

The Minoan Mother Goddess and her son: reflections on a theocracy and its deities

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It was established by Evans that the leading divine figure of the Minoan pantheon was a Mother Goddess and that she reflected the matriarchal stage of mankind. The role of the mother goddess is re-assessed here in the light of Near Eastern theocracies. It is shown that the Mother of God is an important figure throughout the Near East, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Anatolia. Yet, she is not a fertility goddess but rather the mother of the chief god, who is often a storm deity. This template fits perfectly well the visual evidence of gods of Minoan Crete: mother goddess and son often occur together. The son is identified as a dragon-slayer of the Near Eastern tradition. It is concluded that the 'Mother of Gods' was demoted in societies where theocracies ceased to exist as in Greece and Israel.

1. Introduction

A colleague told me once that nobody has impacted the course of Biblical studies as much as Othmar Keel because of his integrated approach to Biblical texts and Near Eastern archaeology and images. My own indebtedness to Keel is immense, since it is from him that I have learned to “read” Biblical and Near Eastern images as symbols of a *koine*.¹

In a recent book Othmar Keel and Silvia Schroer have discussed Syro-Palestinian goddesses and have explored the visual manifestations of the feminine prototype in ancient art (Keel & Schroer 2006). The goddesses illustrated by Keel and Schroer have quite diverse roles, posing sometimes as warrior virgins, other times as erotically seductive females and other times yet as mothers. In this paper I want to offer Othmar Keel some thoughts on the subject of the Minoan Mother Goddess. I shall try to remove this famous figure from the utopian land where she currently floats and place her within the religious *koine* of the Egyptian, Syrian, and Biblical world.

¹ For the *koine* in Greek literature and myth see Burkert 1992, 2004.

I shall structure the paper around 3 questions:

1. Whose mother is the Mother Goddess?
2. What kind of god is her son?
3. What is the connection between the Mother Goddess, her son and kingship?

2. What is a mother goddess?

It is to Sir Arthur Evans, who excavated Knossos in the first decades of the 20th century, that we owe the notion that Minoan Crete had a Great Mother goddess. Confronted with a multitude of images of a female deity in Minoan art, he conceived of her as a divinity with powers over the earth, sky and underworld, responsible for fertility and regeneration and all aspects of life (Evans 1921-35: III 463-468). Subordinate to her was a male consort, a boy god.

Evans' views were shaped by the lens he was utilizing to interpret religion, a lens derived from the Cambridge ritualist school at the beginning of the 20th century. This school is best represented in Classics by James Frazer, Gilbert Murray and Jane Ellen Harrison. Bright and adventurous in spirit, Harrison saw Minoan Crete as a cradle of primitive rites, pre-cursors to Greek rituals. Her theories may be briefly described as follows: Religion evolves in stages, and Minoan religion belongs to a period when man was savage; rites were survival-oriented, their primary purpose being the procuring of food. Consequently, harvest and the seasons were all-important: "Primitive man then in general, and assuredly the ancient Cretan, is intensely concerned with the fruits of the earth. It is mainly because she feeds him that he learns to think of Earth as the Mother." (Harrison 1962 [orig. 1912]: 166)

The lens derived from the Cambridge ritualists accounts for Evans' assumption that the Mother Goddess was a corn-mother who fed mankind and was responsible for fecundity/fertility. It is to the same school that we owe the idea that the goddess had an inferior consort or companion who died yearly and was reborn; he was regarded as the embodiment of seasonal cycles (Harrison 1921: *Epilegomena* xxxi-xxlii).

Yet, because Evans had a brilliant and broad mind he was not completely blinded by the Cambridge ritualists (Ackerman 1991). He knew that Minoan religion was far more sophisticated than primitive mentality would warrant. Indeed, he saw many connections between Minoan and Egyptian religions, and he wondered if Minoan religion was not in fact practically monotheistic (or henotheistic, as we would say today). At the turn of the century, the monotheism of Akhenaton was well known, and it presupposed a great deal of abstraction and philosophical thought (Hornung 1999: 93-94). Evans thus wore *two sets of spectacles* at the same time, sometimes

classifying Minoan religion as primitive and other times seeing it as close to monotheistic religions such as Christianity; he did not perceive the two sets of spectacles as being contradictory.

