

The Character of Minoan Epiphanies

Author(s): NANNO MARINATOS

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The Character of Minoan Epiphanies

NANNO MARINATOS

I. Introduction

How does one begin to discuss the problem of Epiphany in a culture that has left no comprehensible written records behind? Written documents are not everything, however, and the Minoans have bequeathed to posterity a series of exquisite gold rings engraved with scenes of a religious character. The material from which the rings are made and the sophistication of their engraving indicate that they were luxury items owned by the privileged elite.

This paper will explore the rituals of invocation and the resulting visions of deities that are represented on the rings. It will question some of the prevailing assumptions about the so-called tree cult and will address the social implications of the fact that only a few privileged people could have owned rings.

II. The Shaking of a Tree

One type of Minoan religious scene shows a man or a woman shaking a tree. Ever since Sir Arthur Evans, the excavator of Knossos and the founder of Minoan studies, these scenes have been linked to the phenomenon of "ecstatic epiphany."¹ Let us start with Evans' description of one ring found in a tomb at Vapheio, Peloponnesus (Figure 1):²

On the left of the Goddess a male attendant plucks a fruit from the sacred tree... this is a special ritual moment. It is the juice of the sacred fruit, like the *Soma* of the Vedas, that supplies the religious frenzy, and at the same time implies a communion with the divinity inherent in the tree.

¹ Evans 1901: 99-204; Nilsson 1950: 398-99.

² Evans 1930: 142.



1. Ring: Vapheio. CMS I, 219.

Three points are of interest in Evans' interpretation. First that the man shaking the tree is a mortal in a state of religious frenzy; second that if a worshipper touches the tree, he/she sees a deity; third that the figure in the center is a goddess. The word frenzy may require re-examination and there is no evidence that the juice of the fruit was collected, as Evans thought. These remarks apart, he was essentially correct in his perception.

Twenty years later, the Swedish scholar M. P. Nilsson wrote about the same ring:³

There is a tree resting upon an unidentifiable construction and a man is touching a branch of it with energetic movement. In the middle there is a woman in a flounced skirt apparently dancing; she extends her left arm at full length and holds her right arm upwards...

Nilsson differs from Evans in that he identifies the central figure as a mortal. If the epiphany of a goddess were intended, he argues, "it is more than astonishing that the votaries should turn their backs on her; consequently she is to be understood as a devotee performing a sacred

³ Nilsson 1950: 275.

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dance in the tree cult."⁴ Nilsson adds the interpretation that all the figures (whom he identifies as mortals) are dancing in an excited and violent movement. About the Mycenae ring (Figure 2) he writes:⁵

• To the right there is a man in energetic movement; almost kneeling and turning his head around, he grasps and bends down the stem of a tree which rises from the construction... In the middle is a woman with flounced skirt and open bodice with her hands held towards her waist. This attitude belongs to the dance.



2. Ring: Mycenae. CMS, 126.

He concludes that we see here an ecstatic or orgiastic scene of the tree cult together with dancing. He repeats his conviction that the figure in the middle is a not a goddess but a mortal.⁶

Friedrich Matz followed Nilsson and was of the opinion that the central female figures were mortals.⁷ For these scholars there was no anthropomorphic epiphany involved in the ritual of the shaking of the tree.

⁴ Nilsson 1950: 278.

⁵ Nilsson 1950: 276-77.

⁶ Nilsson 1950: 277.

In more recent years, however, the pendulum has swung again to Evans' side. The central figure next to the man or woman bending the tree has been recognized as divine. The discovery of the Archanes ring on Crete (Figure 3) aided this identification.



3. Ring: Archanes. CMS V suppl. 1A, 142.

John and Effi Sakellarakis, who found it, argued that the central figure is a goddess, whereas Wolf-Dietrich Niemeier provided systematic argumentation by creating a typological classification and analysis of all the relevant scenes.^{*}

An even more recent discovery provides absolute proof of Evans's view that the central figures are divine. A ring excavated in a tomb at Poros,

⁷ Matz 1958: 392, says that the figure on the Vapheio ring is a dancing worshipper.

