



## INSIGHTS INTO EGYPTIAN HORUS FALCON IMAGERY BY WAY OF REAL FALCONS AND HORUS FALCON INFLUENCE IN THE AEGEAN IN THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE: PART II

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### Abstract

*Falcons were a part of everyday life in the Aegean but also appear in Minoan-Mycenaean art in cult capacity as attending a goddess, being the possible ba bird of a deceased person, and in symbolic ornaments of falcon shape with distinct falcon attributes of sharp talons, hooked beaks, and neck curls. These are possibly major signs of Egyptian influence reaching the Cyclades Islands as well as the Aegeanized Egyptian themes of Middle Bronze Age Minoan art. The bird part of Aegean griffins and griffin wings show distinct origins in falcon traits. The triangular hook markings of kestrels' underwing flight feathers are the basis of the "notched plume" wing pattern of Aegean griffins. The most suggestive presence of the Horus Falcon and the solar disk in the Aegean is the Middle Bronze Age Melos Island pottery bird designs where falcons have large red disk bodies resembling the solar disks of the Egyptian falcon gods.*

### Falcons in the Culture and Art of the Aegean and Egyptian Influence

#### FALCONS AS COMMON BIRDS ON THE AEGEAN ISLANDS AND THEIR DEPICTIONS

To grasp the significance of the falcon in the art and culture of the ancient Aegean, we must place falcons in the experiential context of the Aegean islanders' sea-bound world. Their world was full of birds, both resident and as great migratory waves passing through the islands in spring and autumn. We can assume birds of prey were abundant and were often observed by the islanders because of plentiful small bird prey. As late as the 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D., the traveler Andre Thevet, "passing through Crete in 1549, noted that birds of prey were abundant. They were hunted and killed for their feathers, used in making arrows, as well as for their skins, which were tanned."<sup>1</sup> Crete and some of the other Aegean islands have wetlands and lagoons that provide stop-over environments for feeding and resting during migratory flights – as pictured in the well-known "Reed Marsh" wall painting of Thera. These situations provided fertile grounds for appreciation of falcon imagery, foreign or local, and intimate

experience with falcons may have entailed exploiting trained captive falcons' hunting skills in providing passerine birds for the table.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike the stately Egyptian symbolic Horus falcons, life-like active falcons were more often pictured in Aegean art. One image of a lively falcon appears on a Cycladic ship in the Thera "Fleet" wall painting from the West House, Akrotiri.<sup>3</sup> The ship has a sickle-winged falconiform insignia placed on its bowsprit (to fit the marine context, this likeness may refer to the beautiful, long-tailed, sickle-wing-shape of an Eleonora's falcon, often seen gliding over the sea).<sup>4</sup> This insignia borrowed falcons' swift flight to speed the ship on its way, assisted by the leaping dolphins painted along the ship's hull sides. An image of a flock of swift-flying pigeons adorned the sides of another of these ships for a similar purpose.

As expressed in such images, for the islanders falcons were regarded as birds of everyday life, unlike in Egypt where the falcons' sacredness and powerful symbolism seem to have prohibited such everyday falcon representations in art.

**AEGEAN REPRESENTATIONS OF FALCONS WITH CULT IMPLICATIONS.**

Despite the everyday nature of the falcon in Aegean culture, Aegean perception of the numinous aspects of falcons is nevertheless evident in several images. Some of these are construable as evidence for Aegean thinking about the Egyptian godly Horus Falcon theme or at least thinking of falcons with a symbolic religious connection that may suggest awareness of Egyptian religious thought concerning falcons. Numerous examples of Aegean falcon depictions may be given:

*Falconiform gold ornaments.* From the Mycenaean Shaft Graves (Grave Circle A)<sup>5</sup> come gold repoussé ornaments in the form of pairs of falcons poised breast-to-breast. These have rear turned heads, accentuated hooked beaks and neck curls, together with clinched taloned feet, half-folded falcate wings and long falcon tails. Ten of these with top lugs were strung as a necklace, and several standing alone served as attachments (perhaps to funeral garments). The pose is not imaginary. These breast to breast falcons could refer to peregrines' courtship behavior where they perform aerial acrobatics; often their breasts nearly touch as the male passes a prey bird to the female flying inverted with breast up. The clinched toes of the repoussé falcons mimic the way attacking peregrines kill or stun prey by striking it with their clinched toes in a stoop flight.<sup>6</sup>

*Falcon attending a goddess in Tiryns' ring scene.* On the large gold signet finger ring (ca. 14<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.)<sup>7</sup> from the Tiryns Treasure, a large perched falcon is positioned just behind the throne back of an enthroned goddess as she receives offerings of liquid libations from a parade of four Minoan leonine geniuses (themselves derivative of the Egyptian Taweret). This falcon seems to parallel, in its attendance to a goddess, the griffin that stands behind the goddess in the Theran saffron presentation scene.<sup>8</sup>

*Falcon feathered arrows.* Giving concrete evidence for the use of birds-of-prey feathers in making arrows in Crete, as Sfikas noted,<sup>9</sup> two arrow butt models, in carved bone, were found in the Knossos Temple Repositories. In simulations two guide feathers (*fletches*) are attached to the cut-off arrow shafts with three sets of cord to each butt. The falcon connection of these feathers is that the black slanted triangle flight feathers markings ("notched plume") are carved into them, simulating real falcon's flight feathers. This marking pattern is derivative from the Common Kestrel's flight feathers (Figure 14). The original pattern's paint is lost, leaving only the triangular hook pattern raised in relief. Because these arrow butt models were found in the sacred Temple Repositories cult significance for them is that these were damaged cult equipment. The running "notch plume" pattern itself perhaps had cult significance. The same motif appears as an ornamental design on a LM IA tall stemmed ceramic cup and



Figure 14: Male Common Kestrel. The black slanting triangular 'hook' pattern of underwings' flight feathers of this species is the source of the Aegean griffins' so-called "notched plume" markings motif. Compare Figure 5. Photograph from Flickr Photostream.

ornamented other objects, possibly alluding to sacred falcons.