Already during Evans' life time, another scholar attempted to interpret the Mother Goddess: the Swedish scholar Martin Persson Nilsson. In his *Minoan Mycenaean Religion* (first edition 1927; second edition 1950) he was critical of Evans' monotheism. The consequence of his study is that he attributed less sophistication to Crete than Evans, thus unwittingly pushing even more strongly the notion of Minoan religion as primitive (Nilsson 1950). The male god became embedded in people's imagination as a fragile figure inferior to the goddess. Indeed it seemed certain after Nilsson's work that Minoan religion was the first stage of Greek religion, a matriarchal stage in the evolutionary chain of development.²

Evans' legacy still prevails today despite acerbic (and often unjustified) criticism of much of his work. The Mother Goddess has become not only popular but intellectually seductive, especially to feminist movements that seek the golden origins of mankind in Crete.³ The following comes from *Wikipedia*, and represents the current standard view:

“The Minoans worshipped goddesses. Although there are some indications of male gods, depictions of Minoan goddesses vastly outnumber depictions of anything that could be considered a Minoan god.”^{18#}

Yet this elusive male god is not just occasionally “indicated” but quite evident; further, he is as important as the mother goddess. This will be the argument here.

3. *Whose Mother is she?*

My first task here will be to question that Minoan religion was primitive (whatever this word might mean). The likelihood that it was radically different from any of the other religions of the Ancient Orient is slight. Crete was a monarchical theocracy; its complex architecture, art, symbols and bureaucratic mechanism were in the forefront of cultural achievement. Most important is the fact that Crete was a literate culture with three different hieroglyphic scripts and at least one Linear Script. Writing, and more importantly, written tradition usually results in elaborate religious systems and symbols (Beard 2004). Just because we do not *happen* to have religious texts from Bronze Age Crete, this does not mean that they did not exist. Nor does it imply that Crete had a lower level of religious complexity than

² Gimbutas 1995. Cf. also Nilsson 1950: 391.

³ For a criticism of the theories of the Minoan Mother Goddess (and especially those of Gimbutas) see now Goodison & Morris 1998.

that of other contemporary kingdoms of Anatolia, Syria, the Levant or Egypt. Indeed, the similarity between Egyptian and Minoan pictograms had struck Evans, as we have seen above. It may be noted in addition that there is a commonality of artistic motifs between all east Mediterranean cultures of the Bronze Age: monkeys, palms, gardens, landscapes full of birds and animals. Most if not all of these motifs may be associated with a nature giving goddess. But in the palatial cultures of Egypt and the Near East this goddess has a family role in the pantheon; she has a husband or a son or both.

A second question may now be asked: if the goddess of Crete is a mother-goddess, *whose* mother is she? Because surely mothers derive their identity not only from the inherent value of their role (which is undoubtedly the case), but also from the identity of their offspring. If Crete had a theocracy, a mythical expression of this theocracy must have been reflected somewhere in its religion; the Mother Goddess of the ‘primitive stage of mankind’ does not fit here.

Observe also that the title ‘Mother of God(s)’ is a cult epithet to be found throughout the theocratic Ancient Near East and even Greece.⁴ This title implies neither fertility nor seasonal allegory; rather, it confers honor to mother and offspring alike and places them at the top of the hierarchy of the pantheon.

Nicolas Wyatt has suggested in a series of articles that the actual counterpart of the Mother Goddess in Ugaritic myth is the dowager queen. She controls the lineage of the king and (for this reason) was held in very high honour; he detects this pattern of lineage in the Hebrew Bible as well and notes the exalted role of the queen mother there.⁵ In Ugaritic literature we read that the heir to the throne “shall drink the milk of Athirat.”⁶ Athirat is the queen of the pantheon, the consort of El and the protectress of the king (Wyatt 2005a: 45). Thus, she is ‘mother of gods’ and ‘mother of kings’ alike.⁷

Turning to Egypt, Isis is the mother of Horus, whereas Hathor is likewise his protectress (Hathor means “house of Horus”). Isis also embodies the throne of the pharaoh and wears it as a headdress on her head. Thus, when the king sits on his throne, he sits on the lap of this Goddess, metaphorically speaking.⁸

⁴ Roller 1999; Borgeaud 2004; Munn 2006.

⁵ On Athirat and royal ideology see Wyatt in Watson & Wyatt 1999: 544. On Canaanite queens see Wyatt 2005b: 5-7.

