

# “The pen fell from my hand when I was in my eighty-sixth year.”

Revisiting the work of Martin P. Nilsson

Edited by Jenny Wallensten & Gunnel Ekroth

STOCKHOLM 2024

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Published with the aid of grants from Stiftelsen Enboms donationsfond (Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities), Birgitta Bergquists stipendiefond (Stockholm University)

The English text was revised by Rebecca Montague, Hindon, Salisbury, UK  
Dust jacket: Front photograph by Fuse/Corbis via Getty Images. Back photograph by Julia Habetzeder.

ISSN 0081-9921

ISBN 978-91-7916-070-8

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Printed by PrintBest (Viljandi, Estonia) via Italgraf Media AB (Stockholm, Sweden) 2024.

## ABSTRACT

2017 marked the 50th anniversary of both the death of Martin P. Nilsson, the eminent Swedish scholar of ancient Greek religion, and the publication of the third edition of his monumental *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*. Nilsson's scholarly output was huge, with a production of around 20 items annually, and he touched upon most aspects of the study of ancient Greek religion, be it in a book or an article, in a footnote or an in-depth argument. This volume constitutes a re-reading of Nilsson in the light of new ancient evidence, and modern methods and theoretical approaches.

Five leading researchers in this field of religion revisit major works of Nilsson's oeuvre—*Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, vols 1 and 2 (Jon Mikalson and Eftychia Stavrianopoulou), *Greek folk religion* (Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge), *Minoan-Mycenaean religion* (Matthew Haysom) and *Greek piety* (Michael D. Konaris)—in order to explore whether his works today are mainly touched upon with just the usual obligatory references or if they still have an active impact on contemporary discourses. Hopefully, this undertaking will stimulate others to explore the vast landscape of Nilsson's work in the future.

<https://doi.org/10.30549/actaath-8-24>

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## Nilsson in the Bronze Age

The place of prehistory in the history of Greek religion

Martin P. Nilsson's *Minoan-Mycenaean religion*

### Abstract

This paper discusses Martin P. Nilsson's contribution to scholarship on religion during the Bronze and Iron Age of Greece. Nilsson's critical method made him outstanding amongst contemporary scholars of prehistoric religion. But he had a much smaller dataset than that available to scholars today. This paper situates his work in the historiography of the subject in three ways. First, it summarizes his reconstruction of Bronze Age Aegean religion and its continuity into the Classical period. Second, it compares his work with that of other scholars of his time in order to gauge the nature of his distinctive contribution. Third, it examines how some of his key arguments have fared in the time since they were made.

In the 1970s Mircea Eliade, who could claim to have taught half the professors of the history of religions in the United States, wrote up his teaching lectures in three volumes under the title *The history of religious ideas*.<sup>1</sup> The section on Crete and pre-Hellenic religion was founded on the work of four scholars: Charles Picard, Axel Persson, Paul Faure, and Martin P. Nilsson. Eliade's imagining of prehistoric religion aligned better with that of Picard and Faure than with Nilsson. But today, of these scholars'

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<https://doi.org/10.30549/actaath-8-24-07>

<sup>1</sup> Eliade 1978, 129–138. For his impact on the study of the history of religions in the United States see Pals 2015, 227–261.

works, Nilsson's *Minoan-Mycenaean religion* is undoubtedly the most frequently cited.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, while Nilsson's contribution to the historiography of the discipline would be recognized by Aegean prehistorians, his status with regard to the study of Greek prehistory is rather different to his status with regard to the study of historical Greek religion. The reason for this is primarily empirical. The corpus of Bronze and Iron Age evidence available to us today that was not available to Nilsson in 1949 is many orders of magnitude greater than the equivalent increase in known literary testimonia over the same period.

The first edition of Nilsson's *Minoan-Mycenaean religion* emerged when Arthur Evans was only halfway through publishing his rambling, but encyclopaedic, discussion of Minoan civilization in *The Palace of Minos at Knossos*. The second edition of *Minoan-Mycenaean religion* came out too early to be informed by the decipherment of Linear B. Today, the palace at Pylos is the starting point for our understanding of the workings of Mycenaean polities.<sup>3</sup> Its archives, feasting sets, architecture and iconography are central to modern interpretations of Mycenaean ritual, religion and ideology.<sup>4</sup> But Carl Blegen's post-war excavations at the site began two years after the publication of *Minoan-Mycenaean religion*'s second edition. Today, an account of religion in the Late Bronze Age could include a good number of shrines and sanctuaries from the Mainland and islands, none of which were known to Nilsson.<sup>5</sup> The only examples of such places he knew of, where the identification would still be generally accepted today, were on Crete. Similarly, today we can point to a number of cult sites both on Crete and on the Mainland where continuous activity from the Bronze Age to the Classical period has been well established. Nilsson too could point to such sites. But the list in Nilsson and the list nowadays only minimally overlap. He was unaware of some of today's strongest cases, like Kato Syme and Mount Lykaion, while some of those

