



Review

NANNO MARINATOS

MINOAN KINGSHIP AND THE SOLAR GODDESS: A NEAR EASTERN *KOINE*

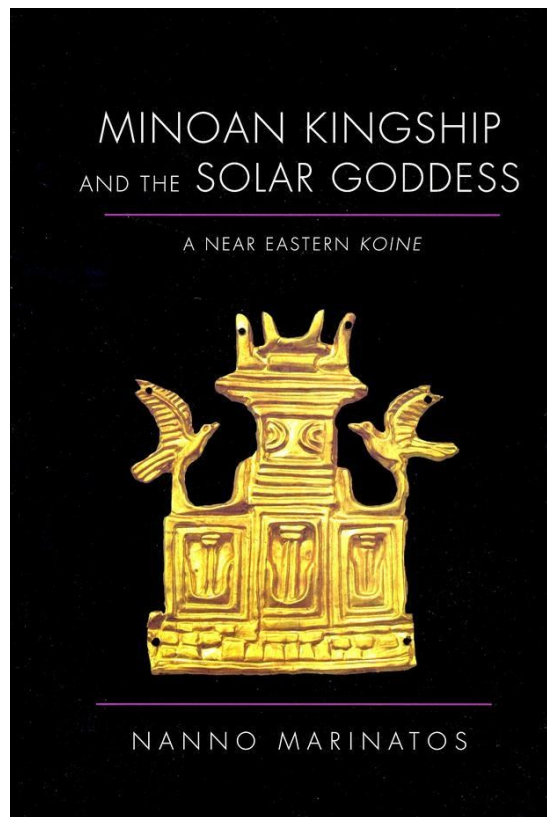
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Nanno Marinatos' exciting new book could not be more important for showing us how to understand the ideological infrastructure of Minoan Crete and, to a lesser extent, Mycenaean Greece, and to see their place in the larger world of the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East. In this way she is stepping over the modern national boundaries (think passports, security, illegal immigration, etc.) that often cripple our approach to a past that was free of them — or which had different boundaries and different political units.

Marinatos will force all working in the Aegean to re-think their attitudes, now pretty jejune or naïve thanks to her, to kingship, divinity and the roles of men and women in the world of the Minoan “palaces”, which continued with fairly few changes into the Mycenaean culture. She does this by comparing the iconography of the Aegean with those of Egypt and the Near East, and their texts, in a book that will resonate far more for Aegeanists than for those working further east, to whom the comparanda will be familiar.

To explicate the intimate linking of political authority and religion in the Minoan world, Marinatos re-locates Crete and its



palaces in their rightful position as part of a sweep — a *koine* — of such buildings and the social systems they embodied that stretched from the Near East and Egypt to the island of Crete, at the western end of this phenomenon. Since there is virtually no help from the Minoan and Mycenaean texts (which are almost all tax returns, inventories and distribution lists), she achieves this by examining and deconstructing the religious iconography of the Minoans and the Mycenaean through comparisons with Egypt and the Near East. As a result, she shows a society in Crete where a king ruled, with temporal power and as high priest, with the aid of a sun goddess whom he alone was in the position to face directly and receive her beneficence; and on death, he became divine.

At Knossos, it was the king, Marinatos argues, who sat on the throne in the Throne Room rather

than the goddess or priestess/princess/queen (or any combination of such persons) of the most favoured current interpretation. She points out the close similarity of the spatial arrangement of the Throne Room suite to its equivalent at Mari, while the wall paintings flanking the throne (which itself is shaped as a symbolic [holy] mountain, and has a sun-and-moon

motif carved immediately below the seat) show palm trees, half-roses and griffins, all with sacred meaning and adding to the close association of the king and the solar goddess. This reinforces the point made some years ago by both Joseph W. Shaw and Lucy Goodison that this suite was situated where it is so that the early morning sun could reach in and illuminate it.