⁶ KTU 1.15 ii.27, Wyatt 2002: 209.

⁷ Two of the many examples: KTU 1.4 iv. 33- Wyatt 2002: 99; 1.8 ii 2 = Wyatt 2002: 152. There is suspicion that also Israelite queens had a similar role although this is contested by Andreasen 1983.

⁸ I thank Thomas Staubli for this suggestion; Wyatt 2005b: 5.

Mesopotamian Ishtar may be cast in a similar theocratic social mould. She is often cited as a fertility goddess, but her social position in the pantheon as a daughter of Anu and a *patroness of kings* is equally important, although this is seldom stressed. It is exactly in this capacity (and not fertility) that she protects Zimrilim, king of Mari and hands him the insignia of his reign in the throne room of the latter's palace. She remains the patroness of Assyrian kings through the first millennium.

Moving on to Greece of the Archaic Greek period (seventh to sixth centuries), we meet the goddess Kybebe. Both the name and cult of this goddess originated in Phrygia and Lydia. In Greece she is equated with the Mother of Gods, Rhea and Magna Mater (Munn 2006: 120-121). Mark Munn points out that Kybebe is closely associated with Lydian sovereignty "...by the heyday of the Lydian empire the mother of the archetypal rule had become the archetype of the divine Mother" (Munn 2006: 129).

With this evidence as a background we finally return to Minoan Crete where we shall detect the Mother goddess in precisely such role as here outlined: she is the mother of the king or of a young god. I shall deal here with only one type of scene, which is represented exclusively on gold rings.⁹ That these rings represent official ideology is certain. They were made of gold, which is a rare material often monopolized by the palace.

The formula entails an enthroned goddess facing a standing male who is sometimes (but not always) smaller. The seated posture of the goddess denotes her authority and status as *queen*. This fact must be noted because it fits the template of the theocracy.

The first example of such an iconographical formula is a ring from Mycenae. It shows a matronly looking goddess with ample heaps and large breasts seated on a throne, the back of which has the shape of a mountain; she faces a standing male who holds a spear (**fig. 1**). The two figures interact in a lively manner: their hands cross and both have pointed fingers, so that the impression given is that they are engaged in an animated conversation. Evans spoke of intimacy between them (Evans 1921-35: III 464), although Nilsson saw the scene as entirely secular.¹⁰ The mountain throne, however, is sure proof that Nilsson was mistaken: mortal women do not have mountain thrones.

The nature of the intimacy, which Evans correctly perceived, may be further qualified. The size and matronly shape of the body of the goddess are signs that she is both older than the male and a matron. The outstretched arm of the goddess and her pointed finger show not just intimacy but authority as well. Thus, a possible reading of the scene is that she is the mother/queen instructing her son about his future roles and duties.

⁹ Some rings were found on the Mycenaean mainland, but their iconography is originally Minoan.

¹⁰ Nilsson 1950: 405. See Evans 1921-35: III 464. Dimopoulou & Rethemiotakis 2000.



Fig.1 Ring from Mycenae. Goddess and god engaged in animated conversation. CMS I, 101.



Fig. 2 Seal now in Geneva. Seated goddess and a god, her son (?). CMS X, 261.



Fig. 3 Ring from Thebes. God greets goddess seated on a her divine palace. CMS V, 199. – Pl.#



Fig. 4 Gold Ring from Poros. Dimopoulou & Rethemiotakis 2000: fig. 1.#

Had this scene been unique, it would have been risky to interpret. Thankfully there exist similar ones, such as a Minoan seal stone now in Geneva (**fig. 2**). Once more the goddess is larger than the standing male, and the two interact. Instead of animated conversation, however, the two figures extend their hands towards each other in a gesture of intimacy that possibly connotes agreement; at any rate it is not an erotic embrace. Above the pair we see an elongated object now understood by many scholars to be a shooting star.¹¹ There is also a small seated child figure, which I am not able to interpret; perhaps it is a child-god. In any case both shooting star and child are imagined in the sky, and if so, the heavens are open and reveal further signs of the divine interaction.

On a ring from Thebes, on the Greek mainland, the goddess is seated on a building which has the form of a palace (**fig. 3**). The male is quite muscular and large in comparison with the ones in the previous scenes. Above the couple is the horizon line and the rayed sun disc. What interests us here is the dominant figure of the male god who is here shown in the full bloom of manhood.

