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THE DOUBLE-AXE: A CONTEXTUAL APPROACH TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF A CRETAN SYMBOL IN THE NEOPALATIAL PERIOD

Summary. The Double-Axe has always been considered as one of the most important religious symbols in Minoan Crete. This paper reassesses the significance of the Double-Axe and puts forward a new interpretation for it. It recognizes the great potential for change in symbolic meanings during the Bronze Age and seeks to understand the Double-Axe in as narrow a period as is realistically possible by filtering out evidence from other periods. Central to the argument is the principle that the meaning of symbols is contextually dependent. It builds, therefore, a new interpretation of the Double-Axe on the basis of as wide a range of contextual associations as possible, both within iconographic sources and in the wider material record. From these contextual associations, it suggests that in the Neopalatial period the Double-Axe was a symbol primarily associated with a social group which exercised power in the economic, military and religious realms and that it became a solely religious symbol only later.

INTRODUCTION

Double-Axes are, together with Horns of Consecration, one of the most familiar symbols of the Aegean Bronze Age. All scholars who have ever studied the Double-Axe have accepted that it was a religious symbol. Even Banti (1941–3, 16–18) and Nilsson (1950, 192–3), the two great sceptics among scholars of Aegean Bronze Age religion, though they may have questioned the dogma of the time which held that the Double-Axe was the symbol of a specific deity, did not doubt that it was a cult symbol.

This paper is particularly concerned with the significance of the Double-Axe in the Neopalatial period, the period of the floruit of Minoan civilization, to which many of the most famous elements of Minoan material culture belong (for the chronology of this period in relation to the other periods of the Cretan Late Bronze Age, see Table 1). The study of religion emerges out of the scholarship associated with the Neopalatial period as particularly prominent. A great many elements of Neopalatial material culture – numerous objects, architectural units, and symbols – are commonly identified as religious (Gesell 1985; Rutkowski 1986; Marinatos 1993). Sir Arthur Evans, the founding father of Minoan studies, placed religion at the centre of his view of Neopalatial Crete. His vision of a peaceful, goddess-worshipping, society headed by a priestly

THE DOUBLE-AXE

TABLE 1

Simplified chronology of the Cretan Late Bronze Age (absolute dates are both approximate and extremely controversial)

Period	Ceramic phases	Absolute dates	
		Traditional chronology	High chronology
Neopalatial	Middle Minoan III (MM III)–Late Minoan IB (LM IB)	c.1700–1450 BC	c.1750–1500
Final Palatial	Late Minoan II (LM II)–Late Minoan IIIA (LM IIIA)	c.1450–1350 BC	c.1500–1350
Post Palatial	Late Minoan IIIB (LM IIIB)–Late Minoan IIIC (LM IIIC)	c.1350–1100 BC	c.1350–1100

elite and priest king has proven particularly abiding and popular, both inside and outside academia. Though today few scholars would accept Evans's views *in toto*, the centrality of religion remains, with a lively debate concerning whether Neopalatial palaces should be interpreted as such or as temples/communal ritual structures (see, for example, the contributions to Driessen, Schoep and Laffineur 2002) and with the various modes of elite action almost always being given the adjective 'ritual'. Meanwhile, a revenant of Evans's priest king, as transmitted through the work of Nanno Marinatos, has achieved pan-European importance in Kristiansen's and Larsson's book, *The Rise of Bronze Age Society* (2005, 83–7). In this environment, it is important to re-examine with greater precision and in greater depth those spheres we define as religious, ritual, or symbolic, how they interact with each other and with other spheres, in our interpretations of elements of Minoan material culture.

It is well known that Double-Axes were a pervasive symbol in Neopalatial Crete, commonly appearing as a motif on pottery (Nikolaidou 1994, 94–260) and sealstones (Onassoglou 1985, 102–10), appearing as a sign in all Bronze Age scripts, and found scratched into ashlar blocks as one of the most common of the so-called mason's marks (Sakellarakis 1967, 288; Gesell 1985, 35; Hood 1987, 210; Hitchcock 2000, 137–8, 150; Begg 2004). Double-Axes can appear in a multitude of impractical forms from the large but thin bronze examples to the tiny precious metal examples. But they were also one of the most common tool types. It has been noted that the majority of Double-Axes are not the impractical types but the substantial, practical, often mould-made, axes that were clearly both capable of being used as practical tools and were used as practical tools (Mavriyannaki 1983, 195; Evely 1993, 51).

This is why Double-Axes are so interesting. A great deal of archaeological discussion at the moment is concerned with the interface between the types of activities we regard as symbolic and those we regard as practical. Double-Axes in Neopalatial Crete clearly cross this theoretical divide. And, because Neopalatial Crete is one of the most extensively studied prehistoric areas in the world, we have a wealth of information about the contexts in which Double-Axes appeared both as symbols and as tools.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Because so little is agreed in prehistoric archaeology, an essential requirement of understanding any element of Aegean Bronze Age material culture is to understand the path that earlier discussions have followed. The most important features of the discussion surrounding Double-Axes were the interpretations of Evans and Cook, which were similar largely because they were both influenced, to varying degrees, by the same anthropological schools of thought and the later criticism of their interpretation by Nilsson.