As for the often-mentioned apparent lack of temples on Crete, Marinatos resolves this by establishing the palaces as the “houses of god” (or shrines), with particular focus on the Throne Room, which has clear equivalents — similar rooms/suites in the same position at the north end of the west side of the palace’s central court — at Malia, Phaistos and Zakros. This view can be extended to the “city of god”, as seen notably in the “Master Impression” sealing from Khania with a guardian god standing on top of a town (whose architecture is closely similar to that on the paintings from Thera). But there is also another type of Minoan shrine, the open air sanctuary, as seen in the scenes on gold rings — and Marinatos rightly stresses that their being of gold marks their palatial and sacral authority — and on sacral vessels such as the carved stone rhyton, originally covered in gold leaf, from Zakros (showing a shrine in rocky mountains, with goats and birds), and actually found on several Cretan mountains, notably the dominant mountain of Juktas a few kilometers south of Knossos.

A key feature of both these types of shrine/house of god is the U-shaped mountain symbol that is frequent in Minoan art and architecture, which Sir Arthur Evans, the excavator of Knossos who formed our notions of Minoan Crete, called “horns of consecration”, seeing them as stylised bulls’ horns. Marinatos prefers stylised mountains, through which the sun can rise, often in an emblematic way as a double-headed axe — that is, the “double axe” again frequent in Minoan iconography, often blended with the ankh sign, and shown both in the underworld (including the sea, another prominent theme for the Minoans) and the sky, or found guarding the storerooms of Knossos. The double axe can now be interpreted as a symbolic sun emerging from the horizon — which *inter alia* brings us back again to the significance of the Throne Room.

These are a few examples of the riches of this book’s analysis of the Minoan *kosmos* through iconographic parallels from the Near East and Egypt, that can often be illuminated by their texts (Babylonian, Egyptian, Hittite, Ugaritic and from the Old Testament) as well as by Homer and other Classical Greek authors (although Marinatos is careful to point out that they are not, and cannot be, describing precisely what happened in the Aegean in the Bronze Age; but the analogies are helpful).

It is an exhilarating book, breezily written with a hands-on approach to the material. Having taken the Minoan palaces as conforming to a Near Eastern social model, she gives a new view (although she might say that it is really neo-revolutionary, since it is an old one revived) of how these buildings and their theocratic

societies worked. Her analysis of the different symbols is internally consistent — which must have been hard, but is most impressive and convincing — and comprehensive, revealing much thought to (re-)create this worldview.

It will probably annoy pedantic scholars. So be it. The next stage now is for Marinatos to write a large book on the same theme, one that will cover the intricacies and problematic details that from time to time in this book need more arguing or refining — for instance, the best date in Minoan ceramic terms for the fall of the Palace of Knossos. Marinatos brightly links this with the lack of mention of Keftiu in the Amarna correspondence, but one might add in (as cause, effect or symptom) a possible transfer of commercial power from Knossos to the Argolid (in so far as the Aegean pottery found there seems to be all from the Argolid). And not all will agree on the importance given to presumed earthquakes as the causes of the destructions in Crete, including that of 14th century BCE Knossos.

But these are minor issues compared to the main thrust of this exciting and cheering book. It is exciting that Marinatos forces us to rethink our material and re-formulate our notions of the Aegean societies. And it is cheering that Marinatos talks forthrightly about “religion” rather than concentrating on “ritual”, the weasel-word substitute that is now so fashionable as it seems, I think, to distance the archaeologist from suggestions that she/he might actually believe in religion and God! Heaven forbid! Whatever Marinatos’ views about God (which I do not know), it is plain she has no doubts about religion as something far more profound than the performative elements of ritual, important though they are, and not least for the Minoans, as she constantly points out.

Cheering too is her rehabilitation of Sir Arthur Evans as someone who understood the Minoan culture both in itself and as part of the wider Eastern Mediterranean, and was generally (but not always) probably right. And her robust, if implicit, proclamation of the strength of old approaches to Minoan Crete and its religion and society, when used sensitively today, is a lesson for all in a time when interpretations are so heavily influenced by anthropological studies of probably simpler societies. These are of course often helpful, and we have come a long way in discoveries and interpretations since the first decade of the 20th century when so many big finds were made in Crete, but it is wise to recall that the pioneers of Cretan Bronze Age archaeology were confronted with mountains of material and had to make first-hand sense of it as best they could. Of course, they had some preconceptions, but they were probably fewer than we have today. How well they did. Sir Arthur would be delighted with Nanno Marinatos’ book, as would her father, Spyridon Marinatos, excavator of Crete, Messenia and Thera.