Sakellarakis and Sapuna-Sakellaraki 1997: 658; Niemeier 1989: 174. I have previously argued that these figures were high priestesses but no longer believe that (Marinatos 1993: 185). Recent discussions in Wedde 1992: 181–203 and Cain 2001: 27–49.

near modern Herakleion in Crete by Nota Dimopoulou, shows one more instance of a man shaking a tree (Figure 4).⁹

The ring merits detailed description. A minute figure floating in the sky is depicted in the upper left section of the field. The gender is female to judge from her skirt with horizontal stripes. She faces a large goddess who is shown as seated but is nevertheless hovering in mid-air. The seated divinity is flanked by two flying birds; the iconography has a parallel on a ring impression from Knossos.¹⁰ How can a seated goddess hover? The lack of a throne makes the representation paradoxical and suggests that it is a *vision*. At the center is a male figure standing on a podium.¹¹ The excavators suggest he is a god, and this is probably right. Thus we have here two if not three divine figures: the only unquestionable mortal is the man who shakes a tree on the side of the ring's impression.



4. Ring. Poros. After Dimopoulou and Rethemiotakis 2000.

To sum up: First, the figures who shake the tree are mortals not gods; second, tree-shaking (or bending) results in divine presence (Figures 1-4). Note that the ritual may be depicted as an activity in its own right (on a seal

^oDimopoulou and Rethemiotakis 2000: 39–56.

¹⁰ Evans 1928: 766, Figure 497; Marinatos 1993: 152, Figure 124; Dimopoulou and Rethemiotakis 2000: 47–48.

['] For a parallel see Rethemiotakis 2001: 168, Figure 4.

not a ring), which means that it was a ritual action of some importance (Figure 5).¹²

However, the issue of tree worship has yet to be addressed. How is the divinity summoned? I would argue that it does not signify tree cult as Evans and Nilsson and others thought, driven by their conviction that Minoan religion had primitive traits." There is no cult of the tree on our rings because the worshippers do not make offerings to it; they simply use it as a medium of communication.¹⁴ This too requires an explanation, however, because it is not evident why trees should have this function. In my view trees mark the habitat of gods on earth and constitute focal points of a sanctuary. They have a similar function in many religions (certainly so in the Hebrew Bible cf. Deut. 12:12) even in modern times. On Crete itself, for example, there exists a monastery dedicated to Virgin Mary in which there is a sacred myrtle tree. It is said that the myrtle grew around her miraculous icon. We need only remind ourselves how many Greek gods have their own special tree: the oak belongs to Zeus, the olive to Athena, the laurel to Apollo, etc.

If trees were conceived as a temporary abode of deities, it is logical that gods appear in their vicinity.¹⁵ In Minoan Crete, the epiphany of a god is often linked visually with a tree as on a ring from Kavoussi (*CMS* II.3.305) where a hovering deity is greeted by a female figure. I have investigated the *locus* of epiphany elsewhere and will not pursue it here any further,¹⁶ except to mention that a structure is often built around the sacred plant and singles it out as *the* monument of the sanctuary (Figures 1-5).

¹² CMS XII, 264; Niemeier 1989: 177, Figure 5. 8.

¹³ Cf. Alexiou 1969: 89: "This establishes that trees were really worshipped."

⁴ Matz 1958: 407, 420.

¹⁵ Marinatos 1989: 127–43. In Greek religion gods perch on trees in the form of birds (Hom., *Il.* 7. 59; 14. 286–91).

⁶ Marinatos 1989: 127–43.



5. Seal. CMS XII, 264.

By bending or shaking the tree the worshipper attracts the deity's attention; this act does not constitute tree worship. It is rather a ritual denoting ecstasy.

The ecstatic worshippers may be of either sex. The deity may be a single anthropomorphic goddess, as on the rings of Vapheio, Mycenae and Archanes (Figures 1–3), or several gods, as on the Poros ring (Figure 4). The epiphanies are *witnessed by mortals and linked to rituals*. However, one remark is important: none of the figures bending the tree seem to gaze at the god directly. Even when their head is turned, they do not face the divine figure. Perhaps they hear the voices of gods or sense their presence. There is an explanation at hand: seeing the god may be dangerous. Hera says in the *Iliad* that gods are harsh when they appear clearly to men (20. 131). In *Exodus* 33. 17. 20, Yahweh warns Moses that he cannot see him, and live.