At the time that Evans and Cook were conducting their research, the long-standing belief that elements of earlier religions are preserved and can be detected within later religions had been reinforced by the wide acceptance of the theory of evolution as a paradigm which could be used to understand the development of human society. The acceptance of evolution also meant that the idea that change in religion was directional, progressing through time, was also reinforced.¹

Two interpretations of primitive religion, current at the time, influenced Cook and Evans to varying degrees in their interpretation of the Double-Axe. The first was the idea, derived from the comparative study of Indo-European language and myth, that the central and most dominant deity of early societies was a sun or sky god. The second was the idea, made famous by Frazer and the myth-ritualists around Harrison but ultimately deriving in large part from studies of nineteenth century northern European folklore, that the main concern of early religions was with fertility, cycles of death and rebirth, and the seasons.²

Given the intellectual environment of the time, it was natural that when Cook and Evans discovered the Double-Axe as a symbol of Zeus in the Hellenistic and Roman periods they should believe that this was a survival and it was therefore the symbol of the supreme sky god of Bronze Age Crete (Evans 1901, 108–9; Cook 1925, 559; see also Nilsson 1950, 188–9). Both, however, moderated this conclusion. Evans, recognizing that the Double-Axe was most commonly associated with female figures in the Bronze Age, convinced that Minoan religion was primarily concerned with fertility, and believing that the supreme deity was a goddess, made the Double-Axe a symbol of both the supreme male and the supreme female deities of the Bronze Age.³ Cook, who is normally included in the core group of myth-ritualists, took a different route to including fertility in his interpretation of the Double-Axe. He argued that the sky god was the consort of the earth goddess and that the Double-Axes discovered embedded in the rocks of Psychro cave were the god's symbol, representing the penetration of the earth goddess, equated with the rock, by the sky god, equated with the axe (Cook 1925, 533–4). It was not until an article by Waits (1923) that the Double-Axe became entirely and primarily the symbol of the mother goddess, only becoming associated with male divinities much later according to Waits's scheme.

A second trend in the interpretation of the Double-Axe developed out of the doubts of Banti (1941–3, 16–18) and Nilsson (1950, 192–6) who could find no evidence that it was

1 The study of religion in the late nineteenth century is an important but complex subject that is intimately tied up with the study of Classics and the beginnings of Prehistoric Aegean archaeology. A complete history of the interrelations between what were to become the separate fields of Anthropology, Archaeology, Classical Philology and Ancient History in this formative period for the study of religion has not yet been written. But a good introduction to the intellectual environment of the time can be found in Morris 1987, 91–106; Ackerman 1991; Pals 1996, 3–53.

2 Although on face value Evans's image of Minoan religion is very similar to that of Frazer and the myth-ritualists about primitive religion generally, there is some debate as to whether he was directly influenced by them; compare Goodison and Morris 1998, 113, fn. 2 with Peatfield 2000, 140–1. Although it is just possible that Evans was not aware of the *Golden Bough* in 1900, it is hard to believe that he was not by 1921: on the wide impact of the *Golden Bough* at the beginning of the twentieth century see Vickery 1973. Some of the similarities between Evans and Frazer are certainly due to the impact of the nineteenth century study of northern European folklore on both, Ackerman 1991, 48, 61.

3 Compare Evans 1901–02, 102, '[the double axe] was associated here with the cult of a goddess as well as a god . . . The double axe, the proper emblem of the male god, was also common to the goddess', with Evans 1921, 447, 'it is clear that the special iconic form of the supreme Minoan divinity, as to her male satellite, was the double axe'.

originally associated with any particular deity. They argued that it was instead just a general religious symbol. Nilsson used Classical parallels to argue that its original meaning came from its association with sacrifice and he thought that this was confirmed by the association between Double-Axes and bucrania in art.

This interpretation, however, was severely damaged by the arguments of Buchholz (1959, 16). He pointed out that the association of the bucrania and Double-Axes was a late development (appearing first in MM III Palaikastro at which point both symbols had been around for some time individually). He also showed that in the earliest combinations of Double-Axe and bucrania, the Double-Axe was not shown shafted but appeared to be hanging from a rope or ribbon, suggesting the axe was not meant as an implement of sacrifice but merely as a decorative motif. Moreover, he re-emphasized the point, recognized by Nilsson, that all known depictions of sacrifice from the Bronze Age Aegean portrayed a knife or sword as making the kill.⁴

Since Nilsson, scholarly opinion has oscillated between various combinations of these ideas, but by far the most dominant is that the Double-Axe was the symbol of a supreme Minoan goddess with several scholars finding support for the idea that it was a symbol of fertility or rebirth in the appearance of Double-Axes in graves and the idea that it was a sacrificial implement.⁵

Explicitly or implicitly underlying the widespread acceptance of the Double-Axe as a religious symbol has been the feeling that the shape is strange and impractical. But there is a debate going on in modern scholarship as to how practical Double-Axes were. European scholars tend to claim that Double-Axes were not practical and so there needed to be a symbolic element in their use even when they were tools (Buchholz 1959, 7; Evelyn 1993, 41), while scholars from the other side of the Atlantic, where double-bitted axes have habitually been used in modern times, tend to argue that double-bitted axes are just as, or even more, practical than single-bitted axes (Hodge 1985, 307–8; Jaeger 1999).

THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

Given the complex combination of ideas and the often subtle differences of opinion between different scholars' interpretation of the Double-Axe, it would be natural to conclude that the precise significance of the Double-Axe is unimportant to the interpretation of the rest of the material record and that it is sufficient just to call it a religious symbol. Because of this it is worthwhile, at this point, to make clear what a complex group of associations is covered by the term 'religious symbol'.

It is well known that each of the Classical Greek gods had one or more identifying symbols or attributes. It should be uncontroversial to say that these were in some sense religious symbols. However, when these symbols appear in a context apart from the divinities they can have very different statuses. Athena's hoplon obviously cannot be called a religious symbol when appearing on a grave stele or on a sympotic vase. Similarly, the bow and hunting dogs of

4 Mavriyannaki (1978, 200–2) has argued on the basis of those Double-Axes with engraved scenes (see below) that in order for the scenes to be seen the right way up the axes must have been meant to be viewed upside down; she suggests that they may have been hung on walls. This accords with Buchholz's evidence for the earliest depictions of the axe hanging upside down.

