THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE BARED BREAST IN AEGEAN BRONZE AGE ART

The representation in art of women of the Aegean Bronze Age with exposed or bared breasts has attracted interest ever since Sir Arthur Evans excavated artefacts such as the faience "Snake Goddesses" or the women gathered in the miniature frescoes at Knossos. These and other similar imagery have been interpreted over the years in many differing ways: as signifying maternity and fertility, as being symptomatic of sexual freedom, or as simply a fashion, which happens to expose the breasts. Given the wide-ranging thoughts on the subject, it is perhaps surprising that there has not been more extended discussion of what is a highly distinctive costume, one which not only exposes, but also sometimes shapes, and always frames and draws attention to the breast area. Of course, in the Bronze Age Aegean we can engage only with the representation of the breast in art; we cannot be sure of how fully such representations reflect real dress, or whether women dressed in this way in contexts other than the ritual or ceremonial ones, which are the focus of so much of the art. We also lack the benefit of texts, which give our colleagues working in the neighbouring cultures of the Near East and Egypt insights into ancient perceptions of the human body – perceptions that could (and often did) differ from our own.

It is perhaps in areas such as perceptions and constructions of the body and its attendant sexuality that modern cultural filters can be especially problematic. The familiar Minoan image of the "Snake Goddess" was part of the stunning opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Athens, in 2004 (Pl. XLIIIa). It is unsurprising that this was one of the iconic images chosen to encapsulate the historical past of the Greeks. But of particular interest for the present study are American newspaper reports that the broadcaster NBC had censored the "goddess" by pixellating her breasts, and that complaints were received about the unsuitability of this imagery for mainstream family viewing. While Evans and others have interpreted the exposed breasts of these figures as references to divine maternity, the 21st century viewer immediately interprets this imagery as primarily sexual and erotic. We have here, in a nutshell, the dualism of much Western thought from mind/body, nature/culture, magic/religion, which extends to perceptions and representations of the breast, as either maternal and good or erotic and bad. This division, which separates and creates a border between motherhood and sexuality, has been described as "one of the most overdetermined dichotomies in our culture."[1]

In this paper, I will be pursuing this dichotomy, arguing that it has strongly influenced the way that scholars have thought about bared breasts in ancient art.

Bared female breasts in Aegean art are a site for divergent interpretations, and it is notable that most of these interpretations tend to treat the breast as having a singular meaning. They do not, for example, explore the possibility of complex, richly layered meanings or of metaphoric rather than (or as well as) literal symbolisms. Evans associated the faience "Snake Goddesses" with his wider belief in a Great or Mother Goddess, and his view that the exposed breasts signify maternity or fertility has been followed by many scholars. I will return to Evans' views in a moment. The idea that the uncovering of the breasts typifies "woman as a giver of nourishment" or "the archetypal experience of the Feminine as all-nourishing" continues to be important in Jungian psychoanalytic thought.[2] Recent

1 I.M. YOUNG, "Breasted experience: the look and the feeling," in I.M. YOUNG, *On Female Body Experience. "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (2005) 86 (previously published in ID., *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Female Body Experience* [1990]). For the "good" and "bad" breast, see also M. YALOM, *A History of the Breast* (1998).

2 E. NEUMANN, *The Great Mother, An Analysis of the Archetype* (1972) 123.

scholarship too sees connections with fertility, and it has even been suggested that the open bodice could "facilitate breast feeding."[3]

Many aspects of Minoan society, as seen through its art, surprised early 20th century society, and none more so than the exposed breasts. Though often referred to in more circumspect terms as "décolleté" or as "open bodices," the female figures gathered in the frescoes evoked ideas of liberated women, perhaps a little risqué, who mixed freely in society. This line of thought was expanded by writers such as Jacquetta Hawkes (writing in 1958), who saw female visibility and the revealing dress as symptomatic of "accepted sexual freedom."[4] This line of thought has been developed and popularised by many writers within the Goddess movement, where the bared breasts widely are seen in terms of female empowerment.[5]