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<sup>2</sup> It may be that an Anglophone bias has some impact here, but even in French scholarship Nilsson seems to be more frequently cited than C. Picard. Several contributions to a recent French volume on Mycenaean religion, for example, cite Nilsson, but none cite Picard, see Boehm & Müller-Celka 2010. P. Faure's work remains known primarily for his pioneering prospection of Cretan rural cult sites rather than for his interpretations. Nevertheless, this work did have an important impact on our understanding of the overall complexion of Minoan religion as revealed by the archaeological record.

<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to Pylos see Davis 1998.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the place of Pylos in the introduction to Mycenaean religion by Palaima 2008.

<sup>5</sup> See below.

that had an important place in his discussion, like Delphi or the Argive Heraion, would no longer be widely accepted by scholars.<sup>6</sup>

Nilsson's prehistoric work, then, does not have the continued relevance lent to his historical work by its being an essential point of reference. But, he remains important from a historiographical perspective for two reasons. His work of the second quarter of the 20th century falls in a period of consolidation in the history of prehistoric Aegean scholarship, when two world wars limited the scale of new discoveries, and so a group of scholars, of whom, in the field of religious studies, Nilsson was the most serious, sought to synthesize the results of the first great wave of discoveries from the Bronze Age civilizations of Greece.<sup>7</sup> But it also falls on the cusp of a schism in the historiography of the religions of Aegean antiquity. From the 1960s onwards, Classical scholars, influenced by French anthropology, would come to increasingly turn their backs on questions of prehistoric origins as a focal point for study, at the same time that archaeologists, influenced by American anthropology, would come to increasingly reject the retrospection of insights derived from later literature as an interpretive strategy for prehistory.<sup>8</sup> After Nilsson the study of Classical Greek religion and the study of Aegean prehistory have grown increasingly divorced from one another. As a result, Nilsson's work would even today, I think, spring first to scholar's minds on either side of the divide, as a model of what any study that sought to connect the two disciplines might achieve or fail to achieve. In the course of this chapter, I aim to illustrate Nilsson's historiographical importance, first by summarizing what he had to say, second by comparing him to the scholarship of his

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<sup>6</sup> For introductions to Kato Syme and Mount Lykaion see, Lebessi & Muhly 1990; Lebessi 2009; Romano & Voyatzis 2014; 2015 (evidence of continuity at the latter would probably not have come as a surprise, but Nilsson 1967, 398, did not know of anything predating the 7th century BC at the site). On continuity from the Bronze Age at Delphi and the Argive Heraion see Wright 1982; Morgan 1990, 107–113; Antonaccio 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Muhly 1990.

<sup>8</sup> I refer here to the impact of Structuralism and New Archaeology respectively. The trajectory of change in scholarship was long, but one of the key moments was Detienne 1972, who radically reframed the archetypal fertility myth-ritual of supposed deep prehistory, the dying god, by placing the Classical Adonia in the structural oppositions of its own time. Another, just a year earlier, was the rejection of continuity from the Bronze Age by Snodgrass 1971 at the same time as he formulated new ways to write about emergent religious forms in the archaeological record by embedding them in the social and economic processes of their time. De Polignac 1984 married these trends by proposing a structuralist interpretation of Greek sanctuaries that was partly dependent on the rejection of continuity of sacred space from the Bronze Age.

time, and third, by looking at how some of his key arguments have fared since their publication.

## Nilsson on the Bronze Age

Nilsson's view of religion in the palatial Late Bronze Age was straightforward. In theological terms, he argued that Minoan-Mycenaean religion was polytheistic, even identifying particular divine figures: a mistress and a master of the animals, a domestic snake goddess, a warrior goddess, a sea-faring goddess, a goddess of the tree cult, and an armed god.<sup>9</sup> He was under the impression that within the pantheon goddesses were much more prominent than gods. And he was convinced that these divinities could share characteristics: they could all, for instance, manifest as a bird. But he argued forcefully against what he himself identified as the prevailing consensus, which was for a single great goddess (variously named) and a lesser male consort: a sort of dual-monotheism. Alongside the gods he identified theriomorphic daemons, who he regarded as nature spirits.<sup>10</sup> In ritual terms, Nilsson's Minoan-Mycenaean religion would in many ways be relatively familiar to a Classical Greek, featuring animal sacrifice, libations and first fruit offerings.<sup>11</sup> But his description of votive dedication suggested something more akin to a potlatch than the familiar dedicative habits of the Classical period.<sup>12</sup> And he followed his contemporaries in identifying ecstasy and dance in the gestures of figures in sphragistics imagery.<sup>13</sup> In spatial and social terms, he argued that there were no temples. Gods, where they were worshipped under roofs built by human hands, were worshipped in small rooms within a house or palace.<sup>14</sup> Obviously, when within a palace, this essentially domestic cult became closely aligned with the power of the ruler and the state.<sup>15</sup> He clearly also believed that the more usual type of sanctuary was an open-air cult space. He knew of only a few actual examples, principally on Crete,