5 Buchholz 1959 (symbol of mother goddess, fertility and rebirth); Mavriyannaki 1983, 220 (symbol of rebirth); Gesell 1985, 35 (symbol of the goddess); Rutkowski 1986, 229 (symbol of the goddess); Dietrich 1988 (symbol of rebirth); Marinatos 1993, 5 (symbol of religious power); Nikolaidou 1994 (symbol of dualities including male/female, earth/sky, nature/civilization); Hitchcock 2000, 150 (symbol of a deity).

Artemis can appear in numerous contexts where they are just a bow and dogs. Pluto's cornucopia or Dionysius' thyrsos, on the other hand, can be regarded as religious symbols even when they appear on their own as emblems. Between these two extremes there are a multitude of religious symbols, such as Persephone's pomegranate or the gorgon's head of Athena, which display a whole spectrum of mundane and religious meanings dependent on the context.

The point of this observation is that religious symbols have a contextual element to their meaning. Some symbols, like the hoplite shield or the bow, are only religious in certain contexts, others, like the pomegranate, can change their meaning in different contexts. Such complexes of context-dependent meaning can be found in any system of religious symbols.

This means that even if the consensus view that the Double-Axe was a religious symbol is accepted, there is still the question of what kind of religious symbol it was. Was it more like Athena's shield, or was it more like Pluto's cornucopia? If it was not for the weight of scholarly authority accepting it was primarily a religious symbol, I suspect we would make an *a priori* assumption that it was more like Athena's shield, given that it, too, could have been, in some circumstances, a useful object and was not a fantastical device like the cornucopia.

INTERPRETING MINOAN ICONOGRAPHY

The basic methodology for the study of Minoan iconography has been established for a long time. It consists of charting patterns of association between motifs in as many iconographic sources as possible. In recent years, great steps have been taken to make such studies more all-encompassing and systematic (most important, of course, has been the production of the *CMS* volumes, but there have also been such other studies as Younger 1988; Crowley 1995; Wedde 1995; Crowley 2000). However, the most intractable problem remains the interpretation of the significance of the motifs themselves – it tends to be very difficult to say anything about them with certainty beyond their status in comparison to other motifs in the same scene.

Most scholars would probably accept that there was variation in religious beliefs, symbols and practices between different places and times in the Aegean Bronze Age. The need to understand the spatial differences and to chart change through time has been acknowledged for some time (Renfrew 1981). The problem has always been that in comparison to studying regional variation and change in, for example, ceramics, the dataset for religious iconography – consisting primarily of seals, seal impressions and frescoes – is very small: a problem that is exacerbated by the poor or non-existent contextual information for many Bronze Age seals and the tendency for some of them to remain in use for considerable lengths of time. The natural caution engendered by this problem has hindered studies of religious change. Scholars have been wary of discussing change as they are aware that an iconographic type which appears at the moment to be confined to a particular time may be shown by new discoveries to have had a longer history. But for the study of religious change to progress, scholars must be willing to make conclusions about change on the basis of the dataset as it exists, acknowledging that these conclusions will have to change in the light of new discoveries.

One key to understanding the iconographic record is to view it, as far as possible, in the light of the wider material record. If broader patterns in material culture can be found that intersect or overlap with those patterns visible in iconography then the interpretation of a motif can be more broadly based and more firmly grounded in the evidence from a particular period.

In the rest of this paper I will attempt to understand the Double-Axe in the Neopalatial period of Crete using evidence which can be shown to be of Neopalatial date. I will also try to



Figure 1
Silicone impression of LM II–III seal from Knossos (*CMS* II.3 63).

highlight those patterns in the wider material evidence that may have a direct impact on the understanding of the Double-Axe as a symbol.

SCENES FREQUENTLY CITED AS DEPICTING THE DOUBLE-AXE AS AN ATTRIBUTE OF
A DIVINITY OR IN A CULT CONTEXT

Many of the depictions that are most frequently cited as placing the Double-Axe in a cult context or as showing it as the attribute of a divinity are rather late in date. Perhaps the most famous of these is a mould from east Crete, which depicts a female brandishing a Double-Axe in each hand (Xanthoudides 1900, pl. 4). It is pretty securely dated on stylistic grounds to late in the LM III period. A group of seals and one sealing depict the Double-Axe either worn on the head of a female or hovering above her head (Fig. 1). These seals and the sealing all come from LH or LM II–III contexts.⁶ The clearest depiction of the Double-Axe in a cult scene comes from

6 Seals: *CMS* II.3 63 (Knossos, Area of the Hospital, tomb III, LM II–III), *CMS* I 144 (Mycenae, Kalkani necropolis, LH II–III), *CMS* I 145 (Mycenae, Kalkani necropolis, LH II–III), *CMS* V 654 (Rhodes, Makri Vounara, tomb 20, LH III C1); sealing: *CMS* I 379 (Pylos palace, LH III B). Examples of the goddess with the ‘snake frame’ but without the Double-Axe are also post-Neopalatial, Hägg and Lindau 1984, table 1, fig. 1. Hägg and Lindau believe that the combination of goddess and ‘snake frame’ originated in the Neopalatial period on the basis of a relief fresco from Knossos. Unfortunately very little is certain about this fresco. It is extremely fragmentary and the pieces are very disparate; its stratigraphic context is so poorly reported that it can never be established with certainty; and the unique nature of the high reliefs defies stylistic dating, *DM/DB* 1901, Vol. 2, 41 = Palmer 1963, 138; Evans 1900–01, 15, 88–90; Evans 1930, 495–518; Cameron 1975, 702; Kaiser 1976, 279–82, 292; Immerwahr 1990, 171, Kn No. 8; Hood 2000, 200; 2005, 75–6. Given the uncertainties it is probably best to start from the seals with their more clear contextual data – all post-dating the Neopalatial – in establishing a date for the first appearance and combination of these motifs. Hägg and Lindau also suggest that the connection between the ‘snake frame’ and Double-Axe originated in the Neopalatial period on the basis of one of the ‘Zakros Master’ seal impressions, but in the clearer pictures now available in *CMS* II.7 203 there is no Double-Axe.