In broader studies of nudity and clothing the Minoan images are not infrequently conflated with nudity. In his book *Art, Desire and the Body*, Andrew Stewart describes the Knossos "Snake Goddesses" as "voluptuously bare breasted," yet he includes them in a discussion of female nakedness in cult.[6] While nudity can itself be regarded as a costume,[7] it is hard to see how bare breasts combined with a complex costume, which covers much of the body, should be viewed as interchangeable with full nudity. In an influential survey of the relationship between the body, clothing and Western art, Anne Hollander touches briefly on Minoan imagery, and describes it as having "characteristics one might readily call primitive," comparing it to the use of exaggeration, vivid ornamentation and considerable use of nudity in "some African styles."[8]

The comments of both writers seem to reflect the very considerable difficulty that scholars have in accommodating the Minoan imagery within wider narratives concerning the relationships between the clothed and unclothed body in Western traditions. I would suggest that this is because clothing *designed* to expose the breasts is actually somewhat unusual. This stands in contrast to images in which clothing is artfully disarranged to reveal one or both breasts, for an array of reasons including: suckling a child, a metaphoric reference to spiritual nourishment, as in the medieval period; displays of erotic beauty; expressions of both vulnerability and dangerous sexuality; depiction of personifications or allegorical figures. In Western art, some of this imagery self-consciously referred back to classical representations of Amazons, to personifications, or to sexual vulnerability; these typically made use of what Marina Warner has called the "slipped chiton" to reveal the breast.[9]

While the rich symbolism of the breast in Western art is a huge topic that lies beyond the scope of this paper, a few examples will serve to illustrate the important point that such imagery shifts in emphasis over time; the meanings can be richly layered, symbolic and metaphoric, though they stem ultimately from the nurturing and the sexual aspects of the breast. Perhaps the most familiar is the single breast exposed to allow for a suckling child: imagery of Isis suckling Horus or the Madonna and child springs readily to mind. A well-known 15th century painting also shows a Madonna figure (Pl. XLIIIb); but here the lines between the maternal and erotic breast are deliberately blurred, since this is believed to be a portrait of Agnes Sorel, mistress of the French king, and her breast seems to be presented for the benefit of the viewer rather than the baby. In other images, one or both breasts might be displayed as part of the beauty of a woman, often, though not always, with a classical flavour to justify the disarrangement of the clothing. A portrait of the young Simonetta Vespucci, where head and bare breasts are framed as a unit, offers an elegant example of how a "new

3 B. JONES, "The Minoan 'Snake goddess'," in *POTNIA* 264. But cf. K. LAPATIN, *Mysteries of the Snake Goddess. Art, Desire and the Forging of History* (2002) 81 (where the author sees no evidence for a link with maternity or fertility).
4 J. HAWKES, *Dawn of the Gods* (1958) 153.
5 See, for example, S. EVASDAUGHTER, *Crete Reclaimed. A Feminist Exploration of Bronze Age Crete* (1996) 101 ("women appear to have displayed their breasts as an expression of their power").
6 A. STEWART, *Art, Desire and the Body* (1997) 34.
7 L. BONFANTE, "Nudity as a costume in classical art," *AJA* 93 (1989) 543-70.
8 A. HOLLANDER, *Seeing Through Clothes* (1993) 16.
9 M. WARNER, *Monuments and Maidens. The Allegory of the Female Form* (1985) 267-93.

sense of feminine beauty whereby the breasts were somehow part of the face" developed in Renaissance art (Pl. XLIIIc).[10]