Finally, a newly discovered ring from Poros near Herakleion on Crete furnishes one more instance (**fig. 4**). An authoritative male figure extends his arm towards a seated goddess who is situated in mid air. The gesture of the male typifies rulers or deities, he is thus very important and this may be also inferred from the fact that he is on the central axis of the scene (Niemeyer 1987, 1989).

The results so far may be summarized as follows: All the scenes on the rings show the juxtaposition of the seated goddess to a standing male. The male is sometimes smaller, other times muscular and authoritative. The last two cases make it abundantly clear that he is important, even though he is subordinate to the enthroned goddess. In the last ring he wears a tall pointed hat, such as worn by Hittite and Syrian gods and deities. Who is this male?

¹¹ Dimopoulou & Rethemiotakis 2000#; Kyriakidis 2005.

There are two possibilities: he is either the king or a major deity of the pantheon. 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 heaps 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 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.

At his point we must pause and wonder if there is an implicit narrative behind the codified scenes, and if this narrative is related to the mission and role of the youthful male as a ruler. A further question is: is he god or king? Fortunately we need not choose between the two alternatives because the ambiguity god/king seems to have been intended by the Minoan artists themselves. The god is a paradigm for the king and the king assumes the role of the god. Thus, whether the figure is god or king, the message is the same: he is the son of the major goddess of the pantheon and his authority is being endorsed by the Mother Goddess. Evans had already intuited this: "The impression produced by the design is rather the relationship of a son to a mother than of a husband to a wife or mistress." (Evans 1921-35: III 464)

4. *What kind of god is the son of the goddess?*

What has been posited here is that the iconography reflects a mythical paradigm of mother-son. We have sensed also a kind of narrative behind the emblemization of the scenes. Since we have no narratives from Crete, we shall turn to Near Eastern texts which may elucidate the Minoan images and apply a Near Eastern lens to the iconography. This is justified from the point of view of methodology because some lens *must* be applied, and in this case a Near Eastern one is the closest we have at our disposal.

Two narratives have been selected, both illustrating the role of the major goddess of the pantheon as a *mother* and a *queen*. A first example comes from the Babylonian story about the Anzu monster from Nineveh (this version probably stems from the seventh cent. BCE). A dreadful monstrous bird steals the tablets of destiny from the gods and causes anarchy and chaos.¹² The gods meet under the leadership of the chief god Anu. In the council of the divine pantheon, the gods are in despair. Anu proposes that they call the Sister Goddess, Belet-ili/Mami, to save them:

"Have them call for me Belet-ili, sister of the gods,
Wise counsellor of the gods her brothers.

¹² The narrative exists in an early second millennium and a first millennium version, the so-called Standard Babylonian, which is the one cited here: Dalley 1998: 203.

Have them announce her supremacy in the assembly,
 Have the gods honour her in their assembly:
 I shall then tell her the idea which is in my heart....
 Previously [we used to call you] Mami
 (but) now [your name shall be] Mistress of All gods.
 Offer the powerful one, your superb beloved,
 Broad of chest, who forms the battle array!
 Give Ninurta, your superb beloved,
 Broad of chest, who forms the battle array
 [then shall his name be] Lord in the great gods'
 assembly.
 Let him show prowess to [the gods, that his name may be Powerful]."
 (*Anzu I*, transl. Dalley 1998: 210-211).

The role of Mami, then, is to summon her son who will champion the cause of the gods and fight the dangerous monster. Mami receives a new name after the appointment of her son as champion; she becomes "mistress". Her power (which is so great that the collective gods, the Igigi, kiss her feet) derives from the fact that she is a queen mother. It must be further noted that the Ninurta epic has an evident relationship to kingship and that its composition reflects the royal ideology of Assyria.¹³

In the Ugaritic poem of Baal, we find a goddess with a similar role to Mami; she too has power to appoint a champion and a successor to the throne. She is Athirat, the consort of the creator god El, a goddess who enjoys the respect of all the gods and has the epithet *rbt* 'great'.¹⁴ Most important for our purposes is the fact that Athirat is called "the mother of gods".¹⁵ Other times it is said that she has 70 sons, a numerical metaphor for totality.¹⁶ When the young storm god Baal decides he needs a palace in order to establish his position in the pantheon, he turns to Athirat asking her to mediate on his behalf. That her approval is necessary endorses the position of Wyatt that the role of the queen goddess as queen mother is an exalted one.