Figure 2
Detail from the Agia Triada sarcophagus (author's drawing).

the Agia Triada sarcophagus, which is now securely dated to at least as late as **LM IIIA2** thanks to Militello and La Rosa (2000, 996–7). Finally, the Double-Axe appears in a famous and complex scene on a solid gold ring from the **Acropolis Treasure at Mycenae** (*CMS* I 17). This ring is very difficult to date. However, it has been well established that it was a mainland product and that it combines symbols in a way that is totally alien to Cretan practice – even if many of those symbols were originally Cretan (Niemeier 1990, 167; Krzyszkowska 2005, 254–5).

Most scholars would probably accept that post-Neopalatial or mainland sources cannot be safely used to understand the significance of the Double-Axe in the Neopalatial period of Crete. In an earlier section I referred to the probability that change in religion happened during the course of the Bronze Age. Something about such changes relating to the use of the Double-Axe can be seen by comparing the depictions on the Agia Triada sarcophagus with depictions from the Neopalatial period. On the right-hand side of one of the scenes on the sarcophagus is a structure that is always interpreted as a shrine (Fig. 2). It appears to consist of a temenos wall with a tree growing within it, the branches of the tree poking out above the wall. In front of this structure is a pole and in front of the pole is a woman who seems to be addressing a ritual towards the shrine. Similar structures are depicted in Neopalatial art but there are small, but significant, differences between the depictions (Fig. 3). **In the Agia Triada depiction, the top of the 'temenos' wall is lined with a series of Horns of Consecration; this is a feature that never appears in the Neopalatial depictions of this type of temenos and tree shrine (Kenna 1960, fig. 155; *CMS* I 119; *CMS* I 126; *CMS* I 514; *CMS* II.3 15; *CMS* II.3 114; *CMS* II.6 1; *CMS* II.7 1, note that the Horns of Consecration in this case are in front of the shrine not on top of it; *CMS* XI 28), even though Horns of Consecration date back to the Protopalatial period and are common in Neopalatial art.** The pole in front of the shrine on the Agia Triada sarcophagus is surmounted by a Double-Axe and a bird. Similar poles can be commonly seen in Neopalatial depictions of shrines but they are



Figure 3
Ashmolean gold ring (drawing by J. Kelder).

always bare (see the depictions just cited and Alexiou 1963; Graham 1970). This example hints that symbolic change did occur through the Late Bronze Age on Crete with symbols from earlier periods being combined and associated in novel ways.

DOUBLE-AXES IN RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS IN THE NEOPALATIAL PERIOD

In the Neopalatial period Double-Axes certainly turn up in cult contexts in the broader material record. The identification of Peak Sanctuaries and Sacred Caves is certain, largely thanks to their distance from other forms of activity and their inexplicability in any other terms. Double-Axes are known from at least some of these sites. At Jouktas, for instance, a group of Double-Axes was discovered in a crevice in the rock near the structure that is believed to be an altar (Karetsou 1981, fig. 14), while at the cave of Psychro Double-Axes were found in the lower cavern; some had become embedded in the cavern's stalactites (Hogarth 1899–1900, 108–9). **The circumstances of their discovery make the interpretation of these Double-Axes as votives hard to avoid.**

Votives, of course, can take the form of cult symbols or representations of deities, but they can be many other things as well (on the variety of Classical Greek votive behaviour, see the outdated but still useful Rouse 1902). Votives can also be gifts given to attract or avert the attention of the divine. A vast array of different types of objects including everyday items or prestige goods can be given in this way. Such everyday objects can sometimes be produced in miniature or otherwise in symbolic form, meaning that we cannot assume that just because something is not functional (like the impractically large or thin Double-Axes) it was not meant to represent a functional object. To make things even more difficult, we know from parallels, not least with the Classical world, that votives can be given to commemorate some great event like an athletic or military victory and in such cases the votives may make use of symbolism, but of symbolism that refers to the event rather than directly to the cult. Some hint of this last phenomenon occurring in Bronze Age Crete may be found in the discovery of figurines depicting boxers at Peak Sanctuaries (Rethemiotakis 2001, 127–8).

DOUBLE-AXES IN NEOPALATIAL ICONOGRAPHY

We are fortunate in having some Neopalatial depictions of Double-Axes being put to some kind of use. Three sealings, one from Agia Triada (Fig. 4), one from Zakros (Fig. 5), and one from Thera (Fig. 6), together with one seal from Knossos (Fig. 7), all show figures carrying Double-Axes.

The difference between these and the post-Neopalatial depictions is clear. Unlike the LM III depictions, the point of these does not seem to be just to show a figure marked by and in



Figure 4
CMS II.6 10.

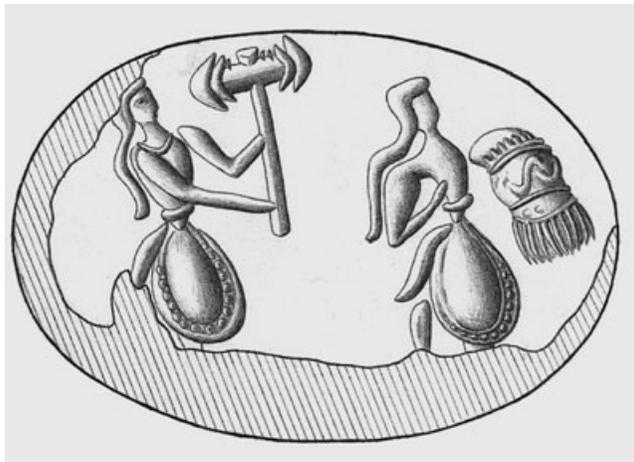


Figure 5
CMS II.7 7.



Figure 6
CMS V suppl. 3 394.