While art might present an uncovered breast in these and other contexts, actual dress tended to draw attention to the breasts by pushing and shaping them or by covering them in only the flimsiest material. An interesting exception to this is documented in 17th century England. There was a fashion for very low-cut bodices from which — it is reported — the nipples were liable to escape rather easily, but bodices could also be deliberately cut to leave much of the breast, including the nipple area, uncovered. This is clearly shown in woodcuts for ballad sheets, where women are clearly depicted with both extreme décolleté and bare breasts (Pl. XLIIId). A recent study by Angela McShane-Jones reflects on the significance of these courtly fashions, with particular reference to depictions of Queen Mary II.[11] Sermons, pamphlets and ballads loudly moralised against the fashion for naked breasts, yet such low-cut fashions had been long established in the courts of western Europe: in association with women of dubious reputation (such as Agnes Sorel), and with ladies of impeccable virtue. McShane-Jones argues that the "apple-like" breasts thus displayed allude to a woman's virtue, beauty and youth. This fashionable look was achieved by the upper classes, both by keeping the breasts "unused" (through the hire of wet nurses), and by means of stays, and a stomacher, which pushed the breasts upwards. During the 18th century, in France, a debate developed about the ills of wet-nursing, widely practiced by the upper class women, who wanted to keep their breast shape. From this emerged a new ideology, which generated a fashion for breast-feeding; this was both extolled in art, and wryly commented on.[12]

I would like to return, now, to Evans' initial interpretations of the "Snake Goddess" figurines. He was one of a number of scholars who was strongly predisposed to the idea of a Mother Goddess. This undifferentiated Mother Goddess is now understood as being largely a product of Western academic tradition; and, in many ways, a much more interesting question is *why* was this hypothesis so readily accepted? Several writers have commented on Evans' loss of his own mother as a motivating factor, but this hardly explains the much wider scholarly espousal of the Mother Goddess hypothesis. There is insufficient space in this short paper to explore the complex factors that may have shaped these ideas — they include social ideologies concerning women and motherhood, medical views about the female body, the emerging influence of psychoanalysis, and the role of Orientalist modes of thought. However, some brief comments on the ideology of motherhood[13] (part of a larger project I am working on) and on Orientalism are directly relevant here: as they replicate on a wider stage the dualistic separation of motherhood and sexuality in Western thought, which has informed discussion of representations of the female body in ancient art.

Evans and his contemporaries lived in a world permeated by a powerful and complex ideology of motherhood that had emerged as a political, social and religious issue from the mid-19th century. To produce children and to devote oneself to their care was promoted (both officially and in popular writings and imagery) as the proper role of the woman. Thus women were extolled as the "Angel of the House;" and the good woman (and, by extension, the good breast) produced and nurtured children, this being regarded as her highest calling in the service of the state. In the Government's own words, "the service the State most requires from the generality of women is motherhood and the maintenance of the family in

10 HOLLANDER (*supra* n. 8) 203-04. The painting of c. 1480 is by Piero di Cosimo.

11 A. McSHANE-JONES, "Revealing Mary," *History Today* 54.3 (March 2004) 40-46.

12 Interestingly, the "good" and "bad" breast found here a new dichotomy: that of the bad or corrupting breast of the wet nurse, and the good breast of the baby's mother. See YALOM (*supra* n. 1) 105-23, figs 42 (for a depiction of Rousseau, a key figure in the drive to maternal breast-feeding, standing within a rural idyll in which a human and animal mother both suckle their young), and 44 (for a satirical depiction mocking the new cult of breast-feeding among fashionable women).

13 For a fuller discussion of this, see "Ideologies of motherhood."

purity and happiness."[14] At the same time, the European imagination had cast the East as effeminate and sexually unrestrained; and the idea of the erotic and seductive female, from Cleopatra to Salome, was expressed in both Orientalist art and in literature. Zainab Bahrani has emphasised how, in this context, the discourses of Orientalism and imperialism affected scholarly interpretations of Near Eastern archaeological finds, which, in turn, fed back into 19th century visual arts and ideologies of female sexuality.[15]

