December 2011

Deconstructing Gender Oppositions in the Minoan Harvester Vase and Hagia Triada Sarcophagus

Emily Larsen

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua

Part of the Classics Commons, History Commons, and the Near Eastern Languages and Societies Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studia Antiqua by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
DECONSTRUCTING GENDER OPPOSITIONS
IN THE MINOAN HARVESTER VASE AND
HAGIA TRIADA SARCOPHAGUS

EMILY LARSEN

Beginning with Sir Arthur Evan’s descriptions of Minoan civilization, scholars have discussed the rituals, labor, and spaces of Minoan religion in strict binary terms of male and female. Gender has become one of the most important aspects in discussing the art of the Minoans, and scholars have continued to read the art and artifacts of the Ancient Aegean as supporting a civilization with a strict separation of gender. Those discussing two artifacts from the excavations at Hagia Triada, *The Harvester Vase*, 1500–1450 B.C.E. (fig. 1) and the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus*, ca. 1400 B.C.E. (fig. 2), have used the figural imagery depicted on these objects to support this polarized reading of gender in Minoan society. However, a closer look at the scenes depicted on the vase and sarcophagus reveals that Minoan religious rituals were not so easily separated into male and female spheres. In fact, the imagery indicates that the distinction of gender in Minoan religion is much more ambiguous than has previously been given credit. An analysis of the lack of distinctly sexed bodies, the ambiguity of male and female dress and the depiction on the *Harvester Vase* and *Sarcophagus from Hagia Triada* indicate that both objects could actually depict men and women participating in the same religious rituals. Furthermore, connections between the rituals depicted on the *Harvester Vase* and the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus* signify that the rituals, and spaces of ritual, were not divided into distinct gender classifications.

1. Another important aspect of Minoan art and civilization that is talked about often by scholars is the Minoan connection to nature. For further information, see Vesa-Pekka Herva, “Flower Lovers, after All? Rethinking Religion and Human-Environment Relations in Minoan Crete,” *World Archeology* 38.4 (Dec. 2006): 586–98.
The Harvester Vase is a carved stone rhyton. The lower part of the vase is lost and would have come to a blunt point. It is the type of vase used in libations—religious rituals involving the pouring of liquids. The vase depicts twenty-seven figures involved in a procession. Because of the high skill level of the depiction, the rarity of making vases out of stone, the formality of the figures, and the fact it is carved on a rhyton, used in libations, the procession is no doubt a religious ceremony or ritual. An older man, interpreted as a priest by some and wearing a cuirass, a known ritual garment, leads the procession. Twenty-one of the figures are holding long sticks with a fork like apparatus at the end. These instruments have been interpreted by various archeologists as winnowing forks, weapons, and hoes. In the middle of the procession is a figure shaking a rattle. He wears a kilt similar to the hide skirts seen in the Hagia Triada Sarcophagus. The figure is followed by three or four figures, all of which are singing with mouths wide open. Toward the end of the procession, one figure turns around and shouts at the figure behind him. Some of the figures are in a combination frontal/profile pose, but all have large frontal eyes and are carved with a rare naturalistic detail.

The Hagia Triada Sarcophagus is a limestone sarcophagus 137 cm long. The front of the sarcophagus depicts two processions. The procession on the right includes three figures: the two leading the procession hold rhytons, and the leader of the procession is pouring the liquid from the rhyton into a ritual area between two labyrs. The leader wears a hide skirt and has fair skin, as does the second figure holding two rhytons. The third figure is playing a musical instrument, is wearing a long cloak, and has dark skin. The procession to the left of the sarcophagus shows four figures with dark skin. They are all


4. For more information on the skill of the artists and the rarity of stone vase carving, see Rodney Casteldon, Minoans: Life in Bronze Age Crete (London: Routledge, 1990), 90. For more information on the argument that the procession is a religious scene, see Nanno Marinatos, Minoan Religion (Charleston, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993). A few art historians and archeologists who have written solely on the Harvester Vase have questioned its depiction of a religious ceremony; however, all who write on Minoan religion accept it as a religious ritual.

5. For further information on the cuirass, see Forsdyke, “The ‘Harvester’ Vase of Hagia Triada,” 1; and Nanno Marinatos, Minoan Kingship and the Solar Goddess (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).


