as much to do with modern scholarship as ancient frescoes.

It was originally Sir Arthur Evans (1921: 52) who claimed of Cretan (*inter alia*) Neolithic and Bronze Age 'goddess' images that "[I]t can hardly be a mere coincidence that all these various provinces of ancient culture – the Aegean, the Anatolian, the Syrian, Cypriote, Mesopotamian, and Elamite – where the habit prevailed of forming these mother idols, whether extended or seated, were the later scenes of the cult, under varying names and attributes, of a series of Great Goddesses who often combined the ideas of motherhood and virginity". Likewise, Evans (1921: 161) claimed "The steatopygous images that occur already in the Cretan Neolithic strata fit on to an Oriental series, and in their later developments are to be clearly identified with a Mother Goddess whose cult, under many names and adopted by many peoples, extends far beyond the Euphrates". Later, Stylianos Alexiou (n.d.: 71) in his seminal work on *Minoan Civilization* claimed of the pantheon that "Equally, the creative power of nature assumed the traits of a Great Mother, who appears not only as a *Kourotrophos*, a woman with a child in her arms, but also as the consort of the Young God". Evans and Alexiou were heavily influenced by early 20<sup>th</sup> century theorists such as Wilhelm Mannhardt

and Sir James G. Frazer, who proposed that ancient religions, especially as seen in the early Mediterranean, were based on a fertility paradigm and were embodied in part in a mother goddess and her vegetation god son/consort. This paradigm has endured so well that the Mother Goddess/Vegetation God motif continued in theories of Minoan religion in spite of the absence of kourotrophic or any other kind of divine maternal imagery.

The paradigm began to shift in the late 1950s when Gordon Childe (1958: 4) claimed that "the collection and interpretation of mother-goddesses is just a harmless outlet for the sexual impulses of old men". Somewhat less tongue-in-cheek work appeared in the works of Peter Ucko, especially in his seminal work *Anthropomorphic Figurines of Predynastic Egypt and Neolithic Crete* (1968). Here the author argued for a multiplicity of interpretations of the female figurines that were appearing from early Cretan and Egyptian contexts, including toy, vehicle of magic, and learning aid, as well as the then far more common knee-jerk interpretation of '(mother) goddess'. The paradigm shift continued with works such as Lauren Talalay's 1994 article "A Feminist Boomerang: The Great Goddess of Greek Prehistory," and Lynn Meskell's 1995 article "Goddesses, Gimbutas, and New Age Archaeology". A watershed publication was the book *Ancient Goddesses*, edited by Christine Morris and Lucy Goodison in 1998. Here, in

their co-written article “Beyond the ‘Great Mother’: The Sacred World of the Minoans,” Goodison and Morris noted that no representations of females in the Cretan Neolithic or Early Bronze Age corpora are shown with children, a fact that very much undermines the notion of an early Minoan mother goddess (Goodison and Morris 1998: 114-116). Morris then went on to analyze why the Minoans specifically were made such a sacred receptacle for the Mother Goddess myth. In her 2006 article “From Ideologies of Motherhood to ‘Collecting Mother Goddesses’”, Morris analyzes Evans’s apparent need to recognize a chaste yet maternal goddess in the Minoan pantheon as the result of the emphases placed on good motherhood in the Victorian Era. Furthermore, this virginal Minoan Mother Goddess appeared at the crux of a discourse concerning European superiority as contrasted with Oriental primitivism and decadence. This discourse was at least partially played out on the female bodies of the two sides’ respective pantheons.

Evans and other early writers immediately aligned the Minoans through the Greeks to the origins of Europe, and the spirit of the Minoans was presented as European and not Eastern. The erotic belonged to the sensuous world of the Orient, while the Minoans had been appropriated as ‘European’, and in this context I suggest that Evans and others mapped out from the ambiguous material evidence not a sensual but a maternal ‘Mother Goddess’ who better fitted European sensibilities (Morris 2006: 75).

The general abandonment of ‘Mother Goddess’ ideologies has now become so well entrenched that even when faced with scenes of kourotrophic iconography, most scholars seem loath to identify the female entity as a mother *per se*. Kanta and Tzigounaki (2001: 153 and 156), in their analysis of the Monastiraki kourotrophos, hypothesize that the relatively large nursing male is the (young) consort of the Minoan Goddess. He is not her son, and she is not his/a mother.

Nevertheless, the spectre of the Great Minoan Mother still lurks, having been most recently broadcast in a 2007 article by Nanno Marinatos, “The Minoan Mother Goddess and her Son.” Here, in direct contrast to the Greek-Oriental dichotomy prevalent in Evans’s day, Marinatos pointedly interprets the Minoan pantheon in light of its Near Eastern milieu. Analyzing scenes of *sacra conversazione* on gold rings in light of Near Eastern literature, Marinatos identifies the female and male characters in these scenes as a mother (or Mother) goddess with her son. As Marinatos notes, in these scenes the male figure is always smaller than the female, and he stands while she sits. This, concludes, Marinatos, shows that the male is less important than, perhaps subservient to, the female.

In any case, he seems to be subordinate to the seated goddess. But what this subordination means needs to be decided next. A crucial feature, it seems to me, is that the goddess has ample hips and breasts which show that

she is a matron. He on the other hand has a youthful frame, he is therefore younger. We may conclude that the juxtaposition of goddess and god (or king) is that of mother and son and that the endorsement of the mother is necessary for the son to succeed (Marinatos 2007: 356).

The goddess's maternal identity, then, is apparently assured by her big hips and breasts. What is important to note is that even in the midst of identifying a mother (Mother) goddess in the Minoan pantheon, Marinatos still must tweak the understanding of this entity to account for the lack of kourotrophic iconography: the Minoan Mother Goddess is mother of a grown child, her maternity only recognizable by her E-cup bosom and her domineering personality.

Female ≠ Mother. In spite of Evans, Frazer, Bachofen, and Gimbutas, the prominent presence of females in Minoan religious iconography does

not automatically translate into mother goddesses, or a Mother Goddess. Quite to the contrary, the Minoans were remarkably adept at avoiding the portrayal of mothers, in spite of the prevalence of women and children in their artistic repertoires, and in spite of the existence of both pregnancy and kourotrophic iconography deriving from periods of greater contact with Egypt, Ground Zero for kourotrophic iconography in the Bronze Age (Budin forthcoming b: Chapter 2). This active resistance makes it far more difficult to argue in favour of a pointedly maternal goddess in the Minoan pantheon, as such a deity would emerge in stark contrast to the concerns and priorities of the Minoans as presented in their arts, both regal and humble. The Minoans knew of mothers. They could portray mothers. They just did not want to.

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CMS = *Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel*

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