*Falcon design jugs.* The sealed Temple Repositories at Knossos preserved cult objects damaged in a fire and earthquake ca. 1700-1600 B.C., including the famous "Snake Goddess" statuettes. Included among these artifacts were several large jugs with falcon designs of a type found on Melos and presumably originating as offerings from Melos to the Knossos palace religious authorities. These jugs will be examined in detail below in terms of their possible Egyptian influence, but seem to have been regarded as so special as art and cult equipment as to constitute part of the cult treasure.

*Falcon "ba" bird.* A falcon possibly represents a type of "ba" bird in scenes of the Painted Sarcophagus from Ayia Triada (Figure 15). This is an equally religious scene in which two smiling goddesses, having just flown in on their two-griffin-drawn chariot, face a falcon hovering over the griffins' wing tips, directly before them. Made significant by a tall semicircular blue crest, the falcon may represent a "ba"-like form of the spirit of the occupant of the sarcophagus, with the heavenly goddesses arriving to fetch him. In another scene on the Painted Sarcophagus three men bring offerings of two bull effigies and a model boat to a mummy-form figure presumed to be the deceased standing before a tomb building, with a sacred tree growing beside it. This scene seems to echo Egyptian funeral rituals.<sup>10</sup>

*Falcon skirt motif.* Another scene with possible cultic connections is found in a priestess's skirt embroidered with falcons flying in a landscape.<sup>11</sup> This depiction was found on



fragments of a wall painting from Melos.<sup>12</sup> The heads of the birds are destroyed, but the wings have salient identifying features.

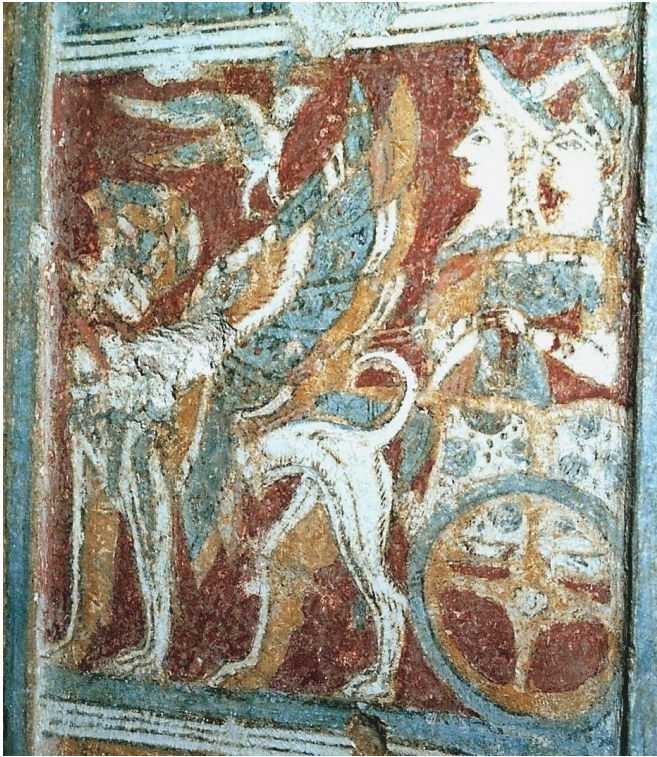


Figure 15: A fluttering falcon, with a tall blue crest, faces two goddesses riding in a griffin-drawn chariot. Detail of the Painted Sarcophagus from Ayia Triada, Crete. Photograph by Ray Porter, with permission of the Director of the Herakleion Museum.

These display the slanted triangle hook markings of falcon underwing feathers with dots interspersed along the flight feathers of the wings. The wings are also falcon-like in their sharp pointed falcate shape. These attributes clearly identify falcons, even specifically the Common Kestrels, as the birds pictured on the skirt.<sup>13</sup> Surviving are parts of two birds flying in opposite directions. The rear three-quarters of the right side bird remains. The tips of the two sharp pointed wings with flight feathers marked with the *black triangles and dotted pattern* and vague narrow tail, marked with small hooks, and the underbody show on the right side bird. Only two top feathers of the left side bird's upper wing with the triangles and dots show. There is a hint of the front rounded bend of the partly folded wing on the right side falcon beyond a void of a lost section. The typical Minoan vertically striped multicolor rockwork signifies the landscape setting. The artist was clearly depicting falcons. The painter showed us the underside of the body, tail and wings of an overflying falcon as one would see in life. The tail is long and narrow like falcons in hunting flight.

The significance of such falcons as decorative designs need not refer to the more violent falcons like the Peregrines and the Lanners. The Common Kestrel, a smallish falcon, nesting in holes in old house walls or under the eaves, in villages, feeding mostly on small mice and voles and large insects, would be a pleasant falcon to live with and to depict in decoration as in the goddess's skirt -- unless falcon aggressiveness, associated with the priestess's function, was the intended meaning of the skirt's bird design.<sup>14</sup>

#### THE FALCON PIXIS LID FROM MALIA

Of particular interest concerning falcons among the Egyptian-inspired Minoan Old Palace artifacts is a beautiful small (11 cm) round ceramic pixis lid adorned with a pair of flying falcons modeled in low relief (Figure 16). These probably represent Common Kestrels (Figure 17). The birds of the pixis lid are portrayed with wings spread as if positioned in the hovering hunting phase of flight, with the underwings showing. The wings are bent slightly downward at the wing carpal joint. The coverts are reduced to simple flat shapes that together with the birds' bodies form a V shape. The tails are fanned out in the



Figure 16: Minoan interpretation of an Egyptian-influenced falcon design in relief on a round ceramic pixis lid from Malia. The birds probably represent a pair of Common Kestrel falcons poised in a hunting posture. Photograph by Ray Porter, with permission of the Director of the Herakleion Museum.

position assumed when kestrels hover in the air, using their fanned out tails and beating wings for support in a slight head

wind before lunging for their prey sighted on the ground below (from a height of 10 to 20 m).<sup>15</sup> The heads are modeled as positioned in flight looking downward. The heads, beaks and eyes are clearly indicated in higher relief. The raised dark eyeballs even have a ring-form space around them to emphasize the eyes. Of the original paint surviving is a vague red wavy-edged landscape feature set between the birds, perhaps some blue in the background, and a thin red border. Perhaps the birds' bodies and wings originally had painted details, but only the plain terracotta relief remains.