<sup>9</sup> Nilsson 1950, 389–412.

<sup>10</sup> Nilsson 1950, 381–382.

<sup>11</sup> Nilsson 1950, 147–151, 229–231, 449–453.

<sup>12</sup> Nilsson 1950, 75; 1967, 264.

<sup>13</sup> Nilsson 1950, 275–277.

<sup>14</sup> Nilsson 1950, 77.

<sup>15</sup> Nilsson 1950, 321–329; 1967, 345–350.



sanctuaries on mountain tops, like Juktas, or in caves, like Psychro.<sup>16</sup> But the iconography seemed indicative of a religion that was primarily conducted outdoors and the prominence of what he took to be tree-cult in the imagery allowed him to talk confidently of at least one other type of open-air sanctuary consisting of sacred trees within walled *temene*.<sup>17</sup>

Later scholars, thinking about Nilsson's place in the scholarship of his own time, taking the lead from Nilsson himself, focus on his argument for a polytheistic system.<sup>18</sup> Here the picture is not quite so straightforward as a polytheistic Nilsson rebelling against a monotheistic mother-goddess consensus. For one thing, as Nilsson himself pointed out, monotheists like Evans were not always consistent.<sup>19</sup> For another, between the publication of the two editions of *Minoan-Mycenaean religion* other prominent scholars—most notably Picard—were won over to a polytheistic interpretation of the evidence.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, Nilsson was not divorced from some of the theoretical background relating to the prehistoric evolution of religions that informed the mother-goddess school of thought. Nilsson used the stage of evolutionary development of the Minoan-Mycenaeans as a supporting argument on multiple occasions.<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, one of his reasons for rejecting monotheism was that for him this was redolent of an advanced syncretistic thinking—uniting functions into a single supreme principal—that was totally unsuitable to the stage of cultural development witnessed in the Late Bronze Age.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, when discussing the duplication of roles in the master and mistress of the animals or the haziness in the expression of individual divinities' identities, he says these result from the fact that Minoan-Mycenaean religion was only incompletely evolved from a belief in more undifferentiated nature daemons.<sup>23</sup> Here the concept of an early undifferentiated nature religion evolving into the functional definition of polytheism, which informed the idea of an early mother-goddess, can be seen in Nilsson too. As an extension of this, Nilsson was not averse to giving a vegetation cycle involving a goddess and a reborn and dying god a place in Minoan-My-

<sup>16</sup> Nilsson 1950, 53–76.

<sup>17</sup> Nilsson 1950, 262–272.

<sup>18</sup> Muhly 1990, 56; Peatfield 2000, 141.

<sup>19</sup> Nilsson 1950, 392, n. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Picard 1948, 73–84.

<sup>21</sup> For more on Nilsson in the context of the evolutionary thinking of his time see V. Pirenne-Delforge in this volume.

<sup>22</sup> Nilsson 1950, 392–393, 396.

<sup>23</sup> Nilsson 1950, 383.

cenaeen religion. After all, “these ideas are of such general occurrence”, he said “that it would not be at all surprising to find them among the Minoan people also.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the continuation of such ideas into the Classical period became one of his several forms of continuity.

Another distinctive feature of Nilsson’s version of Late Bronze Age religion seems, by contrast to his views on polytheism, to have escaped later scholars’ attention. This is largely because Nilsson himself did not draw much explicit attention to it. In contrast to many contemporary scholars, Nilsson avoided the term priest, almost completely. Evans frequently used the term, sometimes in outlandish combinations. Evans imagined the occupant of the Minoan villa at Nirou Chani, for example, as a sort of merchant-archpriest in charge of propagating Minoan religion to overseas unbelievers.<sup>25</sup> Picard identified both priests and priestesses.<sup>26</sup> Even Persson, focused on the mythical and theological, nevertheless identified a eunuch high priest of the Anatolian mountain goddess on a seal from the Vapheio.<sup>27</sup> But, although Nilsson does refer to a priest-king, he does not identify priests and only in one case mentions a priestess.<sup>28</sup> Instead, he usually chooses much more neutral terms like devotees or celebrants for the figures in imagery. This is particularly noticeable in his discussion of certain specific types of male dress that he refers to as “sacral”.<sup>29</sup> Most of his contemporaries would quickly make the step from this identification to identifying as priests the figures wearing these forms of dress. Indeed, even more recent scholars have done just that.<sup>30</sup> But Nilsson, strikingly, does not. Why? The answer, I think, lies in his understanding of the spatial and, by extension, the social place of religion in the Late Bronze Age. The close alignment of the cult of the domestic palatial goddess and the ruler justifies the labelling of the latter as priest-king. But what would a specialized priesthood in a society with important domestic shrines but lacking specialized temples look like?