8. For more information on music and musicians in Minoan society, see John G. Younger, Music in the Aegean Bronze Age (Jonsered, Sweden: Paul Åströms Förlag, 2007).
wearing a hide skirt, though the figure furthest to the left wears a longer cloak of the same material. The three figures are moving toward the figure on the far left, and each carry offerings. The opposite side of the sarcophagus depicts three figures. A fair skinned figure wearing a hide skirt performs a ritual on a table while a dark skinned figure wearing a long cloak plays an instrument. A final figure is light skinned and also wears a long cloak. A bull is lying on a table, presumably about to be sacrificed as an offering. The short sides of the sarcophagus depict figures being pulled in chariots by griffins. Both the Hagia Triada Sarcophagus and the Harvester Vase were found by archeologists at the Hagia Triada villa. Consequently, archeologists were the first to write about these objects and their significance to Minoan religion and society.

Archeologists and art historians writing about Minoan religion have problematically constructed Minoan rituals and practices in strict binary terms of male and female. Like many other archeologists, they have imposed a timeless, stable, and universal idea of gender onto the Minoan civilization and have failed to deal with gender in historically specific terms or account for ambiguity. One such scholar, Evangelos Kyriakidis, has argued there was a strict gender division in religious rituals. He states that the segregation is an important aspect of the ritual and that this segregation indicates significant religious rules being followed, as well as showing the exclusion and distinction of individuals within the religious rituals. Nanno Marinatos, who has written multiple texts on Minoan religion, has also championed a strict division of gender within Minoan society. She argues that the iconography of Minoan objects and artifacts reveals that the sexes almost never associate in religious


rituals. She states that women and men performed separate activities during rituals, evidencing distinct roles in the religious sphere. Other scholars, such as Rodney Casteldon and Marija Gimbuta, have supported and expanded on the ideas of Marinatos in their writings on Minoan society and gender, maintaining that Minoan society was distinctly separated into gendered spheres.\textsuperscript{13} For the most part, Minoan religion has been discussed in strict binary classifications: male and female are separate, and there is no intersection.

In the past fifteen to twenty years, a few scholars have begun to challenge this binary view of Minoan religion. One of the most important of these scholars is Benjamin Alberti. Alberti argues that although Minoan art rarely depicts distinct physical sexual characteristics, the figurative art of Minoan society has been placed into a “rigid binary framework of male/female.”\textsuperscript{14} Alberti asserts that Arthur Evans constructed this polarized view of gender in Minoan society by reading the Minoan religion as matriarchal, situating women in the divine sphere while concurrently placing men as the important political leaders.\textsuperscript{15} Alberti argues that Evan’s view of gender in Minoan society has been left largely intact.\textsuperscript{16}

Priscilla Field has also begun to deconstruct some of the rigid binary oppositions used to describe gender in Minoan society. She has argued that archeologists and scholars have described the overwhelming amount of depictions of women by giving women power as deities and priestesses.\textsuperscript{17} Women’s power in Minoan society was placed in the religious sphere, while men as priest-kings held the political power. She argues this is problematic, as scholars have looked at the Minoan civilization through a twentieth-century lens, imposing modern ideas of gender onto this ancient society. Consequently, the frequent images of women in Minoan art have been accounted for but rationalized as “primitive, natural, sexual, and maternal” goddesses and priestesses in the religious sphere.\textsuperscript{18} Field’s analysis of these shortcomings in the scholarship furthers Alberti’s criticism of a constructed polarization of gender in Minoan society. Women were given power in the religious sphere, men in the political, but neither crossed over. This separation of power constructed another gender opposition in scholars’ view of Minoan religion.

\textsuperscript{13} Casteldon, \textit{Minoans}, 139–40; Marija Gimbutas, \textit{The Living Goddesses} (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 101.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 10.
Specifically these gendered oppositions have been used to describe the religious processions on both the *Harvester Vase* and the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus*. Scholars, such as Marymay Downing and Nanno Marinatos, have emphasized the separate roles of men and women on the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus*. They have delineated the roles of women as performing the altar rites and sacrifices while men act as musicians and bear offerings.\(^{19}\) Significantly, Marinatos has used the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus* as one of her main examples evidencing the strict and distinct roles of each gender in Minoan ritual. She emphasizes that the men and women on the sarcophagus do not intermingle. Likewise, she discusses the *Harvester Vase* as a male-only religious procession, and uses its similarity to a Theran fresco to explain the fresco’s imagery as an all male religious procession.\(^{20}\) In her most recent publication, Marinatos maintains her view of strict gender division in Minoan rituals. The main argument of her most recent book is that men have the main political power as priest-kings, while the imagery of women is explained by the idea of a solar goddess. Like previous scholars, she has given women importance in the religious sphere, and men power in the political. Interestingly, in her conclusion, Marinatos praises Evans for the work he has done, and all the things he “correctly” assumed about Minoan religion—including how he divided the labor and roles of the sexes.\(^{21}\) Marinatos uses imagery from both the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus* and the *Harvester Vase* to support her claims. Dieter Rumpel, Rodney Casteldon, and Marija Gimbutas also champion gender specific readings of these artifacts.\(^{22}\)

Although a gendered reading of the rituals on the *Harvester Vase* and the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus* has been the most prevalent, there is substantial evidence that the assumptions made about gender in these readings need to be questioned. The gender of the figures on the vase and sarcophagus is ambiguous at best, and the ambiguity signifies that the gender, and delineation of gender, is not the most important aspect of Minoan ritual.