III. Sleeping on a Stone

We now turn to another ritual depicted on the rings where the worshipper is not active but passive. A man or woman kneels and rests his/her body on an oval rock. (Figures 6, 8–11).¹⁷ What does the posture signify? It has been interpreted as mourning by the founding fathers of Minoan religious studies. The imagery was interpreted in the light of Near Eastern myths and rituals relating to the death of the young god. The oval stone, according to Evans and A. W. Persson, represents the tomb of the dead god on which the mortal worshipper mourns.¹⁸ The above scholars were probably misled. Mourning is rarely expressed as a passive state of sorrow in ancient art. Instead, the mourners beat their chest or tear their cheeks and pull their hair.¹⁹ We now turn to the more widely spread interpretation that the kneeling figures worship a *baetyl*. Nilsson, for example, interpreted them sometimes as mourners and other times as worshippers; perhaps he did not quite make up his mind.²⁰ Behind his theories was the unspoken assumption that stone worship is primitive and animistic.²¹ I would like to argue that there is no more stone worship than there is tree cult.

On Figure 6, a seal stone from Knossos, we see a woman resting her body and head against a rock.²² This stance can be plausibly interpreted as sleep, rather than mourning or worship.²³ Although each culture develops its own visual codes, a comparison with medieval painting may be helpful because it reveals similar conventions: a sleeper has a dream vision as he reclines against a rock. A crucial feature is the resting position of the head, for no sleeper will hold his head erect.

¹⁸ Evans 1930: 461; Persson 1942: 39.

¹⁹ Examples can be found in Ancient Greek, Egyptian and Near Eastern art: Vermeule 1979. There are exceptions in Greek art as when a female figure expresses her sorrow by leaning her head and resting it on her hand (Vermeule 1979: 162, Figure 15), or Eos sorrowing over Memnon: Boardman 1974: Figure 154. Never do these figures kneel.

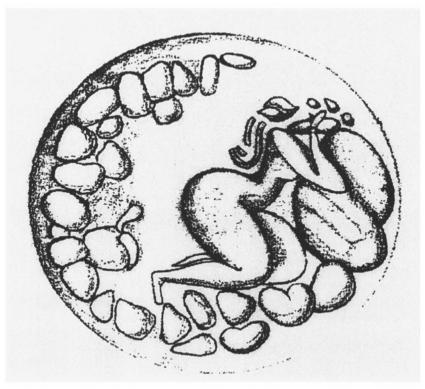
²⁰ Nilsson 1950: 256–59. See also 342–43 and 403–04 where Nilsson is somewhat critical of Evans. However on p. 277 he says that he accepts Evans' interpretation.

Warren 1990: 193-206 with bibl.; see also Wedde 1992: 189.

²² Warren 1990: 199, Figure 14, interprets the stone as a *baetyl* which may be the right designation if we consider the latter as a mere cult-monument, a location where gods may appear. We must resist the temptation to interpret *baetyls* as evidence of primitive animistic religion.

I owe this suggestion to D. Kyrtatas.

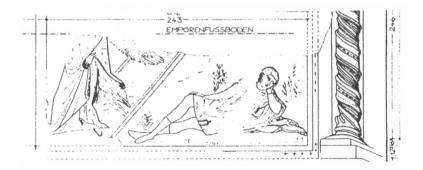
¹⁷ The oval rock (cf. Sourvinou-Inwood 1971: 68; 1973: 155) is associated with vegetation, a feature which probably denotes plants behind the rock but which has led Warren 1984: 18 to interpret it as a "squill." Decisive objections against Warren's interpretation have been advanced by Jung 1989: 91–109.



6. Seal. Knossos.

Figure 7 is a sketch of a painting of Jacob's dream from the church of Santa Cecilia, Rome. It shows Jacob asleep having a dream vision of God's angel. He rests his head but he is not lying down; his posture resembles that of the woman on the seal (Figure 6). A different formula of western medieval and Byzantine art entails a visionary (St. John at Patmos, for example) turning his head around and seeing a supernatural vision.²⁴

²⁴ Huber 1995: 111.



7. Fresco. Jacob's dream. Santa Cecilia, Rome.

These visual formulas in medieval art illustrate the importance of supernatural visions and how artists sought to express them. Viewed in this broad context, the Minoan sleeper on the stone is a comprehensible visual template.

Sleep is a state that induces vision because it is connected with dreams. This explains why on most of the Minoan rings the head of the worshipper is turned backwards towards the deity: the dreamer "sees" the god and even greets him/her by an extended arm (Figures 9–11). Let us now turn to the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis 28:11–13, Jacob has a vision of God (italics mine):

And he [Jacob] took one of the stones of the place, and *put it under his head, and lay down in that place to sleep.* And *he dreamed.* And behold, a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, Jehovah stood above it... (ASV; see Figure 7).