In another passage of the Ugaritic epic, El the king of the gods is desperate because Baal has disappeared and another god/king must be found to replace him. El then turns to Athirat for help and asks *her* to appoint a successor:

"Aloud cried El to the Great Lady who tramples Yam:
 'Listen, O Great Lady-who-tramples-Yam.

¹³ Annus 2001; Wyatt 2006#: 5.

¹⁴ Wyatt in Watson & Wyatt 1999: 544-545.

¹⁵ Two of the many examples: KTU 1.4 iv. 33- Wyatt 2002: 99; 1.8 ii 2 = Wyatt 2002: 152.

¹⁶ Wyatt in Watson & Wyatt 1999: 529-585.

Give the first of your sons'
I shall make him king."
(KTU I.6 44-47: Wyatt 1998: 131)

Thus, Athirat's role is to determine succession as the mother of the king of gods. As Wyatt states, Athirat's role in the Ugaritic pantheon reflects the importance of the dowager queen, a key figure in the issue of royal lineage.¹⁷ It may be interesting to note that Athirat is regarded as a solar goddess and this fits well the iconography on the Mycenaean ring from Thebes. On the latter the sun features above the seated goddess (**fig. 3**).¹⁸

The narratives cited above (originating in different cultures) provide stories which illustrate the exalted role of the mother/queen in the ancient Orient and testify to a common tradition. But they also show that the son of the Mother goddess is a very important figure. I would thus like to argue that the Minoan seated goddess is the mother of the dominant male god of the pantheon. This god is not an embodiment of vegetation and yearly decay but a king and warrior. The goddess endorses his authority, gives him instructions and supports him. She is at the same time the mythical mother of the king. The scenes on the Minoan rings are embodiments of both the mythical and the social paradigm.

5. The Serpent/monster and the Storm God

In the second part of this paper, I should like to argue that the postulated male god of the Minoan pantheon is a version of the Near Eastern Storm God who kills monsters and sea-dragons. Further, I shall suggest that he was the king of the pantheon because, in many religions of the Ancient Orient, the king is a youthful warrior god and not an older creator-god (Marduk, Horus, Zeus are all younger gods).

The storm god often has a dragon adversary, as Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger have shown.¹⁹ This monster lives in the sea and may emerge from the deep waters to attack the boat of the god. In any case, the dragon embodies chaos and must be defeated. Precisely such a creature can be detected on a Minoan ring impression from Knossos (**fig. 5a-b**). The incompletely preserved scene shows the head of a creature with an open mouth threatening a man in a boat. He however stands firm and yields weapons unfortunately not preserved on the sealing. Ingo Pini rightly observes in his commentary on the publication of the image that the weapon in the left hand of the god does not aim at the throat of the monster.

¹⁷ Wyatt in Watson & Wyatt 1999: 540-544; Wyatt 2002: 132 with n. 75.

¹⁸ Wyatt in Watson & Wyatt 1999: 544.

¹⁹ Keel 1992: 195-232; Uehlinger 1995.



Fig. 5a Sea Monster attacking the boat of the Storm God. CMS II. 8. 234.



Fig. 5b Reconstruction by Nanno Marinatos.

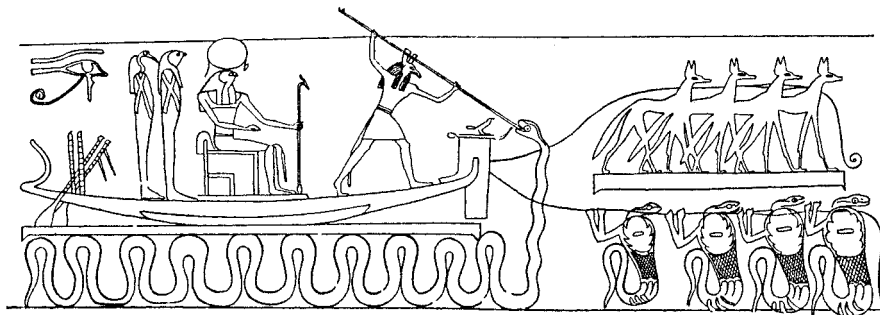


Fig. 6 Apophis defeated by Seth. Egyptian Papyrus. After Keel 1992: fig. 229.