The choice of a hunting falcon subject is indicative of the special status of falcons in Minoan life. The scene may be drawn from observations of living hunting kestrels and may depict a mated pair of kestrels as females and males often hunt in pairs, each concentrating on different kinds of prey. Both birds are represented at the same size, although in life the female Common Kestrel is 30 percent larger than the male.



Figure 17: Flying Common Kestrels in hunting posture with tails half fanned. Compare the Malia ceramic pixis lid with the pair of flying kestrels (Figure 16). Illustration from G. Handrinis and A. Demetropoulos. *Birds of Prey of Greece*. 1983, p. 169, detail. Permission to reproduce drawing, courtesy A. Demetropoulos.

The subject of this falcon decorated lid was most likely Egyptian inspired, however. It is from the Old Palace, Middle Minoan II *Quartier Mu* sector at Malia, the third largest Minoan palace. Malia's *Quartier Mu* is where a number of other Egyptian inspired artifacts were found. Since Egyptian imagery<sup>16</sup> most likely prompted the creation of these two spread-wing falcons, hunting is probably not the only reference. As the falcons are flying high in the sky with the sun, perhaps even suggested by the

circular shape of the lid, a connection with the solar disk comes to mind.

### The Egyptian Gold Falcon from Crete

A number of actual Egyptian artifacts found in the Aegean provide concrete evidence for Cretan/Egyptian contact and influence regarding falcons. Considered for the purposes of this article is a small 2 by 4 cm gold falcon likeness, of Egyptian manufacture, found on Crete and now in the British Museum (Figure 18). Worked in the Egyptian cloisonné technique, each flight feather of the wings is made into tiny cells to be filled with semiprecious stone inlays although all but one inlay is lost. The tail is rectangular, flaring outward at the tip. The wings' coverts are solid, and their feathers are narrow raised ribs worked in repoussé relief. The head, in the same technique, is simplified. The hooked beak and a slanted eye are clear. A large raised V shape descending from the eye definitely represents the moustachial streak, a feature that establishes the bird's falcon identity.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 18: Small Egyptian falcon ornament found in Crete, now in the British Museum. The falcon is in the protective position with wings outstretched and slanted downward. Photograph courtesy of the British Museum.

That the artist consciously accentuated the nostril on this falcon is important, as the nostrils are a key feature of Egyptian falcon images. Here it is specifically rendered as a single tiny ring nostril visible at the top above the base of the beak. This placement of the ring-form nostril above the beak base, for emphasis, is repeated in Egyptian Horus falcon representations. It was intended to mark the nostril's presence as indispensable to falcons' likenesses and perhaps to signify breathing (recall that the Horus Falcon's "breath is the cooling north winds"). The small gold falcon is posed in the extended wing "protective" posture like the painted Deir el Bahri falcon considered earlier. This small jewel-like falcon, perhaps a



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protective amulet, and possibly others like it, could be an Egyptian model for Aegean falcon theme imagery -- but not the earlier Melos falcon pottery designs now to be considered.

### THE MELOS FALCON PAINTED POTTERY

In the Middle Bronze Age Aegean, prominent depictions of falcons – or their derivative griffins - appeared in the art of the Cycladic Islands. Some particularly important examples of these pottery designs, previously little examined for bird species,<sup>18</sup> are found in the apparently previously unidentified falcon (and falcon inspired griffin) representations from the island of Melos (Figures 19-26).

The pottery style with the bird subjects, excavated at the town site of Phylakopi, Melos, is designated the “Black and Red” style and was particular to the Cycladic Island of Melos. It was produced during the Middle Bronze Age, in Phylakopi Phase II (Middle Cycladic II).<sup>19</sup> Intense black and brownish reds on a burnished glossy light color ground characterize this style. The rapid-brush style of the painting animated the abstract bird depictions, and various painters interpreted the motif differently, as evident in the examples illustrated.<sup>20</sup> The birds with wings spread in flight have short heads and distinct hooked beaks, large round black eyes set off by a surrounding white ring, stiff tails, and extended taloned feet positioned as if



**Figure 19:** Pottery jug fragment with falcon head and wing from Melos. The point denoting the wing's *alula* is similar to the pointed *alula* indication of the later griffin jar design from Keos (Figure 22). Photograph by Ray Porter. Photographed with permission of the National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

about to attack prey. These certainly can be identified as falcon features. Several birds have long curl-tipped crest decorations on their necks, and a very falcon-like one has a curl extended from its neck (Figure 19). A point was made to represent falcons' aggressive features, the hooked beaks especially and taloned feet. The curled features could refer to falcon's black

face-back hooks and the cheeks' black moustachial streaks. The same pendant curl-tip “plumes” appear on the neck back on the surviving griffin of the Knossos Throne Room (ca. 1450 B.C.) and on the Keos jar's griffins. In these Melian designs a single brush stroke represents each wing feather, and only a single wing to each bird is represented.<sup>21</sup>

*A tiny griffin.* An intriguing Melos design depicts a small (ca. 6 cm) lively black painted griffin (Figure 20). It was painted on a previous period “Cycladic White” jug. It has one wing done in a style like the bigger birds, with an elongated spotted body, denoting feathers, and a single wing stretching out in flight, a curled tail, and a linear bird's tail also, part of the rear leg, and a single pawed foreleg extended frontward. A similar second griffin appears on the back of the jug.



**Figure 20:** Griffin with curled lion's tail and a bird's tail on a “White Cycladic” jug from Melos. The curled tail repeats the leonine tails found in other Aegean griffin depictions. The foreleg matches the leg in Keos griffins. Drawing by Ray Porter, from a photograph taken with permission of the National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

*Young falcon testing wings for flight.* Of these designs one in particular is especially naturalistic and shows the artisan's observations of falcons' life ways (Figure 21). A juvenile falcon is pictured testing his flapping wings while clutching the ground with large clawed feet, the ground being a black ring encircling the base of the vessel.<sup>22</sup> This ring refers to the black rings encircling the large red disks of the birds' bodies. Large rings are a constant motif in other pot fragments with this subject from the site. This young bird's behavior is an amusing anecdote depicted to resemble a juvenile falcon as may be found on sea-side cliff ledges where the young birds are brooded.