For example, Marianna Nikolaidou has argued that in Minoan art hair, dress, movements, and accessories are the most important aspects in determining roles within Minoan art, and furthermore, these characteristics are much more important than the assumed gender of the figures to delineating

---


roles in rituals. This is especially significant for the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus*, as the same types of clothing are shown on both genders. If one maintains the idea that dark skin is used to portray males and fair skin to portray females, a common belief about Minoan imagery, then the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus* becomes problematic as both men and women wear the long ceremonial cloak, as well as the hide skirt. Therefore, if, as Nikolaidou convincingly argued, the dress, stature, and accessories of a figure identify its roles and place in a ritualistic setting more so than other factors, than it seems that the figures on the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus* are not rigidly polarized by their genders, but instead share similar places and roles in the ritualistic setting.

Dress also reveals gender ambiguity on the *Harvester Vase*. Benjamin Alberti has argued that the loincloth cannot be taken as a sign of masculinity. He argues there is no original connection between a male physical sexual characteristic and the loincloth in Minoan art. This is problematic for previous readings of the *Harvester Vase* as the figures wearing loincloths on the vase have been assumed to be men and their loincloths have been understood partially to signify their male gender. Significantly, one of the first scholars to write about the *Harvester Vase*, John Forsdyke, recognized at least in the group of singers, an uncertainty in gender and dress. He describes the dress of these three figures as similar to the long cloaks on the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus* and writes, “the drapery makes it impossible to be sure about the sex.” Future scholars have failed to recognize this ambiguity in dress and gender that Forsdyke significantly pointed out in 1954, as they have always described the *Harvester Vase* as a procession of twenty-seven males.

Furthering the ambiguity of the figures’ gender, Benjamin Alberti has also argued that because of the lack of physical sexual characteristics in Minoan art in general, it is hard to firmly identify sex or gender for any figure. He boldly states, “Only figures with breasts, in any medium, can be confidently sexed.” Therefore, Alberti argues, a lack of breasts cannot be assumed to signify a male figure. Consequently, the figures on the *Harvester Vase* with their lack of breasts cannot clearly be identified as male, and this procession cannot be assumed to be an exclusively male religious ritual. This concept holds true for the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus* as well: the figures are not clearly depicted with breasts or other physical sexual characteristics; they cannot be confidently

25. Ibid., 109.
identified as male or female, making the assertions that the sarcophagus depicts two distinct, gendered rituals inconclusive.

Additionally, Alberti has asserted that even the well accepted distinction in Minoan art that white skin signifies a female figure and that red skin signifies a male figure is a constructed assumption. He has argued that there are many exceptions to this rule and that there are too many inconsistencies to confidently assign red skin to the male gender and white skin to the female.\(^\text{26}\) Without being able to use color of skin, dress, or physical sexual characteristics to identify gender in Minoan imagery, the gender of the figures in the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus* is uncertain. Thus, the sarcophagus offers no conclusive evidence of gendered rituals. This further complicates our understanding of Minoan gender and particularly how gender has been used as a distinction in Minoan ritual.

Further blurring this distinction is the fact that the Linear B tablet lists religious functionaries as one of only a few occupations held by both men and women at Knossos.\(^\text{27}\) This indicates that both men and women would participate in religious rituals, and most likely the same religious rituals, as there are not two different gender specific titles for religious functionaries. In addition, at the most simplistic level, the fact that the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus* and the *Harvester Vase* depict both men and women indicates that both men and women were involved in the same ritual activities.\(^\text{28}\) Even if one believes that there are very specific roles for each gender within Minoan rituals, the fact that both genders are represented as participating in the same ritual activities shows that despite whether there were distinct roles for each gender, there were not two separate spheres of Minoan religion according to gender.

