

Minoan Religion **Carl Seaquist**

(Slide 1) Welcome to Carl Seaquist's lecture on Minoan Religion. In this lecture, I begin by pointing to some of the ways that religions in the ancient world differed from those of today. I then briefly discuss one religious text in Linear A, but the remainder of the lecture focuses on archaeological and iconographic evidence, since we can't really read Cretan scripts prior to Linear B, and that takes us into the Mycenaean world.

(Slide 2) Religions in the ancient world tended to lack features that are particularly important to people in the modern world. Often they did not have fixed, sacred texts that were central to the self-identity of the religious tradition in the same way that, for example, the Bible is central to Christianity. They tended not to have centralized hierarchies or religious leaders, or orthodox sets of beliefs that those leaders were tasked with enforcing. Religions were not viewed as sources for systems of ethics, and they tended not to be elective, meaning that participation did not require membership that could be sought or earned.

(Slide 3) Notice the number times I have used the words "tend to." There are exceptions to all of these generalizations, but those exceptions only serve to emphasize the general patterns from which they differ. The Israelites had a sacred corpus of texts – in fact the Hebrew Scriptures are a portion of the Christian Bible, what Christians call the Old Testament and Jews call the Tanakh. But the books of the Tanakh were not originally viewed as a closed canon of scripture. The notion of a canon evolved over time: first the books known as the Pentateuch or Torah came to be viewed as a unit, then the Prophets were added, and general agreement was reached on what remaining books should compose the canon only in the Hellenistic period and into the first centuries of the Christian era. Religion took on different shapes during the Hellenistic period than it had earlier: elective membership in associations that modern scholars call "cults" was basically a Hellenistic innovation. Ethical principles seem to have played a key role in the Zoroastrian religion of Persia, and the norms established by particular religions served as fuel for ethical speculation in a number of traditions, but that's a far cry from the modern view that one reason for religious faith is that it provides believers with a consistent set of ethics. In fact, a common refrain of the early Greek philosophers was precisely that traditional Greek religion was basically immoral.

(Slide 4) So when we study religion in the ancient world, we need to be careful of what assumptions and expectations we bring to our study. That's true not just for the Bronze Age, but in fact for much of the ancient period. That said, the study of Minoan and Mycenaean religions requires particular care due to the nature of our evidence. We don't know the languages of ancient Crete, so we can't rely on any written records from the Minoans – the only Bronze Age texts that we can read from Crete are in Mycenaean Greek, at the very end of the Bronze Age civilizations of Crete. So we're stuck trying to understand Minoan religion from the physical remains that have survived. This means we know a fair amount about the visual symbols they used, but we don't know how they understood or interpreted them. For the Mycenaeans, we have the same kinds of physical (archaeological) evidence, and we also have written texts that we can read. But these are basically accounting records, so we know a lot about the types of things that were provided to the gods and their servants, but again, we don't have sacred texts or anything that interprets the religion for us.

(Slide 5) What exceptions exist to these generalizations are quite unsatisfying. For example, a text that occurs in a number of Linear A versions (yes, Linear A, the Cretan language that we can't read) has been

partially translated. Called the “Libation Formula” by scholars, it reads something like the following: “(1) Oh, (2) at Mount Dikte, (3) Piteri and Akoane (4) dedicate [this] (5) to Jasasara, (6) something, (7) something, (8) something.” How can we translate a text in a language we don’t know? Well, we know the approximate phonetic values of many of the Linear A signs, because they also occur in Linear B, so we can frequently read (that is, pronounce) names. We can also intuit the grammatical role of some words, particularly in formulaic contexts, for example we know that Dikte is a mountain, so in the formula it probably indicates a location. The verb seems to imply giving or offering, or something like that, and the first word in the formula seems to introduce a formula, so it is translated (very loosely) with the English “Oh!” I have added the numbers in parentheses to make it easier to refer to the translation. Elements (2) and (3) vary from one inscription to another, whereas (1) and (4) through (8) are always the same. Note that we don’t have any idea what the final three words mean, so really all we’re able to do is read names and guess at words (1) and (4) based on the fact that it seems to be some kind of dedicatory inscription. How much does an inscription like this help us understand the religious beliefs of the Minoans? Not a lot, I’m afraid, though it’s kind of cool that we can understand even this much of the formula.

(Slide 6) We can make some general claims about the “realia” of Minoan religion, in other words the physical remains themselves, and we can draw very provisional conclusions from them. Scholars identify particular sites as being religious sites based on the objects found in them, and then they generalize about religious practices based on the combinations of those objects that are found in particular places, and their relationship to other, secular, sites. There’s a danger that this method is circular, and in any case, how do we know that a particular object had a religious function when we don’t know what that function was, or have an independent way of establishing that it was religious in the first place? It turns out that different scholars can interpret the same evidence in very different ways, so these are real concerns. Still, knowledge of later Mediterranean religions, and more generally, the results of the comparative study of religion give us at least some reason to believe that such arguments are not completely circular.