*The later falcon-griffin Keos jar.* The Melos pottery designs with their fierce-expressed falcons, of the Middle Cycladic II period, were followed in the next period, Late Cycladic IA, by an impressive Melos pottery design found on Keos Island picturing two distinctly hook-beaked griffins speeding around the shoulder of the pithoid jar, now fragmentary. Alice Fäthke



Figure 21: Depiction of a young rearing falcon flapping wings, standing on a ring, from Melos. Compare the rings encircling the large red disks of the birds in figures 23-26. Photograph by Ray Porter, with permission of the National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

has restored the damaged painting<sup>23</sup> (Figure 22). The design is considerably more naturalistic than the earlier rapid brush style falcon designs. The red painted griffins are carefully and precisely defined by thick-to-thin outlining black brush work, in contrast to the previous more abstract Melos pottery birds.<sup>24</sup>

The griffins have the large, round, wide-open black staring eyes set out by surrounding white rings, and the extreme hook beaks and angry expressions that closely resemble real falcons' head features. Inside the neck line a second line runs down through the beaks and continues downward creating a space at neck front indicating the white throat and chest of real falcons. The wings are simplified with only large widened flight feathers with no markings. Rows of dots run along the middle of the wings.

Though the earlier falcons have curled crest plumes, here they are showier. They look to be evidence for Minoan influence, as do the rosettes and the idiosyncratic version of undulating 'hanging' rockwork framing the griffins overhead.<sup>25</sup> The Minoan and Cycladic griffins seem to be merged here. The seeming narrow waist of the left side griffin is simply the broken edge of the fragment; no full bodies of the griffins survive. To the left there is a curl-tipped tail and an extended pawed leg. This pithoid jar is from Keos Island's Ayia Irini town, House A. (House A was a large wealthy house with wall paintings fragments which show a lion, dolphins, pigeons, and



Figure 22: "Black and Red" griffin design from two fragments of a pithoid jar from Ayia Irini, House A, Keos, Melos. (Ca. 1550 B.C.). Of special interest are the falcon-form features. Alice Fäthke watercolor restoration. Courtesy of The Department of Classics, University of Cincinnati.



a griffin. The remaining 20% of this griffin design indicates a spectacular work in the developed earlier “Black and Red” style. Though kin to the earlier MC II Melos falcon designs, it is more sophisticated. Though the origin of some of the Cycladic bird designs is questionable, R. L. N. Barber believes this major example is a work of a Melos potter.<sup>26</sup>

### The Egyptian and Actual Falcon Inspiration of Melos Pottery with Falcon Themes

Specific features are present on the “Black and Red” style pottery from Phase II of Phylakopi that strongly suggest Egyptian influence. Falcons are depicted with large red disk bodies that are strongly reminiscent of images of the Horus falcon sky god and the associated red solar disk of Egypt.

*Dominance of red disks* (Figures 23-26). The large red disks that make up the birds’ bodies, distinguishing them from depictions of ordinary falcons, make these designs especially interesting and unusual. These large, black outlined, red disks strongly suggest the red solar disks of the Egyptian Horus falcons and the red solar disk borne by Ra-Herakhty and the war god Montu and other falcon-headed deities. In fact the red disks here appear to be the focal point of the designs and are dominant. The single sketchy wings along with a falcon hook-beaked head and taloned-feet were simply attached to the large red disks. This concentration on the red disks is a further reminder of the solar disk symbol where the falcon becomes the sun in the winged solar disk that symbolized the sun god Ra (i.e., where the solar disk is centered, with the wings stretching out to the sides). Figures 23 and 24 show the large red disks and how the falcon parts are attached to them. Figure 25 is one of several similar large jugs with the same design found in the Temple Repositories at Knossos.<sup>27</sup>

*Multiple small “solar disks” version.* Standing out significantly is the more elaborated version with additional smaller red disks painted on the larger jug seen in Figures 25 and 26. These multiple disks are another detail that makes a persuasive argument for a connection with the Egyptian winged solar disk.

These entail, along with the large red-disk bodies of the falcons, additional rows of five smaller red disks, arranged so as to arch over the flying birds’ backs. The arched rows of small red disks suggest the sun moving through the day, from dawn to sunset. Each of the three falcons painted on the jug have the arched rows of small red disks.

If these Cycladic depictions are derivative of the Egyptian sacred falcon symbol, the theme probably reached the Aegean concurrently with the other Egyptian themes that reached Crete in the Old Palace Period during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. Signs of earlier Egyptian contact are the Cretan African vervet monkey likenesses of ivory seal handles of the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>

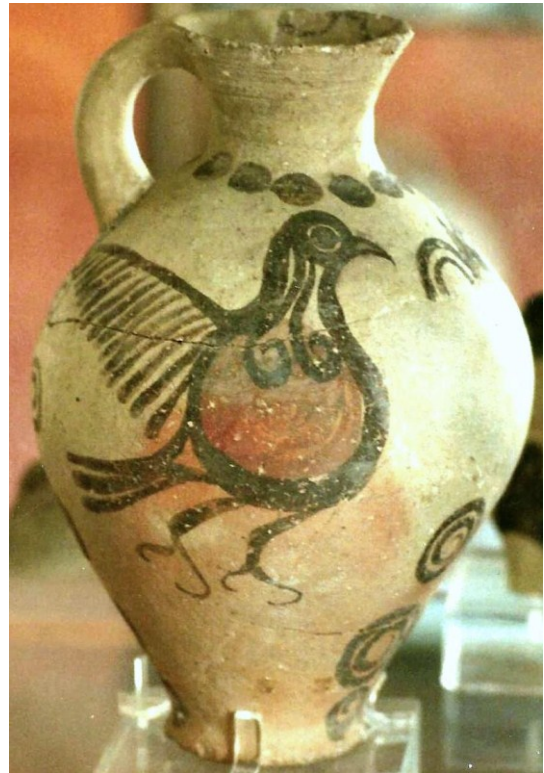


Figure 23



Figure 24



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centuries B.C. from burials of south Crete. Like these Egyptian themes, the Melos Horus falcon and solar disk theme were translated into the Minoan style (or into the Melos style in the case of the Melos falcon designs). The appearance of an Egyptian motif at Melos would not be unusual. Melos, one of the larger Cycladic islands, with a wide, sheltered harbor, was a major Cycladic trading port. Prosperity from trade was evident in the important prehistoric town of Phylakopi. Contact with trading ships would make the arrival of the Horus falcon motif at Melos understandable. Melos would have attracted foreign trade carrying exotic motifs on craft commodities.