A final evidence that Minoan religion and rituals, especially those depicted on the *Harvester Vase* and the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus*, are not strictly polarized according to gender is the connections and similarities between the ritual depicted on the *Harvester Vase* and the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus*.\(^\text{29}\) These connections evidence that instead of distinct gendered spheres in

---


28. If you accept my arguments, and Forsdyke's assertions for the *Harvester Vase*.

29. I acknowledge that the *Harvester Vase* and the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus* are from 50 to 100 years apart, and are therefore, not directly related. However, I think the connections between the types of rituals shown on each vase show a broader connection within the Minoan religion where the rituals are not distinct and separate, but interconnected and therefore the separation of gender in religion is not so distinct but more interconnected.
Minoan religion, the ritual activities and duties of both Minoan genders are interconnected.

The first connection between the religious rituals depicted on the vase and the sarcophagus is that the sarcophagus depicts a ritual that uses a rhyton in a libations ceremony. This is significant as the *Harvester Vase* is a rhyton, and vases like the *Harvester Vase* could have been used in the ritual depicted on the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus*. Therefore, the imagery depicted on the vase could be directly related to the ceremonies on the sarcophagus. Moreover, even if the artifacts, or other objects like these, are not directly related, then the connection between rhytons and funerary sarcophaguses indicates that the spaces and objects of Minoan religion are not conclusively gendered. There is interplay, an area of intersection between the roles of the figures on the rhyton, and the role of the figures who pour the rhyton on the sarcophagus. Rhytons, like the *Harvester Vase*, are not completely separate from the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus*, and therefore the gendered oppositions of these objects are not completely separate either.

Furthermore, the ritual procession depicted on the *Harvester Vase* could be a ritual that preceded a religious ceremony like the one depicted on the sarcophagus. This idea is further supported by the fact that musicians accompany both processions, indicating a shared aspect of both ceremonies. Also supporting this idea, the musicians on the *Harvester Vase* wear the same long cloak as the musicians on the *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus*. This is significant for two reasons. First, the same clothing is depicted in two different Minoan rituals indicates it is an article of clothing specifically related to ritual activity, and second, it indicates that those wearing the cloak on the sarcophagus and those wearing the cloak on the vase are performing similar roles, perhaps even the same religious roles in the two ceremonies. Again the shared aspect of musicians and ceremonial dress indicates that these two ceremonies, one considered male and one female, are not mutually exclusive, they share important aspects and practices and therefore are not distinctly gendered.

A final evidence for a shared connection between the vase and the sarcophagus is that, the site where both objects were found, the villa at Hagia Triada, was a center for rituals, indicating that the rituals of both artifacts, and consequently both genders, took place in the same general space. Robert Koehl who has written on the villa extensively stated that the villa’s function was most likely to be a center for the performance of important religious rituals.30 That both the vase and the sarcophagus were found at Hagia Triada

---

evidences that the rituals they depict were performed at this religious center. This is significant because it shows that the *Harvester Vase* procession, a religious event read as male, and the *Hagia Triada* ritual, a ritual read as female were performed at the same site. If there had been as strict of gender polarizations in the Minoan religion as some scholars have emphasized, these events would not be taking place at the same religious site. The distinctions would have gone beyond role and rituals and would have extended into place. There would have been separate sites for the female and male processions. Thus, the mutual site of the processions evidences that they were more closely related than has so far been given credit.

In conclusion, Minoan art and religion has been read as strictly gendered. Since Evans began discussion concerning the Minoan civilization, males and females were cast into separate spheres of religion, with separate duties, roles, and rituals. Until recently, this polarized view of gender had been unquestioned; however, scholars like Benjamin Alberti and Priscilla Field have begun to deconstruct the gendered binary oppositions archeologists and scholars have placed on Minoan society. The *Harvester Vase* and *Hagia Triada Sarcophagus*, both found at the villa at Hagia Triada, have particularly been used to support a distinct gendered reading of Minoan society. However, on closer investigation, both the sarcophagus and the vase are ambiguous in terms of gender. The lack of distinctly sexed bodies and the gender ambiguity of dress and depiction on both the vase and sarcophagus reveal that we cannot clearly identify any figures on the vase or sarcophagus as male or female. Furthermore, connections between the rituals depicted on the vase and the sarcophagus, evidence that the Minoan religion was not strictly polarized according to gender, there is far more intersection between these “gender specific” rituals than has been given credit, and in fact both men and women participated together in important religious rituals. This investigation into Minoan gender constructions is important because it sheds light onto assumptions that have been made, and accepted about Minoan society which need to be analyzed more closely and questioned. A deconstruction of the gendered Minoan society can lead scholars to a more significant and specific understanding of the Minoan religion, people, and civilization, and an investigation into areas and distinctions of Minoan society that have thus far been overlooked.
Fig. 1, Harvester Vase, 1500–1450 B.C.E.
Fig. 2, Hagia Triada Sarcophagus, ca. 1400 B.C.E.