In describing the "Snake Goddesses" (Pl. XLIIIe), Evans notes that "her breasts, which are almost entirely bare, are of matronly proportions."[16] It is clear that he used the word "matronly" not simply as a euphemism for large, but in the more specific sense of maternal – from his phrasing elsewhere in the *Palace of Minos*. He writes, for example, of the "organs of maternity" being prominently shown on Palaeolithic figures;[17] and, then, of the "matronly figures" of early clay idols, which he interprets as "a primitive Mother Goddess."[18] Elsewhere, he refers to the mother and virgin, and we might speculate that he also had the imagery of the good breast of the Madonna in mind.[19] In his discussion of the "Snake Goddesses," Evans goes on to draw extensive parallels with Egyptian imagery of Hathor and Isis, and it is here that he writes of the "Egyptian Mother Goddess" influencing her "Minoan sister" or the "analogous Cretan divinity."[20] He drew many parallels between the Minoans and the neighbouring Near Eastern cultures; nor did he hesitate to suggest considerable influence from these older eastern civilisations on Bronze Age Crete. But, it is easy now to forget how strongly Evans and other contemporary writers also drew links between the Minoans and the later Classical world. The spirit of the Minoans was seen as classical and European, not Eastern – a point clearly made by Lapatin in his discussion of how the scholars enthusiastically compared the Boston "ivory goddess" to Classical art and ideals.[21]

Neither motherhood nor sexual activity has a high visibility in Minoan art,[22] whereas both are prominent in the arts (and literature) of the Near East and Egypt. Images of a mother holding or feeding a baby, the *kourotrophos*, are not part of the Minoan repertoire, although a nexus of ideas connecting female breasts with liquid nourishment and pouring is visible in Early Minoan vessel figurines as well as on later Cycladic nippled ewers. Explicit sexual images and depictions of nude frontal female figures are well-known themes in Near Eastern art; but Minoan imagery is remarkably reticent in these areas. In the Near East, the figures may hold or gesture towards their breasts, while attention may also be drawn to the genitals, by gesture and by the emphatic depiction of the vulva, which is presented in Mesopotamian literature as erotically alluring, and the site of sexual pleasure.[23] In the Aegean, full nudity is relatively infrequent for women. The Aegina treasure contains the intriguing image of beads of gold, carnelian and lapis in the form of a hand cupping a breast: but we cannot say whether this is the hand of the owner of the breast or someone else, nor can we be sure that the iconography is Aegean.[24] We may wonder, though, what the Aegean viewer would have made of such imagery. Minoan iconography, also, only rarely shows the female genital area or vulva.[25]

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14 P. SUMMERFIELD, "Women and war in the twentieth century," in J. PURVIS (ed.), *Women's History, Britain 1850-1945. An Introduction* (1999) 313 (citing a 1919 government publication).
15 Z. BAHRANI, *Women of Babylon, Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (2001).
16 *PMK* I 500.
17 *Ibid.* 45.
18 *Ibid.* 12.
19 For the growing importance of Marian cult at this time, see "Ideologies of motherhood."
20 *PMK* I 513.
21 LAPATIN (*supra* n. 3).
22 On the "invisibility" of Minoan mothers, see also B.A. OLSEN, "Women, children and family" (1998), and KOPAKA in this volume.
23 See BAHRANI (*supra* n. 15) 45, for the "sweet vulva" in Mesopotamian literature.
24 For a useful summary of the possible Eastern elements within the Aegina treasure, see S.P. MORRIS, "Daidalos and Kothar: the future of their relationship," in *Aegean and the Orient* 283.
25 Female genitalia are shown on votive body parts from Minoan peak sanctuaries such as Petsophas and Zou Prinias.

I suggest that the dualistic thinking of the time would have predisposed Evans (and other scholars) to interpret the exposed breasts either as maternal (= "Mother Goddess") or as sexual/erotic. But, the possibility that the exposed breasts could allude to both these aspects of female embodiment was not considered. Since, the erotic belonged with the sensuous world of the Orient and not to the Minoans, who were appropriated as "European," it was the maternal and not the sensual aspect of the Mother Goddess which was read onto the Minoan female body. It is striking too that although Evans drew extensive (and interesting) parallels with Hathor as an Egyptian Mother Goddess, yet he did not refer at all to another important part of her divine character: her sexual allure, which is seen as a source of her power. This might have further suggested to him – as it can now to us – that a female deity (or indeed a human female) could combine nurturing and erotic roles, and that both are a source of power. In relation to Mesopotamian imagery, Bahrani has similarly argued that the two roles cannot be so simply separated and categorised, though she would emphasise the dimension of sexual allure in this imagery.[26] I am not suggesting that we can simply transpose Near Eastern models onto the more visually reticent Minoan evidence. But it does highlight the point that there are other possible ways of thinking about the iconography of the breast, which do not uncritically replicate dualistic thinking filtered through Western thought.