Figure 7
CMS II.3 8.

a sense 'labelled' by the Double-Axe but they appear to show an action **or a process**; the carrying of the Double-Axe, together with some type of garment or cloth (in the case of three of the depictions), from one place to another (compare to the description of narrative given by Cain 2001, 29–30). For this reason most scholars have not identified these figures as deities or regarded the Double-Axe as a particular attribute of these figures but have interpreted them as doing exactly what they appear to be doing: carrying the objects to something or someone 'off-scene'. Usually this something or someone is said to be the goddess who is thus 'borrowed' from the post-Neopalatial depictions.

These scenes do give us a clue as to what is going on in the form of the cloth or garment carried with the Double-Axe. Nilsson (1950, 160–1) recognized that the garment in the case of the Zakros sealing is the same as that worn by the leader of the procession on the Harvester Vase



Figure 8

The leader of the procession from the Harvester Vase (author's drawing).

from Agia Triada (Fig. 8) and if true this must surely extend to the seal from Knossos and the sealing from Thera as well. This garment is marked by being quite short, having a fringe, and appearing to have scales.⁷ In all three depictions there seems to have been an attempt to depict each of these features.⁸

A scaly cloak-wearing figure like the leader on the Harvester Vase only clearly appears in one other depiction: a set of sealings, all made by the same ring, which are also from Agia Triada (Fig. 9). In a perfect world it would be possible to make an argument purely on the basis of the objects from the same context at Agia Triada. However, although both the scaly cloak and the Double-Axe appear being carried on sealings from the Agia Triada villa (the Double-Axe is found on *CMS* II.6 10, cited above, the scaly cloak on *CMS* II.6 7), there are no preserved sealings depicting both being carried together, unlike in the case of the Zakros, Knossos, and Thera depictions. Nevertheless, there are enough points of contact between these depictions to believe they are related. Other than the scaly cloak, figures in three of the sealings are wearing a bulbous skirt, which is not the normal Minoan attire. In addition, one of the figures wearing the bulbous skirt on one of the Agia Triada sealings is carrying what appears to be the same swagger stick as that held by the leader of the harvesters.

Given that the scaly cloak and the axe are seen being carried together, and that the scaly cloak is only ever seen being worn by the type of man that leads the harvesters, it seems logical to conclude that both the cloak and the axe are attributes of a man or of men like the leader of the harvesters, even though there is no surviving depiction of him carrying the axe. In any case,

7 Faience pieces from corridor 73 of the palace at Phaistos, previously interpreted as representing fish-scales, may represent the scales of such a cloak, Pernier and Banti 1951, 341–2, fig. 213.

8 There are a number of cloaked figures in Neopalatial art and Verlinden (1985) has attempted to equate them all. However, the scales and fringe on the type of cloak discussed here are sufficient to distinguish them from other cloaks that tend to be longer and more plain.

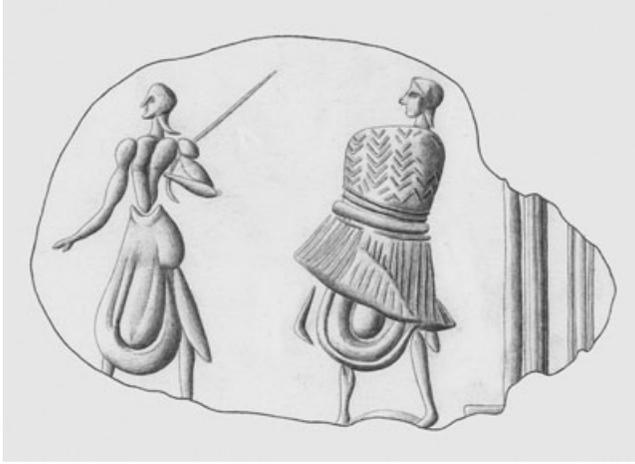


Figure 9
CMS II.6 11.

this seems to be a better solution than the alternative which requires borrowing a goddess from a later period.⁹

If I am right, we can say something about this man or about men like him. The most readily identifiable supernatural beings in Aegean art seem to have been distinguished by being a different size, by being placed higher in the scene than other figures, or by being accompanied by a supernatural or exotic creature such as a lion, griffin or monkey. Given that this figure does not seem markedly different from the others, it seems probable that they are all mortals.

The tools carried by the men on the Harvester Vase seem clearly to relate the scene to agriculture. The sistrum carried by one of the men, the presence of what appears to be men singing, and the unusual goose-stepping gait of the figures make it reasonable to conclude that the event being depicted was festive. It is reasonable, therefore, to conclude that this is a religious occasion related to agriculture. In this light it is interesting to note that the seal depicting a man similar to that leading the procession was one of the most active in the Agia Triada sealing assemblage, occurring on 255 hanging nodules and a roundel out of a total assemblage of nearly 1100 sealings impressed by about 150 seal types (Krzyszowska 2005, 170–2). Given that Neopalatial administration is supposed to have been heavily concerned with agricultural produce, it seems an extraordinary coincidence that a type of man, clearly depicted at the forefront of one type of agricultural activity, should be depicted on such an active seal. However, there are a whole series of problems with associating the depictions on seals with the roles of the

9 A seal from Malia depicting a woman and a man exchanging a cloak also seems to be related, especially as the flat shape on the head of the man is reminiscent of the beret-like hats worn by the men on the Harvester Vase and the cloak again seems to have the scales and fringe, CMS II.3 145. The old idea that the thing being exchanged was a dress for the woman, who is interpreted as either a priestess or goddess, would be negated if this connection is accepted, since only the man on the Harvester Vase is shown wearing the cloak and the woman is in any case already clothed.

people who used them.¹⁰ Not least of these is that the vast majority of Neopalatial seals do not depict things that can be clearly related to administrative activities.