(Slide 7) Objects viewed as having religious functions include symbolic objects, cultic offerings, and implements. Symbolic objects either found on Crete or portrayed in Minoan art include double-headed axes, figurines, and objects called by scholars “horns of consecration.” Axes are practical objects, but sometimes practical objects have symbolic uses. In Cretan palaces, it seems that in certain rooms axes were put on display by being inserted into stone bases set in the floor of the room. The display of such axes was clearly symbolic, and it is only a small leap to assume they had religious meanings, since double-axes are also prominent in pictorial portrayals of evidently ritualistic actions.

(Slide 8) Figurines are by definition representations of real things, so their use is necessarily symbolic rather than practical. On Crete, figurines of animals and people are found. A real ox can be eaten, or used to plow a field, but a figurine of an ox can be used for neither purpose. Figurines are often found in stashes – a group of them is often found close together. Perhaps these were play-chests, and the figurines merely dolls for children, but most scholars assume they are religious objects. Differences of opinion exist as to whether human figurines represent gods in human form, or their mortal worshippers. A commonly held belief is that in many ancient societies, worship of goddesses was more prevalent than in later societies. Support for this view is found in the fact that many figurines from the Neolithic onward represent women with very large breasts – this is interpreted as representing forces of birth and renewal. I won’t address this topic any further here, but anyone who dips into the literature will quickly encounter such theories.

Horns of consecration do not, unlike figurines, portray particular objects in a self-evident way – they are not, in the language of semiotics, “iconic.” But they are commonly found, both as realia and in pictures. They are basically rectangles with a concave indentation is carved in the upper surface so that they look like bovine horns, or those of some other animal. These were frequently used as decorations on the roofs of buildings, and are also found in tombs and shrines. If the theory is correct that they represent the horns of bulls then they are in fact iconic, and probably associated symbolically with attested examples of the ritualistic sacrifice of cattle. But that’s far from certain.

(Slide 9) These are just three illustrations of objects commonly found in Cretan sites that scholars identify as having religious significance. They tend to be found in a finite number of contexts. Certain rooms in Minoan palaces are identified as cult rooms because they contain such objects, but since it’s not clear that sacred and secular were distinct functions in the Bronze Age Aegean, identifying these rooms as cultic doesn’t preclude the possibility that they also had political, or personal, functions as well. For example, one type of room found in a number of the palaces is known to scholars as a “pillar crypt.” This room-type has a pillar (sometimes two), about six feet tall, in its middle, on which are often incised double axes and other religious symbols. Double axes or horns of consecration could also be set in these rooms, and they often had side rooms that served to store ritual objects such as figurines. Another common feature of palaces that scholars think had religious significance were so-called “lustral basins,” in other words, bathtubs, which occurred in rooms that appear to have been public. Minoans were good plumbers, and they had real bathtubs in residential areas as well, but in public spaces lustral basins are assumed to have more ritualistic functions.

(Slide 10) Another type of place that apparently had a religious function is what scholars call “peak sanctuaries.” These are found near the tops of hills or mountains, sometimes but not always quite far removed from settlements. These tend to have large quantities of figurines and also a related type of object, sculpted human body parts. Peak sanctuaries are also the sites of altars, which can have Linear A inscriptions. These altars appear to have been used for libations, or the sacrifice of liquids by pouring them out. Animal sacrifice is clearly documented as well in Crete, and some scholars have argued that the Minoans also practiced human sacrifice. Other places to which religious actions are attributed are caves and burial sites. It was not uncommon in the ancient world to leave objects with the deceased, and in fact undisturbed graves are one of the main sources of luxury goods from the Bronze Age. Grave robbing was a common practice in the ancient world because the graves of the wealthy could include objects of gold and ivory, of functional arms and armor, and other things of value. The clearest sign that the ancients were worried about grave robbing were the elaborate steps taken by Egyptian pharaohs to hid their bodies, and the incantations found in graves announcing curses on grave robbers.

(Slide 11) All the things I have described thus far may be taken to describe Minoan religion before the imposition of Greek culture. The Mycenaeans adopted a variety of symbols associated with Minoan religion. The Swedish scholar Robin Hägg has argued that there were three phases of Cretan influence on mainland religion. In the 16th century BC, Minoan objects were imported, but these were deposited in graves rather than shrines. Hägg takes this change in use or function to mean that the objects were treated as luxury goods, signs of wealth, but that the religious meaning was not adopted and perhaps not even understood. In the 15th century BC, Minoan religious iconography was heavily borrowed, and from evidence that the upper classes of the two societies had greater contact than earlier, Hägg hypothesizes that the Mycenaeans might have understood and perhaps adopted some of the beliefs that went along with these symbols. In the remaining centuries of the Bronze Age, the Mycenaeans seem to have stopped adopting Minoan elements, though by this time some symbols had become

naturalized as a part of the religion of the mainland. During the Mycenaean dominance of Crete, some Minoan elements may have even been reintroduced into Crete, perhaps with their meaning changed.

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