Attention to the vision is drawn by the verb *idou* ("behold") in the Septuagint translation of the text. The verb need not be taken literally as "seeing." Nevertheless, it is a pointer to the vision and may be viewed as the verbal equivalent of the device of the turned head of the worshipper on the Minoan rings. Most striking is the presence of the stone in both the dream and the rings. Jacob sleeps on a stone; when he wakes up he anoints it with oil and calls it the House of God: *Bet-el* (*baetyl*; Gen 28:19).



8. Ring. Kalyvia near Phaistos. CMS II.3.314.

The rock on Minoan rings was in all likelihood a cult monument (*Kultmal*) within sanctuaries and (like the tree) it designated a holy spot.²⁵ This was the place where the deity might appear, just as the *abaton* was the designated place where the patient saw the god in his sleep in the later Greek sanctuaries of Asclepius or the hero Amphiaraus (Herodotus 8. 134; see also Bravo in this volume).

Note that the tree and rock associated rituals may co-exist in one and the same scene (Figures 3, 8, 9). Were the rituals complementary? It seems that they depict two alternative forms of prophecy: ecstasy and incubation.

²⁵ Similar cult monuments consisting of stones or *stelae* are characteristic of Near Eastern hypaethral sanctuaries: Mettinger 1995: 129. The Hittite *huwasi* stones are of special interest. Note that all the female worshippers resting against a rock wear a simple skirt that contrasts with the flounced garment of the goddesses they see. According to Persson 1942: 32, 36, some of the figures are kneeling against a *pithos*. See also Hood 1971: 138; Sourvinou-Inwood 1973. The *pithos* identification is rejected by Niemeier 1989: 17–175.

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One (the shaking of the tree) involves possession of the body. The other (sleeping on a rock) entails a passive state although the spirit may be wandering. There is a further distinction: only the sleepers may gaze at the gods, whereas the figures who shake a tree never do. This is evident when we look at the rings from Archanes and Kalyvia where both rituals occur (Figures 3, 8). The distinction between those who see—the sleeping figures—and those who sense or hear the divine presence—the shakers of the tree—is evident.

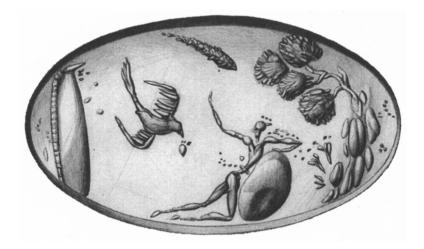
IV. The Nature of the Vision

What do the humans experience if they shake the tree or sleep? The experiences vary. Sometimes there is a single goddess who stands in the center, as in the rings from Vapheio (Figure 1), Mycenae (Figure 2) and Archanes (Figure 3). On the Poros ring (Figure 4) the man who shakes the tree sees several deities. The narratives differ and this is perhaps what makes each vision special and unique.

In what form do the mortals see the gods? On Figs. 1-4 the divinities are anthropomorphic. But why do the goddesses have their hands on the hips or have one arm extended (Figures 1-3)? I follow Evans' suggestion that the gesture indicates a twirl of the type that dervishes engage in.²⁶ While Evans thought of the twirl as a dance. I rather think that it is the slowed-down phase of the swirling movement of gods who have just descended from the air like whirlwinds. Alternatively, the adorant sees deities as stationary images in their own sphere, as on the Poros ring, where the seated goddess hovers above a crocus field facing a god/statue on a podium (Figure 4). However, what mortals see is not always an anthropomorphic vision. On the Sellopoulo and Phaistos/Kalyvia rings (Figures 8 and 9), the men who lean on a stone see birds (see Burkert in this volume). On the Archanes ring (Figure 3) the vision includes two dragonflies and other symbols such as an eye next to an oversized goddess. Dragonflies seem to be important: on a ring imprint from Zakros (Figure 10) the visionary sees one huge dragonfly. On a similar impression from Hagia Triada (Figure 11) a woman sees a pair of dragonflies and a sacred garment (perhaps a skirt).