DOUBLE-AXES AND WARFARE

Verlinden (1985, 136–8) has pointed out the similarity between the scaly cloak worn by the leader of the harvesters and that depicted on a Double-Axe from Vorou (Buchholz 1962).¹¹ Depicted together with the cloak are a figure-of-eight shield and two objects that have been interpreted as, among other things, quivers or ritual tankards – though there is no good parallel for either object in the wider material record outside iconography (Verlinden 1985, 140–5; Onassoglou 1985, 23–8). Whatever the latter objects are, the figure-of-eight shield clearly connects the cloak and Double-Axe to warfare.¹² Similar depictions on Double-Axes also relate to warfare. An axe published by Mee and Doole (1993, no. 479, pl. 23) also has a figure-of-eight shield on it. It was supposed to have been donated by Bosanquet and so may come from east Crete. Another Double-Axe, from Knossos, has a clear depiction of a helmet on it (Xenaki-Sakellariou 1953, figs. 1–2; Evely 1993, no. 82). Unfortunately, although all of these examples from Crete are conventionally dated on typological grounds to the Neopalatial period none of them come from a clear context (Evely 1993, 41–55; Mee and Doole 1993, no. 479, pl. 23).

Some further evidence that the cloak, shield and axe were related in the Neopalatial period may come from the floor cist of the Vapheio tholos tomb in Laconia, which is safely dated to the Neopalatial period (Popham *et al.* 1974, 219). Here the three can be found together on the right-hand side of the scene on the Vapheio ring (CMS I 219).¹³ This, too, is problematic because the axe, like the two objects to its left, is one of the class of floating filling objects commonly found on Neopalatial seals and it is very unclear how or even whether these objects related to the main scene, rather than to, for instance, the seal user or the circumstances in which the seal was supposed to be used (Cain 2001, 34–7). Finally, in exploring the network of contextual associations between the Double-Axe and figure-of-eight shield in the Neopalatial period, it may

10 Much more work has been done on this issue in Mycenaean rather than Minoan studies, see, for example, Laffineur 1992; Weingarten 1997.

11 There is an argument over whether the depictions on the axe represent the robes alone or people wearing the robes. The argument centres on whether the loop at the top represents a head, see Small 1966, *contra* Verlinden 1985. That only the robe is meant seems more likely as the overall shape, bundled into a spiral at the top, mirrors its shape on seals where it is shown being carried. The parallel most commonly cited for the alternative, a LH IIIA krater from Cyprus, is rather removed from the Cretan context, Small 1966, fig. 3; Warren 2000, 461–2.

12 When appearing as a symbol on its own the figure-of-eight shield has often been interpreted as a symbol relating to the goddess, see Warren 2000, which contains the previous bibliography. A complex set of interrelations between motifs is used to support this argument, but it all depends on the core depictions of a shield as an attribute of a female deity. These core depictions, the solid gold ring from the Acropolis Treasure at Mycenae mentioned above, CMS I 17, and a painted plaque from the LH IIIB ‘Tsountas House’ at Mycenae, Immerwahr 1990, 191–2, MYno7, are both undoubtedly mainland products which make use of symbols in a way unparalleled on Crete in the Neopalatial period. The Cretan depictions of figure-of-eight shields combined with anthropomorphs can most easily be interpreted as warrior processions, see CMS II.3 32; CMS II.8 276. This may well be a clear case of mainland innovation in the symbolic and religious sphere.

13 Impressions from a seal at Zakros, CMS II.7 5, have the same combination of the man and woman, the tree, the figure-of-eight shield, and the cloak without, in the preserved sections of the scene, the Double-Axe. The usual interpretation of scenes which like these are under the boughs of a tree is as adoration/epiphany scenes, which seems to me to be significantly complicated by a ring in Berlin that has recently been established as genuine, which appears to hint at a more complex narrative, CMS XI 29.

well be significant that the scaly robe, with which we saw the axe associated in the previous section, also occasionally appears associated with the shield without the Double-Axe (*CMS* II.8 127).

Moving away from the iconographic evidence, a couple of patterns in the broader material record from the Neopalatial period may confirm a connection between Double-Axes and implements of war. It should already be clear that the discovery of Double-Axes in the cave of Psychro played an important role in the original interpretation of them as religious. Along with the Double-Axes, one of the most important votive types in the cave consisted of over 200 weapons dating from the Neopalatial period. These included daggers, thin sheet-bronze models of swords and daggers, and perhaps two arrow heads (Boardman 1961, 25; Rutkowski and Nowicki 1996, 17–18; Watrous 1996, 49). Perhaps significantly, in spite of the early date of the excavation, Hogarth (1899–1900, 100, 109–10) does report that the distribution of these militaristic objects mirrors that of the Double-Axes with the majority being discovered in the lower cave. It may also be significant that, like some of the Double-Axes, some of the swords and daggers were made of impractically thin sheet bronze and that some of them, like some of the axes, seem to have been discovered embedded in the rock.

The idea that Double-Axes were used in and could be symbols connected to warfare is also compatible with the contexts in which usable Double-Axe tools are found in settlements. The discovery of Double-Axes with other tools in what are sometimes thought of as tool-kits is a well known phenomenon (Evely 1993, 51). But Double-Axes have also been regularly discovered with weapons.¹⁴ Although in most cases these Double-Axes and weapons were also together with tools, on at least two occasions a Double-Axe and a weapon were found together without other implements; interestingly in both cases the Double-Axe and weapon were at the entrance to a building. Obviously anything that can be used to chop wood can also be used to chop people and it is possible that Double-Axes did both.

DOUBLE-AXES IN NEOPALATIAL SETTLEMENTS: THE CASE OF THE MIRABELLO BAY REGION

Further information about the significance of the Double-Axe as a symbol in the Neopalatial period can be garnered from the contexts in which the large, thin, impractical and, therefore, presumably symbolic or ceremonial Double-Axes turn up in the material record of the Neopalatial period. The relatively extensively excavated settlements of the Mirabello Bay region of east Crete provide a good case study for such an enquiry as the region is less hampered by archaeologists' understandable concentration on big impressive buildings elsewhere.