The scene has a highly dramatic character, and therefore captured the attention of Evans and, some years later, of Spyridon Marinatos (**fig. 5a**).²⁰ Also Martin Nilsson and Axel W. Persson tried to interpret it, but little attention has been paid to it since. And yet it is clear that a young god is attacking a monster of the sea holding two weapons: a sword aiming at the throat and a spear aiming at the eye of the monster (**fig. 5b**).²¹

Now to the nature of the monster. We can be certain that the attack takes place at sea because the god stands in a boat.²² A sea-serpent is attested in Ugaritic myth: the sea-serpent Litanu.²³ This has been taken to be the equivalent of Biblical Leviathan. Litanu is one of the primary adversaries of the storm god Baal as Leviathan is to *Jhw*. Also in Egyptian papyri we see the sea-serpent, Apophis, who is the enemy of Horus and Seth. In representations of the conflict the boat of the sun god is attacked by Apophis and defended by Seth, the helmsman of the boat of Horus (**fig. 6**; Uehlinger 1995).

²⁰ Evans 1921-35: IV 952, fig. 921; Marinatos 1926.

²¹ At CMS II. 8, 234.

²² Correctly perceived by Marinatos 1926: 51; Nilsson 1950: 37.

²³ KTU i.5. i. 1 = Wyatt 2002: 115.

Finally, the Syrian storm god is depicted as a snake slayer in the Middle and Late Bronze Age seals. The tradition continues into the first millennium and later.²⁴

What is the role of the dragon-slayer deity? In many Near Eastern myths he is the storm god and king of the gods. Such a role is attributed to Babylonian Marduk and Ninurta, to Egyptian Seth, to Ugaritic Baal to Israelite Jahweh, to Greek Zeus and Apollo. I suggest that there was a major strong male Minoan god of a similar nature, who may be described as a warrior and a dragon slayer. But at the same time he was conceived as a son and a king. We see him in these two capacities on the rings (**fig. 1-4** and **5**).

6. The Mother Goddess and her Warrior Son in Crete of the First Millennium: Dreros

Did this Minoan war god and his mother-goddess survive the end of the Bronze Age? In Greek religion Apollo inherits the role of the dragon slayer (Fontenrose 1959). It has been shown by Walter Burkert that he owes much of his mythical persona to the smiting god of the Near East Reshep.²⁵ Apollo in Greek cult and especially on Crete remained tied to his mother Leto; she too is a goddess of some importance presiding over male warrior rituals.²⁶ Leto is also greatly honoured in the Hymn to Apollo which dates to the sixth century BCE. There she receives the epithet mistress (*potnia: Hymn Apollo, 12*); this *potnia* title is the Greek equivalent of the Ugaritic *rbt* and Palestinian *gbr*, namely epithets of Canaanite Mother Goddesses.

The earliest representation of Apollo flanked by his mother and sister from Crete is a bronze statue from the temple at Dreros (seventh cent. BCE). The statues were excavated and first interpreted as a divine triad by Spyridon Marinatos (**fig. 7#**; Marinatos 1936).

This evidence provides some continuity between Minoan and Greek/Dorian Crete. Yet, together with this continuity the nature of the relationship between mother and son has changed. The statue of Leto is larger than that of Artemis but considerably smaller than that of Apollo. This shows the demotion of the Mother Goddess and the exultation of the warrior god as Keel together with Uehlinger and Schroer have spotted for Canaanite/Israelite religion in the Iron Age and earlier.²⁷

In Greek religion Leto has some importance as an honoured mother of the warrior god, but she clearly takes a secondary role to him. But how are we to explain this shift? My proposal is that it is due to the fact that theo-

²⁴ Keel 1978#, with fig. 55; Uehlinger 1995.

²⁵ Burkert 1975. See also Waldner 2000: 185.

²⁶ Such rites have been studied by Katerina Waldner who makes a cogent case that Leto is connected to the initiation of young warrior males: Waldner 2000: 177-197.

²⁷ Keel & Uehlinger 1995; Keel & Schroer 2006.

racies had declined on both sides of the Aegean. Queen mothers no longer had the prominent role they had as controllers of lineage. The demotion of the role of Mother of Gods is linked to the demotion of the dowager queen. The Mother Goddess may thus be defined as a feature of monarchical theocracies, not of primitive religions.

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