Obsidian was the island's most valued resource. From 8000 B.C., the volcanic island served as the primary source in the Aegean of obsidian, a hard volcanic glass that was the source of pre-metal cutting tools. Demand for obsidian continued even after the advent of bronze technology, especially for less advanced material cultures such as the Mycenaean mainland, according to R.L.N. Barber.<sup>28</sup> He states that the need "...for obsidian encouraged a close relationship with Cyclades and Melos in particular". A lesser resource was the white mineral, kaolin, valued as pure white pigment. Melos' crafts were refined and circulated among the islands. Inter-island trade is evident in a number of local pottery types found at various sites. For example, fine MC II Tehran swallow bird ewers were found at Mycenae in Grave Circle B;<sup>29</sup> painted shards of Melos type falcon theme pottery were found at Akrotiri, Thera;<sup>30</sup> and several of the large Melos Falcon and Red Disk jugs were found on Knossos on Crete.

To further explain how the Horus falcon symbol reached Melos, the Egyptian-inspired themes in Early Minoan and Middle Minoan art attest to the flow of Egyptian motifs circulating in the Eastern Mediterranean by way of diplomatic gifts of fabulous art objects and tribute before the "Golden Age" of major motif exchanges of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. Vehicles for motif transmission included small scale maritime trade circulating artifacts of different cultures, raw materials from Egypt and the Near East to the Aegean, including perishable textiles and wooden artifacts, and more durable metal and ceramic goods. Coming at the end of this period, is the Ulu Burun shipwreck of ca. 1300 B.C. whose cargo reflects the craft and practical commodities carried by such small seafaring traders.<sup>31</sup> D. Collon<sup>32</sup> relates that another major vehicle for motif transmission during the Middle Bronze Age were small Near Eastern seal stones, such as Syrian cylinder seals that were sought by members of the foreign elite as precious prestige items.

Besides seeking copper and tin for manufacturing bronze, craft materials were sought such as hippopotamus ivory from Syria that arrived in Crete during the Early and Middle Bronze Age. (The Early Minoan II and III stamp seals from South Crete tholoi were made of imported hippopotamus ivory).<sup>33</sup> H. Frankfort cites pictorial theme textiles as motif circulation

vehicles.<sup>34</sup> Another stimulus for the Melos falcon pottery was the local Cycladic figural painting style of the Middle to early Late Bronze Age, particularly the pictorial styled pottery paintings found at Melos (e.g., fishermen carrying fish, a lion, a dolphin and falcons<sup>35</sup>).

Egyptian influence in the Aegean was already evident in the iconography of Minoan art as early as Early Minoan II and III, ca. 2400-2200 B.C., and it particularly stands out during the Old Palace period (Middle Minoan II, 19<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.) in artifacts from the palaces of Malia and Phaistos. At this time there were representations of many Egyptian subjects, e.g., the hippopotamus goddess Taweret, a male sphinx, scarab beetles, flying falcons, griffins, African vervet monkeys, lions and a foreign collared spotted leopard. Much of their Egyptian meanings was lost in transit, however. Taweret, for example, was transmuted into the Minoan genius.

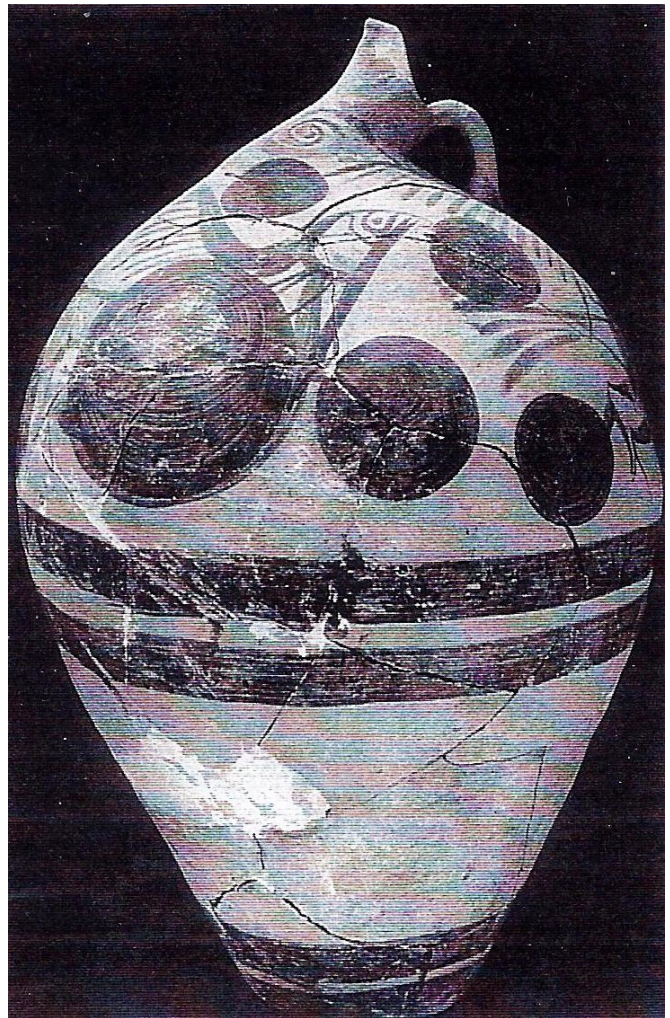


Figure 25





Figure 26

Figures 23-26 Middle Bronze Age pottery bird designs from Melos, painted in black with large red disks for bodies, proposed as evidence for the Horus-falcon theme in the Aegean. The bird in Figure 23 is depicted with two curled plumes on its neck and extended talons, hooked beak, and a round eye set off by white ring. The bird depicted in Figure 24 is shown with thick neck feathers and round eye, and the hooked beak was deliberately indicated with a separate brush stroke. Figure 25 depicts a large jug with complex amplified version of red-disk-bodied falcons in Melian style from the Temple Repositories at Knossos. The design exhibits five smaller red disks arching over each of the three flying falcons painted on the jug. These arched rows of smaller red disks suggest the sun crossing the sky. Photograph from R. E. Jones, "Studies of Cycladic Pottery." Pl. 1. In *Thera and the Aegean World* Vol. I. 1978. Figure 26 gives a rendering of the design on the jug in Figure 25. The placement and form of the five smaller red disks are clear in this rendering. Color pencil reconstruction by Ray Porter.