Three of these 'ceremonial' Double-Axes have been found in the region. One was in house C3 at Mochlos (Soles and Davaras 1996, 194), one was in house Cg at Gournia (Boyd-Hawes 1908, pl. XI 22) and another was in the Hill House, a rural or semi-rural building just

14 **Malia:** *House E*, in the entrance, a Double-Axe and a dagger (no tools), Deshayes and Dessenne 1959, 144 nos. 6, 1, pl. LI 1, 4; *House Zβ*, room V, several Double-Axes and a spearhead, Deshayes and Dessenne 1959, 68 nos. 2 a, b, 71 no. 1, pl. XX 1; *House Zγ* 8 Double-Axes and 7 daggers and swords, some with gold and silver rivets for attaching the handle, Deshayes and Dessenne 1959, 38, pl. XX 3, 5; **Palaikastro:** *House X51-66*, 2 Double-Axes and a sword, Bosanquet, Dawkins and Hawes 1904–5, 282; Bosanquet and Dawkins 1923, 116, pl. XXIV S; **Phaistos:** *palace*, room xlii, a Double-Axe with a spearhead (no tools), Pernier 1935, 366, fig. 218; **Knossos:** *Northwest House*, 3 Double-Axes with 4 daggers and a sword, Evans 1928, 629, fig. 392; **Zakros:** *Hogarth's House C*, 2 Double-Axes with 3 daggers, one of which had gold rivets, Hogarth 1900–01, 134, fig. 46.

outside Gournia (Boyd-Hawes 1908, pl. XI 18, 23). None of these buildings was remarkable, all appeared similar to the majority of buildings in the region, and they have, therefore, never been interpreted as anything other than houses (on architectural patterns in the region generally, see McEnroe 1990). In all cases the Double-Axes were in storage and in all cases they were found together with a lot of scrap metal including tools, broken vessels, and pieces of bronze ingots. None of them were anywhere near any sign of metalworking. These collections seem almost certainly to have been a way of storing wealth in the form of metal, which could be melted and recycled when needed (Brogan 1998; Soles 2004, 159).

That ceremonial Double-Axes could end their life-cycles in such domestic recycling stores must raise problems with any interpretation of them as strictly religious symbols imbued with a high degree of sanctity.¹⁵ Moreover, if I am right in connecting the Double-Axe with the man wearing the scaly cloak then it must raise questions about where on a putative Minoan hierarchy we should place him. To find so many 'ceremonial' axes in such humble buildings in the relatively humble settlements of the Mirabello region may suggest that we are not dealing with the symbol of a small group at the upper end of the social scale but with a larger social group which had agricultural, religious and perhaps military responsibilities.

CONCLUSIONS

This article is a contribution to the understanding of the use of symbols in the Aegean Bronze Age. As such it is based upon three premises. First, the fact that symbols can change meaning in time and space means that attempts must be made to understand particular symbols initially in as confined regional and spatial contexts as possible, so that evidence from other places and times must be filtered out of the initial interpretation. Second, a holistic and contextual approach should be taken to the understanding of symbols. As many contextual associations as possible need to be charted within the temporal and spatial frame so that interpretation is consistent with the full body of published material and to avoid, as far as possible, scholars' preconceptions leading to the artificial privileging of individual contextual associations. Third, symbols are complex, and simple conceptual divisions between religious and non-religious are likely to be unrealistic. Symbols tend to build metaphorical connections between those spheres of life we classify as religious and those we classify as mundane.

This paper took Crete in the Neopalatial period as a good starting point for the understanding of the Double-Axe, thanks to the wealth of information provided by the widespread destruction of Cretan sites in the course of the latter part of this period. An even more confined initial temporal and spatial perspective, while ideally desirable, would be unrealistic given the obvious limitations of the archaeological record.

In attempting to filter out evidence from other times and places, it was discovered that the most clear associations between the Double-Axe and divinities and the most clear appearance of the Double-Axe as a focus of cult come from later periods than the Neopalatial and/or from

15 One possibility is to follow Driessen and Macdonald 1997, 54–61, in arguing that there was a religious crisis in the latter part of the Neopalatial period resulting in religious symbols falling out of favour and being found in humble circumstances untypical of their use at earlier times. This argument, however, is highly controversial simply because there is not enough evidence from earlier periods, see the critique by Warren 2001. It would be particularly problematic to apply this theory to the Double-Axe since it should already be clear that it remained an important symbol after the Neopalatial period.

places other than Crete. While it is always possible that new discoveries will invalidate this conclusion, if change in the use of symbols is to be addressed discussion must start from the archaeological record as it is currently known. This paper also argued that the religious associations of the Double-Axe in the Neopalatial period are not so straightforward. Their appearance as a votive in Peak and Cave Sanctuaries, for example, could be equally well due to their symbolizing the dedicant or an event.

In Neopalatial iconography the Double-Axe is closely associated with the scaly cloak and the figure-of-eight shield. The figure-of-eight shield is primarily an implement of war, while the scaly cloak is only shown being worn by and distinguishing a particular type of man whose role is most clearly attested by his leading of the harvest procession on a stone rhyton from Agia Triada.

The broader contextual associations of the Double-Axe complement those from iconography. The humble contexts of ceremonial (large, thin, impractical) Double-Axes in the settlements of the Mirabello Bay region, and their consistent appearance in recycling deposits, make an interpretation of them as restricted sacred symbols problematic. The association of Double-Axes with weapons in settlements and the close association with weapons in the votive assemblage at Psycho reinforce and confirm the association with warfare.