This caution over terminology brings us to the element of Nilsson’s scholarship that most accounts for his later high reputation: his method.

<sup>24</sup> Nilsson 1950, 403.

<sup>25</sup> Evans 1928, 284–285.

<sup>26</sup> Picard 1948, 159–161.

<sup>27</sup> Persson 1942, 146.

<sup>28</sup> Nilsson 1950, 155.

<sup>29</sup> Nilsson 1950, 155–164.

<sup>30</sup> For the discussion of these figures including earlier bibliography see Marinatos 1993, 127–146; Blakolmer 2008, 262–263.

Nilsson is remarkable for always making his methodology explicit in its application. His work is marked by a discipline in ordering the discussion according to certainty and making clear the foundations of the prehistoric material evidence before bringing in external insights. Again and again, Nilsson clarifies the borders of the evidence and the distinction between the raw material and the parallels or later narratives that he uses to aid interpretation. Nilsson did make assumptions and, as I have already made clear, these were explicitly grounded in a similar evolutionary model of religion that was informing the work of his contemporaries. But the tenor of his work is markedly different from a scholar like Evans. Where, for Evans, the interpretation seems intuitive and, as a result, the conclusions emerge as unavoidable, for Nilsson the foundations of the interpretation both empirical and theoretical are clear and, as a result, the conclusions emerge as contingent.

## Nilsson on continuity

Nilsson's views on continuity take up less than a third of the second edition of *Minoan-Mycenaean religion*. But it was the issue that framed his overall discussion and that drove his interest in prehistory. Nilsson discerned quite a variety of different strands of continuity between the Bronze Age and Classical period, but, in keeping with his methodology, ordered them strictly according to certainty.

Most certain was the continuation and transformation of the snake-handling domestic palace goddess into the female poliadic deities Athena and Hera.<sup>31</sup> For Nilsson the firm ground on which this was placed was the continuity of cult place. The temples to these divinities sited immediately in the ruins of old palaces on the Athenian acropolis, at Mycenae, Tiryns and supposedly the Argive Heraion. But this firm ground was only the start: the connection could be proved by pointing to the affinities between the Bronze Age and Classical divinities—such as Athena's snake or her role in sponsoring heroes.

Next in certainty was the transformation of the Bronze Age Mistress of the Animals into a number of Classical figures—Artemis, Eilithyia, Ariadne and Helen.<sup>32</sup> Here proof was centred on the continuity of the motif termed the *potnia theron* between the Bronze Age and the Archaic

<sup>31</sup> Nilsson 1950, 485–503.

<sup>32</sup> Nilsson 1950, 503–532.

period. But again, Nilsson supported this firm ground by drawing in parallels between the mythical identities of the Classical personalities and elements that he had drawn out as important in Minoan-Mycenaean religion in the earlier portion of the book. The divine personality he refers to as the “popular” Artemis, for example, was “associated with the orgiastic dance and the sacred bough, both common features of Minoan cult.”<sup>33</sup>

Here Nilsson makes a firm distinction: up to this point proof by external continuity (archaeological continuity at a site, iconographic continuity, or etymology) had been confirmed by internal affinity between the Minoan and Greek deities. These two forms of continuity were therefore well founded—Nilsson’s language suggested he regarded them as essentially proven. Another form of continuity could be identified: “where elements of strikingly un-Greek appearance are found in Greek religion and where this is in districts that were thoroughly permeated by Minoan influence.”<sup>34</sup> But here, as he repeatedly emphasized, the identification was hypothetical—unproven. Not least because, as he immediately acknowledged, the identification of un-Greek elements is highly subjective. It was in this hypothetical category that Nilsson placed the continuity of a vegetation god, a divine child that is annually born and dies. This Minoan divinity, in Nilsson’s scheme, contributed to the cultic identity of a variety of gods and heroes in the Classical period; most directly, of course, to the Cretan-born Zeus, but also to Hyakinthos, the Eleusinian Ploutos, Kekrops, Erichthonios, Erechtheus and even “Thracian” Dionysos.<sup>35</sup>