The realistic vervet monkey likenesses of the 22<sup>nd</sup> c. B.C. suggest live African vervets in Crete at this time, signaling early trade with Egypt. The vervets, together with Minoanized "Nilotic" papyrus plants and bluish rock pigeons, furnished the subject for New Palace period (LMIA) mural decorations, as in the House of Frescoes mural found at Knossos, keeping alive the earlier Egyptian "flavor" of Middle Minoan Cretan art by recalling an exotic "Nilotic" landscape. Akrotiri frescoes<sup>36</sup> show a number of vervets. A number of actual imported Egyptian artifacts have been found in Crete, as studied by J. Philips.<sup>37</sup> All these examples show Egyptian cultural presence in the Aegean

and indicate that it is likely that Horus Falcons were also among the transported Egyptian elements.

In 1921, Arthur Evans, the eminent excavator of Knossos, was the first to notice the Aegean Melos bird designs' connection with Egypt that he discusses in the first volume of his *Palace of Minos*.<sup>38</sup> He noted the resemblance of the Melos pottery's falcon-like birds to Egyptian falcon-headed griffins like those from Beni Hassan of the Twelfth Dynasty. He did not comment on the fact that falcons were depicted on Melian jugs, however. In his figure 405 he illustrates the Melian falcon jugs discussed here and included two Melos falcon jugs found in the Mycenae Shaft

Graves, Circle A. Also two Mycenaean (MH. II-III) jugs are illustrated picturing crude “early” Mainland renderings of griffins that show no relation to the more sophisticated Melian falcon jugs or the small “Cycladic White” flying griffin.

The influx of the Horus Falcon motif into the Aegean displayed on the Melos pottery, within the context of Middle Bronze Age Aegean-Egyptian contacts, should not be taken as unusual, as previously noted. However, rather than only Egyptian Horus-Falcon designs, actual falcons were doubtless also a stimulus. Local Melian beliefs concerning falcons cannot be ruled out as at least a partial incentive. But the red disks are unique in Aegean iconography, and they are the most persuasive evidence for the Egyptian origin of large red disks given to the painted birds for bodies (Figures 23-26) These red disks imply a representation of the sun, and are specifically suggestive of the Horus Falcon and his solar disk. None of the other Cycladic Islands’ art’s bird designs emphasize falcons, nor do the red disks appear in them.

From the point of view of actual falcons as motivation for the Melos designs, according to later historical and current accounts, it can be assumed that numerous falcons inhabited the rough cliffs of the rocky Cycladic islands, including Melos. As bound by the sea, the seasons, weather and problems of fresh water availability, local islanders were very aware of their environment and would have observed the abundant bird life on the islands

and which they would have exploited as food, both the birds and eggs.<sup>39</sup> Especially pertinent were the falcons’ predatory behavior, impressive personalities, and beauty that would have made a strong impression. Also, Melos was one of the islands lying on the migratory routes between Europe and Africa that carried huge flocks of migrating birds in both spring and autumn affording the falcon population, of several species, with abundant prey. Thus it is perhaps natural that falcons should be a local theme of the pottery painters.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, it is likely that Egyptian inspiration would have been the prime motivation for the creation of such unusual designs as the red disks of the Melos falcon jugs. Thus Melos islanders’ experience with a large population of local falcons could have created a receptive climate for the falcon subject and its adaptation from the Egyptian motif. The very different crude early Mycenaean griffins can be ruled out as stimulus for Melos falcon designs because of marked differences. As for actual Egyptian Horus Falcon art objects, except for the two flying falcons on a pottery pithos lid from Malia (Figure 16, discussed above), to this writer’s knowledge there are no actual images of the Egyptian Horus Falcon from the Middle Bronze Age Aegean although the Near Eastern griffin theme appears to have been already circulating in the Aegean in the Middle Bronze Age.



## Summary

This article explores actual falcons and their relation to the ancient Egyptian Horus falcon god as well as Aegean falcon depictions.

Falcon morphology and behavior illuminates the depictions and identifies the Peregrine, Common Kestrel and Lanner as the most distinguishable falcon species represented in both Egyptian and Aegean art. The diagnostic falcon facial features, shared by all Egyptian falcon-deities, were the dark malar facial stripe, hooked beak, tomial 'tooth', large black eyes, and prominent nostrils and elaborate wing feather markings. Notably the black triangular 'hook' flight feather markings of the Common Kestrel gave the Aegean griffins their characteristic hook and dot wing feather markings pattern, along with spirals, as is apparent in the Thera griffin's wings – and the Ahmose axe's Aegean-influenced griffin of the early 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. The falcons' hooked beak's sharp tomial 'tooth', used in killing prey, included in all Egyptian falcon deities' facial images, symbolized falcon aggression, while overt falcon aggression is not depicted in Egyptian art. Wings on which the real falcons and falcon sky god and solar disk soared through the sky were carefully rendered in detail, upper and underwing, with flight and covert feathers and markings displayed. The gender reversal of the falcon genus where the female is typically larger, stronger and heavier than the smaller males was not acknowledged in identifying as masculine the Horus-Falcon and other falcon-headed gods. Natural gender order was considered, however, in the goddess Hathor as a female falcon, and Isis and Nephthys as brown-headed female Common Kestrels in Nefertari's tomb paintings.