Combining these Neopalatial contextual associations both within and beyond the iconographic record, it may be possible to suggest an alternative interpretation for the Double-Axe. It is possible that the Double-Axe together with the scaly cloak was an attribute and symbol of a group or class within Neopalatial Minoan society with a leadership role in agriculture; a leadership role in, at least, some religious occasions; and with some kind of military role. At the same time, the discovery of three of the ceremonial (large, thin) Double-Axes – made of a material that is prone to disappearing from settlements – in the relatively humble settlements of the Mirabello Bay region may suggest that this group or class was not narrow and confined to the top of a conceptual Minoan hierarchy but was more broad-based. This may coincide with some recent discussions of Minoan society which emphasize the apparent complexity in the evidence for social structure through the use of the terms ‘heterarchy’ and ‘factionalism’ (Melas 1995; Hamilakis 1997–8; Schoep 2002a; 2002b; Hamilakis 2002). The understanding of the Double-Axe as a symbol of a social group would be compatible with the occurrences of the symbol in art and in the wider material record, while suggesting that as a votive its symbolism was as much to do with the dedicator as with the cult.¹⁶

The Minoans, in common with all of humanity, would have perceived the world and interpreted it through the filter of their cosmological, in other words religious, world view. They are almost certain to have built metaphorical meanings, which we would regard as religious,

16 The two aspects of the appearance of Double-Axes in the Neopalatial period that have not been dealt with in detail above are their appearance as ‘mason’s marks’ and their combination with the bucranium. In the former case I can only point to the problems with understanding these marks to demonstrate that they are not so well understood as to provide a base on which to build a specifically religious interpretation of the Double-Axe, see footnote 2 above for bibliography. In the latter case the key to understanding the connection may be to combine the observation that bucrania appear as a decorative motif on their own, with Mavriyannaki’s observation that Double-Axes hanging upside down may have decorated the walls of Minoan buildings, and with Buchholz’s observation that when the two motifs first appear together the Double-Axes are always shown hanging upside down, see above. It is also worth pointing out that sacrifice was not the only possible significance of bulls in the Neopalatial period, see, for example, Säffund 1987, or Hallager and Hallager 1995, where bulls are seen as symbols of personal and/or political power.

around all kinds of symbols and objects. It is very likely that the Double-Axe would have been surrounded with such a body of narrative, myth and ritual. But when archaeologists are looking for cult symbols they normally seem to mean something more confined, more specifically religious than this. The identification of spaces, objects or symbols as religious on the basis of association with the symbol of the Double-Axe is common in Minoan studies (Gesell 1985; Rutkowski 1986; Marinatos 1993). For such a methodology to be acceptable the Double-Axe needs to have been a highly specific religious symbol, so confined to the religious sphere that it could appear in no other context and have no other meaning – whether or not the particular interpretation of the Double-Axe suggested by this paper is accepted, it should be clear that such a methodology is not acceptable.

This paper has laid out in application an alternative methodology for examining the interplay of various spheres of meaning, whether religious, ritual or otherwise, in the use of a prehistoric symbol. The first step must be the critical examination of the historiography of that symbol. This is necessary because old ideas based on long defunct theories have a tendency to become so embedded in the archaeological discourse that they can gain an aura of impeccable factuality. This step becomes particularly important when it comes to examining the transmission of a symbol through time or space – which must be the ultimate aim of all such studies. If this step is neglected one may fail to realize that commonalities in the interpretation of a symbol from place to place or from period to period are not independently arrived at as inevitable interpretations of the evidence but derive from the common archaeological tradition. The core of the approach, however, is the charting of as many contextual associations as possible. This network of contextual associations must encompass both the traditional iconographic sources for the study of symbols but also the broader archaeological record. If this task does not form the basis of interpretation then interpretations run the risk of not being compatible with the full archaeological record as it is currently known. A necessary component step in this charting of a network of contextual associations is the confining of the study to as narrow a chronological and spatial frame as is realistically possible given the limitations of prehistoric archaeology – the filtering out of sources of evidence from other times and spaces. If this step is not undertaken the resulting interpretations will be based on an unrealistic palimpsest of evidence. Any subsequent studies of the transmission of symbols through time and space risk floundering in a poorly differentiated soup of evidence and interpretation and, as a result, will tend towards circularity. It is, for example, the lack of this detailed contextual foundation to the study of symbols in Kristiansen's and Larsson's (2005) attempt at an 'inter-contextual' archaeology of the European Bronze Age that has engendered much of the criticism and that prevents the book fully living up to the considerable appeal of its manifesto (Harding 2006; Nordquist and Whittaker 2007; Kristiansen and Larsson 2007). Finally, our interpretations of prehistoric symbols must fully acknowledge the complexity of symbols as a phenomenon. Most importantly, we must recognize that symbols, through their building of metaphorical relationships, always tend to bridge and transcend modern conceptual spheres such as those of religion or ritual. This means that the *a priori* privileging of these spheres in our examination of networks of contextual association is likely to be unrealistic – just because a symbol is religious in one context does not necessarily mean it is religious in all contexts.

Although this study has concentrated on the evidence from the Neopalatial period, on the evidence reviewed in this study it is possible tentatively to suggest that as the Late Bronze Age proceeded the symbol of the Double-Axe lost its wider significance and became increasingly a symbol confined to the religious sphere, until, by the time of its appearance in the

LM IIIB Shrine of the Double-Axes at Knossos, it was far removed from its Neopalatial meaning. Perhaps this is just what we might expect from such a prevalent symbol when the social structure to which it had been closely related disappeared or changed beyond recognition.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- CMS** *Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel* (Berlin). The CMS series is organized into volumes by museum and collection – denoted by the Roman numeral. Where more than one volume is dedicated to a museum/collection or group of museums/collections the Roman numeral can either be followed by a full stop and an Arabic numeral or by a supplement number. The full volume number will be followed, after a space, by an Arabic numeral denoting the item number within the volume. For a good guide to the CMS volumes see Krzyszkowska 2005, appendix 1.
- DM/DB** Duncan Mackenzie's day book of the Knossos excavation (Ashmolean Museum/British School at Athens archive).

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