Noticeable, here, is what Nilsson does with an argued continuity that was central to other contemporary accounts of the relationship between Bronze Age and Classical religion, such as that of Persson.<sup>36</sup> He accepts the case but tames it somewhat. Not making any mention of some of the more outlandish connections that Persson had made to illustrate the continuity of a vegetation god, and clearly demarking this as a more hypothetical form of continuity. Most importantly, he drew a sharp distinction between the certain continuity of the *potnia theon* and the much more uncertain continuity of the vegetation god, whereas Persson had used the former as a principal support for his proposal of the latter.

One trend that has run through the historiographical reception of Nilsson’s work is to cast his polytheistic interpretation as opposed to

<sup>33</sup> Nilsson 1950, 509.

<sup>34</sup> Nilsson 1950, 533.

<sup>35</sup> Nilsson 1950, 534–583.

<sup>36</sup> Persson 1942.

the idea of the mother-goddess and cyclical vegetation god that dominated other literature of the time.<sup>37</sup> This is a theme that appears as early as Alan J.B. Wace's review of the first edition of *Minoan-Mycenaean religion*, where Wace talks in glowing terms, contrasting Nilsson with the "school of Frazer".<sup>38</sup> In a review of the historiography of Minoan religion published in 1990 this is identified as Nilsson's main contribution.<sup>39</sup> The picture, however, is a little more complicated. Nilsson seems to have been an admirer of Sir James George Frazer, who wrote the preface to the English edition of his *A history of Greek religion*, apparently at Nilsson's invitation.<sup>40</sup> His notion that a vegetation cult is so widespread as to be reasonably safely assumed for the Aegean Bronze Age is clearly derived from Frazer. What was distinctive about Nilsson was his placing of this as a hypothetical element within a polytheistic system, other parts of which could be more securely established.

One modern critique of Nilsson is to do with his supposed conflation of Minoan and Mycenaean religion.<sup>41</sup> Here again, the lead was given by Nilsson himself, who acknowledged that he gave too little attention to the issue in the first edition of *Minoan-Mycenaean religion* and expressed some dissatisfaction with the degree to which he was able to distinguish the two in the second.<sup>42</sup> In the first volume of *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, Nilsson adopted a more signposted division between Minoan and Mycenaean. But, other than more clearly delineating a Mycenaean phase to the cult of the palace goddess, this had little impact on the overall picture he sketched.<sup>43</sup> In large part this was because Nilsson's focus had always been primarily on the connection between Bronze Age and Classical religion. And, from the first edition of *Minoan-Mycenaean religion*, he had already identified two forms of continuity that highlighted the distinctions he perceived between the two cultures. He argued that hero cult had developed out of Mycenaean burial practices and afterlife beliefs, but that hero cult was absent from Crete because these beliefs and practices were not shared by the Minoans. The concept of Elysium and

<sup>37</sup> For an in-depth discussion of how this idea emerged in the pioneering works of A. Evans, under the influence of J.G. Frazer and J. Harrison, see Eller 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Wace 1928.

<sup>39</sup> Muhly 1990, 56.

<sup>40</sup> Nilsson 1925, 2–6.

<sup>41</sup> Hägg 1985, 203–204; Renfrew 1985, 3, 394.

<sup>42</sup> Nilsson 1950, viii.

<sup>43</sup> Nilsson 1967, 256–384.

the Isles of the Blest, on the other hand, were echoes of the afterlife beliefs of the maritime Minoans, whose rulers were priest-kings rather than the champion-warlords ruling from Mycenaean citadels.<sup>44</sup>

Nilsson's efforts in discussing the relationship between Late Bronze Age religion and Classical religion were almost exclusively focused on listing the various forms of continuity that he believed he could detect and outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence in each case. By contrast, the mechanisms of continuity, the factors contributing to the processes by which elements of the religious system changed or remained constant receive little treatment. Most notably, Nilsson's views on the nature of Mycenaean collapse and the society that followed it are hard to pin down. Nevertheless, one primary mechanism of continuity is clear in Nilsson's writings and that is folk religion.<sup>45</sup> Greece, for Nilsson, was a land of peasants, whose subsistence lifestyles remained essentially unchanged for millennia. This unchanging peasant way of life was the deep well of religious continuity reaching into the depths of prehistory.