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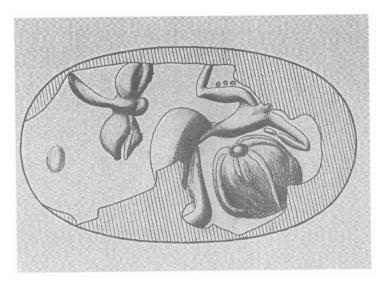
²⁶ Evans 1930: 71, Figure 40. Evans says about the figure on the Vapheio ring, 141: "[the goddess] seems to be whirling around . . ." The late A. Furumark also made this suggestion in a public lecture delivered at the Swedish Institute, Athens in the 1980s.



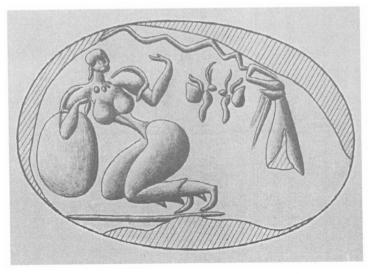
9. Ring. Selopoulo. CMS Archives IIS - 1034.

The key to the dragonflies maybe is to be found on a wall painting from Santorini/Thera, which represents a Minoan goddess with a dragonfly necklace around her neck.²⁷

²⁷ Marinatos 1993: 151, Figure 122. Good picture in Doumas 1992: 162-63.



10. Ring impression. Zakros. CMS II. 7. 6.



11. Ring Impression. Hagia Triada. CMS archive.

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Whether the insect was considered a manifestation of the deity or a messenger cannot be decided.

V. How Idiosyncratic is Minoan Epiphany?

In Greek art, epiphanies are rarely represented as minute figures arriving from the sky, although the Dioscuri on classical vases may appear as minute riders arriving from afar. This has a superficial similarity to the descending gods on Minoan rings.²⁸ Most commonly, epiphanies are represented on votive reliefs from the fourth century B.C.E. onwards.²⁹ There, gods appear next to the altar in most cases and more rarely during a banquet. Thus, banqueting and sacrifice in Greek religious art are the principal rituals that lead to epiphany (see also J. Bravo in this volume). In short, one invites god to dinner and he or she appears. This ritual pattern differs from the Minoan shaking of the tree, although the tree of Zeus at Dodona may be a parallel (Hom., Od. 14, 327-29; 19, 297; Hdt. 2, 52, 57).³⁰ The differences however are not as substantive as they may seem at first. Ecstatic possession is a feature of Greek religion even though prophecy is rarely depicted and certainly not on the aforementioned reliefs. Incubation rituals are depicted sometimes. In short, the difference between Minoan and Greek religion lies not so much in the nature of the phenomena as in the choice of the mode of representation and in the media of depiction.

VI. Conclusions: Rings as Insignia of Privilege

Minoan scenes with visions of the divine occur only on rings of the New Palace period, never on public monumental art, such as wall paintings. Each ring had its own unique iconography and each was a personal item. However, since rings were used to seal documents, the imprints they made would have been viewed by a broader group. This group would have understood the images better than us because they had access to the cultural code that we are lacking. The public would also have identified the owner

 ²⁹ Hermary 1986 (*LIMC* III.2): 465, n. 112; also J. Bravo and W. Burkert in this volume.
²⁹ In sacrificial scenes the gods are often represented as replicas of their cult image (van Straten 1995: Figure 4). On other occasions gods are shown in person seated inside their temple (van Straten 1995: 207, V78, Figure 13). On more rare occasions, the god is shown both as alive and a cult image. On a red figure Apulian vase of about 400 B.C.E., we see Dionysos reclining on the upper register, surrounded by Maenads and satyrs. On the lower level we see women offering sacrifice and dancing around an archaic cult statue (van Straten 1995; 105, Figure 111).

The passage in Hdt. 2. 52. 57, implies that divination was inspired by birds who may have been concealed in the foliage of the oak tree and their singing was understood only by gifted prophetesses.

of the ring as a person of privileged status. It is not easy to define this status as a priestly one because we do not know exactly how priesthood was defined in Minoan palatial society of the second millennium B.C.E. Nevertheless, we can surmise that the social elite was involved in the religious theocratic structure.

It is time to revise the idea of ecstatic vegetation cults, orgiastic dances and the Mother Goddess that have dominated Minoan studies since the first quarter of the twentieth century. Indeed, such notions may (and should) be dying a slow death in the light of new evidence.

University of Illinois at Chicago

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Nanno Marinatos

ABBREVIATION

CMS Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel. 1964–. Berlin.

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