A Middle Bronze Age link between Egypt and the Aegean is proposed for the Cycladic Melos Island's "Black and Red" style

pottery bird designs. The birds are identifiable as aggressive falcons with large black outlined red disk bodies that suggest the red solar disks of the Horus falcon sky god. These appear to be Aegean translations of the Horus falcon motif, and are parallel to other Egyptian motifs reaching Crete in the Middle Bronze Age such as the hippopotamus goddess Taweret, which became the Minoan leonine 'genius'. Direct Egyptian influence is seen in the ceramic pithos lid relief of a pair of spread-winged falcons in hunting posture from Crete Malia (Middle Minoan II, 19<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.). Other Aegeanized Egyptian motifs from Malia are a terracotta relief of a Pharaonic bearded male sphinx, 'Nilotic' wildcats, and a spotted leopard carved stone axe. Early Minoan Egypt/Aegean contact is evident in Egypt-derived vervet monkeys depicted as stamp seal handles made of exotic hippopotamus ivory. Images of Minoan falcons in cult contexts, previously unnoticed, are presented as further Aegean involvement with falcons and infer falcon cult significance in the Aegean. For example, in the Tiryns gold ring's scene, a falcon is perched behind the throne attending a goddess in the same way the griffin attends the goddess in the Thera fresco from Xeste 3, Akrotiri. Distinct falconiform gold emblems come from the Mycenae Shaft Graves. A likeness of a small juvenile falcon flapping its wings on a Melos shard evokes the presence of a large population of Cycladic Island falcons feeding on the vast numbers of passing migrating birds, another motivation for Melos falcon designs. A painting of two angry griffins with distinct falcon facial features, on a later Melian jar from Keos Island, extends the Melos Island's falcon bird painting tradition into the Late Bronze Age.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> George Sfikas, *Birds and Mammals of Crete* (Lancaster: Gazelle, 1989), 7.

<sup>2</sup> In one report concerning exploitation of the vast numbers of passing migrating birds, in Greece's Mani peninsula in the 1950's quail were trapped in large quantities and shipped live in cages to European cities for the luxury food trade.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Harte also noticed the Eleonora's falcons' silhouette in this bowsprit ornament. K. J. Harte, "Birds of the Thera Wall Paintings," in *Proceedings of the First International Symposium: The Wall Paintings of Thera*, ed. Susan Sharratt. Vol. II. (Athens: Idryma Theras, 2000), 681-698 and Figs. 5a, 5b.

<sup>4</sup> C. Doumas, *The Wall Paintings of Thera* (London: Thera Foundation, 1992), Pl. 37

<sup>5</sup> Hood 1978, Fig. 203 C; S. Marinatos and M. Hirmer, *Crete and Mycenae* (London: 1960), Pl. 205 top.

<sup>6</sup> Several other Shaft Graves' ornaments depict face-to-face animal pairs: e.g., bushy-tailed wildcat pairs communicating by rubbing under-chin scent glands together and recumbent fallow deer pairs. These are examples of realistic treatment of animals and their natural traits.

<sup>7</sup> For the Tiryns ring, see: Marinatos and Hirmer 1960, Pl. 207 top; Aruz, Benzel and Evans 2008, Fig. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Only the Thera goddess's griffin's upward-gazing, beaked head and highly decorative wings are illustrated here. For the entire enthroned goddess receiving saffron stigmas from a monkey with the griffin, see Doumas 1992, Pl. 122. For Ray Porter's restoration in line see: Ray Porter, "The Flora of Thera Wall Paintings: Living Plants and Motifs," in *Proceedings of the First International Symposium: The Wall Paintings of Thera*, ed. Susan Sharratt. Vol. II. (Athens: Idryma Theras, 2000), 603-629 and Fig.10. See also P. Betancourt, *Introduction to Aegean Art* (Philadelphia: INSTAP Academic Press, 2007) for R. Porter's 2005 revised restoration, Fig. 6.15. In associating the reed marsh with the Minoan Nature Goddess in the Thera Xeste 3 mural, a point was made that the Goddess was "Mistress" of life-nurturing reedy wetlands, with their rich aquatic bird life, in the same way she was "Mistress" of the medicinal saffron whose harvest she oversees in the mural. Her remarkable dragonfly and duck subject necklaces are attributes of her Wetlands domain and connections. Her attending griffin declares her divinity and the monkey presenting the saffron stigmas to her denotes her special rapport with animals.

<sup>9</sup> Sfikas (1980, p. 7) points out the actual practice of using birds of prey feathers for arrow making in A. D. 1549.

<sup>10</sup> If a "ba" bird, this would suggest a link with Egyptian religious beliefs in a funeral context.

<sup>11</sup> T. D. Atkinson, *et al*, *Excavations at Phylakopi in Melos*, Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies Supplement 4

(London, 1904), 72f., Figs. 60-61. Also illustrated in N. Marinatos, *Art and Religion in Thera: Reconstructing a Bronze Age Society* (Athens: D. & I. Mathioulakis, 1984), Fig. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Also the poorly preserved head of a vervet monkey was found with other fresco fragments in the 1970's excavations.

<sup>13</sup> S. A. Immerwahr, *Aegean Painting in the Bronze Age* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 189. Aegeanists have had trouble interpreting these birds, often calling them swallows despite the wrong wing markings for swallows. Immerwahr cites Cameron (unpublished dissertation, 1975, 391ff.) as interpreting the headless birds as griffins, presumably because of the hook-form wing markings. This is closer to a correct interpretation, but the birds do not have the leonine bodies of griffins.

<sup>14</sup> The same type of birds-in-a-rocky-landscape scene occurs on the skirt of a woman in the wall paintings of the Xeste 3 building at Akrotiri on Thera. The woman is part of a procession bringing floral offerings to the enthroned goddess attended by a monkey and griffin. The birds in the landscape on this woman's skirt are long-tailed swallows (*Hirundo rustica*), however.

<sup>15</sup> For an online BBC video of hunting kestrels, see

<http://www.arkive.org/kestrel/falco-tinnunculus/vidco-06a.html>

<sup>16</sup> A Third Dynasty ornamental limestone disk of Djoser's reign (2630-2611 B.C.) has a similarly posed pair of birds which may be meant as falcons; they are buff color and are labeled as doves, without good cause. There are no feather details or markings. Their rectangular tails are falcon-like. A thousand years separate the Malia disk from this one, but such scenes may have been traditional. Amenta 2007, Fig. 36.