## Nilsson's scholarship today

I turn now to the fate of some of Nilsson's key arguments over the years since their publication. I begin with ritual. As might be expected of a scholar of Greek religion, Nilsson gave the ritual of bull-sacrifice a central place in Minoan-Mycenaean religion. He did this primarily by associating one of the emblematic symbols of the Aegean Bronze Age, the double-axe, with the practice.<sup>46</sup> Texts, iconography and faunal remains coincide in supporting the existence of bull sacrifice at the time of the Mycenaean Linear B administrations at Knossos and on the Mainland.<sup>47</sup> This is now understood to also be the period of the depictions of bull sacrifice that Nilsson knew

<sup>44</sup> Nilsson 1950, 584–633.

<sup>45</sup> This aspect of Nilsson's work is covered extensively elsewhere in this volume, particularly by V. Pirenne-Delforge. Perhaps its most lengthy and explicit statement with regard to prehistory is Nilsson 1925, 76–77.

<sup>46</sup> He was also sympathetic to the idea that horns-of-consecration represented the horns of sacrificial bulls, Nilsson 1950, 183–190, 229–231. Suffice it to say, there are other interpretations for the double-axe, see Haysom 2010 for a review of the options and an argument for a different interpretation. A longstanding alternative interpretation of horns-of-consecration, as an Egypt-derived symbol for “mountain”, has gained ground recently, Banou 2008 (which contains the earlier bibliography); Marinatos 2010, 103–113.

<sup>47</sup> Nikoloudis 2001; Isaakidou *et al.* 2002; Palaima 2004; Stocker & Davis 2004.



Fig. 1. “Mycenaean era” (LM/LH II–III) images of trussed bulls: A) CMS I 203; B) CMS II 6 173; C) CMS XI 52. Images courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg.

about, which depict a bull trussed and placed upon a table, sometimes with blood pouring from its throat or a sword piercing it (see Fig. 1).<sup>48</sup> Clearly, the form of sacrifice that was, in these depictions, most frequently celebrated in Late Bronze Age material culture and the form most celebrated in Classical culture are fundamentally different from one another.<sup>49</sup>

The decipherment of Linear B means that, unlike at Nilsson’s time, a major divergence now exists between the discussion of the “Mycenaean” Aegean, which is informed by the Linear B texts, and the discussion of earlier “Minoan” periods on Crete, which cannot be informed by an understanding of contemporary texts. In the case of the earlier period, scholars might sometimes interpret the appearance of terracotta bull-figurines in Minoan extra-urban sanctuaries or the appearance of bucrania in Minoan settlements as reflections of bull sacrifice.<sup>50</sup> But, there are no explicit contemporary depictions of sacrifice equivalent to the images of bound bulls on tables, which are found only later.<sup>51</sup> “Minoan-era” depictions of bovines emphasize unpredictable and dangerous forms of violence. A stone vase from Agia Triada seems to equate bull-jumping, where the

<sup>48</sup> For bulls and other animals depicted in this manner on LM/LH II–III seals and sealings see: CMS I 80; CMS I 203; CMS II 6 173; CMS II 8 480; CMS II 8 481; CMS II 8 482; CMS V suppl. 1B 3; CMS VI 422; CMS XI 52; CMS XI 258. For the same motif on the LM III Agia Triada sarcophagus see: Militello 1998, 154–167.

<sup>49</sup> The attested contemporary practice of selectively burning animal bones in particular circumstances has inevitably (re-)raised the question of continuity in practices surrounding sacrifice; for a cautious approach to this which emphasizes diversity see Isaakidou & Halstead 2013, 89–90.

<sup>50</sup> E.g., Watrous 1996, 84–85; Warren 2018. There is certainly evidence of meat-eating at some Minoan sanctuaries (e.g., Mylona 2016) but whether the mode of slaughter should count as sacrifice is a more open issue.

<sup>51</sup> See, now, Shapland 2022, 104–112, 213.



jumpers are trampled as often as they vault through the air, with boxing.<sup>52</sup> Bulls are paralleled with the quarry of the hunt and with fantastic or exotic beasts. They are chased by hunters over rocky landscapes and caught in nets like hunted birds.<sup>53</sup> Bovines twist in agony, pierced with missiles, in the same way as lions or agrimi (wild goats), prey of the hunt, are found similarly pierced.<sup>54</sup> Bucrania appear alongside the heads of hunting dogs and animals that are typically hunted.<sup>55</sup> Men spear bulls just as they do lions.<sup>56</sup> This extensive iconography, emphasizing danger, competition and the chase, provides a stark contrast with concepts of formalism, predictable repetition and control, which might typically be associated with the concept of “sacrifice”, and with the formula of control expressed in the later “Mycenaean-era” image of the bound bull.<sup>57</sup>

As we have seen, later generations identified Nilsson’s introduction of polytheism to the Bronze Age Aegean as his key contribution. As with sacrifice, the decipherment of Linear B has produced a parting of the ways in scholarship between the textually informed discussion of “Mycenaean” religion and the more purely prehistoric discussion of “Minoan” religion. In particular, Linear B has been decisive in proving that Nilsson was correct, at least for the final 150 years of the palatial Late Bronze Age—the period of the Greek administrative systems on the Mainland and at Knossos. There now seems to be no doubt that divine names in Linear B tablets reflect a polytheistic system in which some of the deities have names familiar from

<sup>52</sup> Koehl 2006, no. 651.