The assemblage to which the "Snake Goddesses" belong includes faience plaques showing the cow and the goat suckling their young. So, although the exposed breasts of the "goddesses" do not self-evidently signal maternity or fertility, the associated imagery of these plaques may have suggested the nurturing role of the human breasts to the viewer. The presence of faience representations of robes in the same deposit also draws attention to the importance of ceremonial dressing, as part of Minoan rituals; and it is through the formal and deliberate act of dressing that the particular shaping and presentation of the body – the "bodyscape," which includes the display of the breasts – is created. While the evidence available does not allow us to know if the Minoans "considered exposed breasts to be erotic,"[27] nor should we be too quick to assume that they did not have any sexual dimension. Nanno Marinatos is one of a small number of scholars to draw attention to the emphasis on sexuality in some (though not all) Minoan dress: since, the codpiece worn by males draws attention to male sexuality, just as the exposed breasts emphasise feminine sexuality.[28] Here, I would remind the reader of the British 17th century woodcuts discussed earlier in the paper, where the exposed breasts signal feminine beauty.

The Thera frescoes also offer insights into the iconography of the bared breast, though the use of Cretan-style dress need not imply identical frames of meaning. The Xeste 3 frescoes offer support for the idea that exposed breasts are here incorporated into a costume, which, together with hair, clothing and jewellery, communicates the ages and status of the girls and women.[29] That these females are engaged in a ritual related to the advent of sexual maturity is indicated by the symbolism of blood, and the insistent presence of the saffron crocus which is strongly associated with pain relief for the female cycle.[30] Thus, the breasts are a very visible and potent indicator of incipient and actual sexual maturity. There is considerable attention to the breast area – from the neatly shown nipples of the younger girl, to the fully developed breast with its strongly emphasised nipple of the young woman carrying the necklace. That bared breasts could also be associated with a more mature female seems to be indicated by the robing scene from the House of the Ladies. The large and pendulous breast of the figure bending over has been much commented on, but, in the wider context of breast imagery through the ages, it is also quite striking. In a sociological study of

26 BAHRANI (*supra* n. 15) 80-89.
27 LAPATIN (*supra* n. 3) 81.
28 "Formalism and gender roles."
29 See also REHAK (ed. YOUNGER) in this volume.
30 For the symbolism of the blood, see also KOPAKA in this volume. On the medicinal properties of crocus, see S.C. FERRENCE and G. BENDERSKY, "Therapy with saffron and the Goddess at Thera," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 47.2 (2004) 199-226.

the breast, Iris Young has observed how static artistic imagery typically "suppresses the fleshy materiality of the breasts, this least muscular softest body part"[31]: but, unusually, in this Theran image the "fluid being" of the unsupported breast *is* represented.

In choosing the bared breast as a topic, I am aware that I could be perceived as encouraging the view that women (but not men) are, to use Lynn Meskell's pithy phrase, "situated within the flesh zone."[32] However, as Elizabeth Grosz has argued, "corporeality can no longer be linked with one sex;"[33] and it can be suggested that emphasis on the codpiece in relation to the Minoan male body places men as much in a flesh zone as bare breasted females. There is also a need to challenge unexamined assumptions that fragment the female body and the female breast, according to dualistic modes of thought inherited from earlier scholarship, so that we can, in the future, be open to the possibility of more nuanced, complex and contextualised readings of the bared breast in Aegean art.

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31 YOUNG (*supra* n. 1).
32 L. MESKELL, "Writing the body in archaeology," in A. RAUTMAN (ed.), *Reading the Body. Representations and Remains in the Archaeological Record* (2000) 15.
33 *Volatile Bodies* 44.

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