<sup>17</sup> Outstanding is the gold Mycenaean scepter (12<sup>th</sup> c. BC) from Cyprus (Curium) in the cloisonné technique and with a special subject: two falcons perch on a gold sphere at the scepter's top. See R. Higgins, *Minoan and Mycenaean Art* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 1981), Fig. 222.

<sup>18</sup> The Melos bird pottery designs were given much attention as typical archaeological types, but neither the birds' falcon identity nor their unusual large red disk bodies has aroused a great deal of interest, and remain puzzling up until this study.

<sup>19</sup> R. L. N. Barber, "The Cyclades in the Middle Bronze Age" in C. Doumas, ed., *Thera and the Aegean World*, I (London: Aris & Philipps, 1978), 368-379.

<sup>20</sup> R. E. Jones, "Composition and Provenance Studies of Cycladic Pottery with Particular Reference to Thera," in C. Doumas, ed., *Thera and the Aegean World*, I (London: Aris & Philipps, 1978), 472-482.

<sup>21</sup> Birds as subjects for art, entailing island life with birds, was popular in the Cyclades Islands. Therans favored the spring-heralding migrating barn swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) in their



mural and pottery paintings. Melians preferred the aggressive falcons.

<sup>22</sup> For a young falcon in a similar posture, see the BBC nature videos online at

[http://www.arkive.org/peregrinc/falco-peregrinus/video-\\_.html](http://www.arkive.org/peregrinc/falco-peregrinus/video-_.html)

<sup>23</sup> W. W. Cummer and E. Schofield, *Keos III. Ayia Irini House A*, Cat. No. 1318 (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati, 1984), Pl. 79. Rooms 25, 26.

<sup>24</sup> One kind of polychrome Thera pottery designs of more abstract birds employed a similar rapid brush style painting in black and red, but on a buff, not a near white, background. See S. Marinatos. *Excavations at Thera V* (Athens: 1972), Color Pl. A. Swift swimming dolphins also were a major subject of Thera pottery paintings, a fitting subject for sea-governed islanders' art.

<sup>25</sup> The griffins of Knossos Throne Room with similar features are recalled.

<sup>26</sup> R.L.N. Barber, *The Cyclades in the Bronze Age* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1988), 171.

<sup>27</sup> Figure 25 reproduces the jug in the Ashmolean Museum. For other Melos bird jugs and other vases found in the Temple Repositories, see Ann Brown, *Arthur Evans and the Palace of Minos* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 1983), Fig. 30b.

<sup>28</sup> Barber 1988, 157. "It has also been suggested that these obsidian sources provided, or rather continued to provide, the basis for whatever influence the Cyclades possessed in the Aegean world of the second millennium BC, and further that, since the Mainland was at the time in a considerably less advanced state of material culture than was Crete and had a much less well-developed bronze-working technology, a continued requirement for obsidian encouraged a close relationship with Cyclades and Melos in particular. In this context we may interpret the close ceramic connection that can be observed between the islands and the Mainland in EC IIIB to Middle Cycladic."

<sup>29</sup> Royal Grave Circle B (tomb B III) illustrated in S. Marinatos, *Excavations at Thera II* (Athens: 1969), 43, Fig. 28.

<sup>30</sup> Falcon wing and head types on Melos pottery fragments illustrated in Marinatos 1969, 44, fig. 30; and S. Marinatos, *Excavations at Thera IV* (Athens: 1971), Pl. 96 upper left.

<sup>31</sup> Cernal Pulak, "The Uluburun Shipwreck and Late Bronze Age Trade." In *Beyond Babylon: Art, Trade and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium B.C.* Eds., J. Aruz, K. Benzel and J. M. Evans (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 288-383.

<sup>32</sup> Dominique Collon, "Syrian Glyphic and the Thera Wall Paintings," in *Proceedings of the First International Symposium,*

*the Wall Paintings of Thera*, I (Athens: Idryma Theras, 2000), 283 states "... Syrian cylinder seals of the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries BC have been found at sites in the Aegean and are the principal surviving vehicle for the spread of iconographic motifs in what was evidently a lively maritime trade involving a variety of commodities..."

<sup>33</sup> Discussed by Susan C. Ferrence, "Hippopotamus Ivory in EM-MM Lasithi and the Implications for Eastern Mediterranean Trade: New Evidence from Haghios Charalambos." In *Krinoi kai Limenes: Studies Honor of Joseph and Maria Shaw*, Philip P. Betancourt, Michael C. Nelson, and Hector Williams (Philadelphia: INSTAP Academic Press, 2007), 167-175.

<sup>34</sup> Frankfort posited that the female sphinx and male griffins appearing on a miniature textile depicted in fresco fragments from Knossos not only were Near Eastern influenced but actual foreign textiles. Few scholars believe this today as the triple-horned bull's head, part of the design, is a distinct Minoan motif. H. Frankfort, "Notes on the Cretan Griffin," *Annual British School at Athens* 37 (1936-37): 116.

<sup>35</sup> Barber 1988, Fig. 111 shows Cycladic White ware figural designs from Phylakopi, Melos.

<sup>36</sup> There are 17 vervets pictured in Akrotiri paintings so far found. R. Porter, "Real Vervet Monkeys and Their Representations in Aegean Art" (Unpublished INSTAP grant report) (2010).

<sup>37</sup> Jacqueline S. Phillips, *Aegyptiaca on the Island of Crete in Their Chronological Context: a Critical Review*. Contributions to the Chronology of the Eastern Mediterranean., vol. 18. *Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Denkschriften der Gesamtakademie*, vol. 49. (Vienna, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> Arthur Evans, *Palace of Minos*, I (London: Macmillan, 1921), 588 ff, Fig. 533 and Fig. 405.

<sup>39</sup> The eggs of summer nesting Eleonora's falcons that nest in colonies are especially considered wild food. Eleonora's falcons are still illegally hunted and eggs collected on the rocky off-shore islands of Crete, activities deplored by conservationists. These together with disturbance by tourism, and use of pesticide which the falcons consume with their prey, are major threats. "About or more than 80 % of the world population of Eleonora's falcons breed in Greece." Source: Status Global Raptor Information Network.

[http://www.europeanraptors.org/raptors/eleonoras\\_falcon.html](http://www.europeanraptors.org/raptors/eleonoras_falcon.html)

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