<sup>53</sup> Men with spears chasing a bull over a rocky landscape Alexiou 1967, pls 30–33 (from a later context but usually dated to the “Minoan” Neopalatial period on stylistic grounds, see most recently Poursat 2008, 244). Bulls caught in nets: *CMS* II6 48; *CMS* II6 49; Kaiser 1976, pl. 5. On the contemporary hunting of birds with nets see Papageorgiou 2014.

<sup>54</sup> Bovines pierced by missiles: *CMS* II6 38; *CMS* II6 50; *CMS* II6 68; *CMS* II7 4445; *CMS* II7 54; *CMS* II7 58; *CMS* II7 60. Lions pierced by missiles: *CMS* II6 8889; *CMS* II7 70. Agrimi pierced by missiles: *CMS* II3 126; *CMS* II6 60; *CMS* II7 57.

<sup>55</sup> E.g., *CMS* II6 92 (bucranium, boar head, lion head, dog head); *CMS* II3 196 (bucranium, bearded male head, boar head and dog head); *CMS* II8 208 (bucranium, goat head and another horned head).

<sup>56</sup> Compare, man spearing a bull, *CMS* II6 37; man spearing a lion, *CMS* IX 152.

<sup>57</sup> The complexion of the iconography combined with the sense the sacrifice should be present discomforts scholars. See, for example, the most extensive study of animal figurines, Zeimbekis 1998, which carefully observes the absence of evidence for sacrifice before concluding it must have existed. See also the shift in emphasis from sacrifice to hunting between Marinatos 1986; 1993. For an argument against the conflation of sacrifice and hunting see Bloedow 1996.



the Classical period.<sup>58</sup> There are even points of detail where the Linear B surprisingly resonates with Nilsson's discussion. Whether by serendipity or otherwise, the presence of both male and female versions of the names Zeus and Poseidon in the tablets, for example, cannot help but bring to mind Nilsson's extensive discussion of the replication of a single function in both male and female figures in the iconography.

Further back in time, in the main periods of Minoan palatial civilization on Crete, between the 19th and 15th centuries BC, the debate between a goddess-centred monotheism and polytheism remains unresolved. One line of scholarship noticed, as the available evidence expanded, that the packages of attributes that Nilsson had assigned to different goddesses in fact overlapped one another, thus collapsing the polytheistic scheme into a basic unity.<sup>59</sup> Pierre Lévêque and then Robin Hägg, by contrast, argued that the unfamiliar names listed alongside the divine names familiar from Classical antiquity in Linear B reflect hang-overs from an earlier Minoan pantheon.<sup>60</sup> Nanno Marinatos and Oliver Dickinson both argued that distinct packages of attributes aligned to separate divinities in the imagery were not necessary to representational schema in ancient polytheism.<sup>61</sup> The former cited Egyptian parallels and the latter Hittite to demonstrate that the Minoan imagery is compatible with a polytheistic system. Important studies have exposed the deeply flawed theoretical foundations of the mother-goddess idea: the way it emerged from 19th-century prejudices about "primitive" societies and arose from methodological approaches to comparative anthropology and folklore studies that have long been debunked.<sup>62</sup> This very same interpretation has been applied and then deconstructed, again and again, in the historiography of a wide variety of prehistoric cultures ranging from northern Europe, through the Indus Valley, to Mesoamerica.

One impact of the 1960s revolution in New Archaeology is that many scholars probably now believe that an archaeologist really has no business being so specific as to identify gods in prehistoric imagery. Nevertheless,

<sup>58</sup> Palaima 2004; Bendall 2007; Hiller 2011.

<sup>59</sup> See, in particular, Peatfield 1994, who gives earlier bibliography, and argues for a multitude of goddesses only after the *floruit* of Minoan civilization.

<sup>60</sup> Lévêque 1975; Hägg 1985. For a recent contribution to this line of argument, containing intervening bibliography, see Gulizio & Nakassis 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Marinatos 1993, 165–166; Dickinson 1994. Blakolmer 2010 usefully highlights the fact that discerning discrete deities in the iconography remains a problem into the period when Linear B attests to a pantheon.

<sup>62</sup> Talalay 2012; 2017.

it is still possible to find in the scholarly literature of the turn of the 21st century discussions of Minoan iconography that reflect acceptance of the goddess-monotheist school of interpretation.<sup>63</sup> The most recent contribution, which suggests the Minoans may not have had divinities at all and instead should be interpreted as animists focused on the forces of nature, might be welcomed for underlining that the possible interpretations of the evidence are much broader than the theist debate envisioned.<sup>64</sup> But, at the same time, it neatly demonstrates that the evolutionist theories of religion ascending from an undifferentiated concern with nature to more advanced forms, which ultimately informed the interpretations of Evans, Nilsson and all their contemporaries, are still very much alive and well today.<sup>65</sup>

In one respect at least we can, thanks to our increased knowledge, put an aspect of this debate on a firm empirical footing. This is the idea, which was held by Nilsson and all his contemporaries, together with the vast majority of scholars since, that Minoan imagery is dominated by female figures and that there are, therefore, far more candidates for goddesses than there are for gods. In fact, the relative representation of male and female figures in Minoan iconography is highly medium specific. Outside the Palace of Knossos (where chronological issues too complex to get into here cloud the picture) all wall paintings on Crete from the period of the *floruit* of Minoan civilization, the so-called Neopalatial period, that depict large-scale anthropomorphic figures, do depict women.<sup>66</sup> But the relief stone vases from the same period, which are also some of the finest pieces of Minoan craftsmanship and naturalistic imagery, exclusively depict men.<sup>67</sup> Three-dimensional ivory figurines are exclusively male, three-dimensional faience figurines are exclusively female.<sup>68</sup> In extra-urban sanctuary deposits with large numbers of anthropomorphic figurines, where proportions of the two sexes are reported, the majority are usually said to be male.<sup>69</sup> In the case of sphragistic

<sup>63</sup> E.g., Immerwahr 1990, 50; Chapin 2004, 54.

<sup>64</sup> For example: Morris & Peatfield 2002; 2004; Herva 2006a; 2006b; Peatfield & Morris 2012; Tully & Crooks 2015. A very important alternative perspective on animism is Shapland 2013; 2022, 37–39.

<sup>65</sup> An evolutionist model can today be found in both introductory textbooks and high-profile monographs, e.g., Steadman 2009; Bellah 2011.

<sup>66</sup> For a complete list of representational wall paintings from secure Neopalatial Cretan contexts see Haysom 2018, table 2.

<sup>67</sup> Logue 2004.

<sup>68</sup> Lapatin 2001, 22–34; Foster 1979, 70–78.

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Petsophas: Myres 1902–1903, 367; Juktas: Karetsou 1981, 146; Kophinas: Spiliotopoulou 2015, 289.

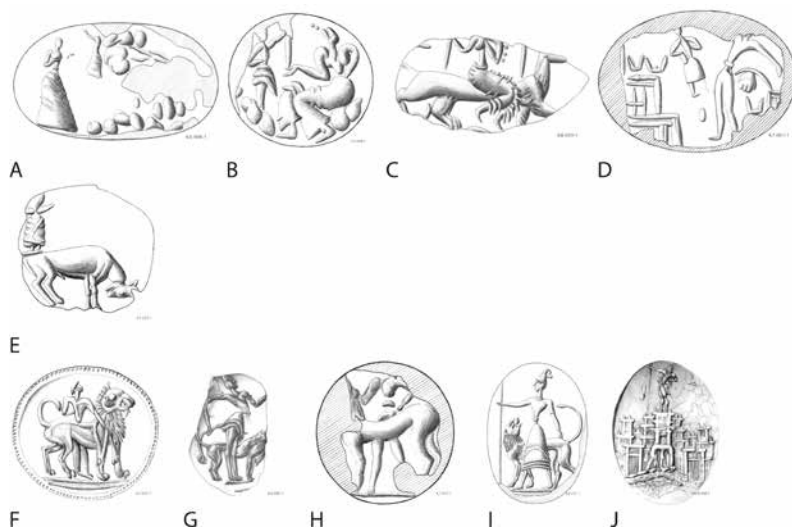


Fig. 2. Sphragistic images of men and women with supernatural characteristics from secure Neopalatial Cretan contexts (LM I): A) CMS II6 6; B) CMS II6 8; C) CMS II6 33; D) CMS II7 1; E) CMS II7 29; F) CMS II3 24; G) CMS II6 36; H) CMS II7 27; I) CMS II8 237; J) CMS V suppl. 1A 142. Images courtesy of the CMS Heidelberg.

imagery, the largest corpus of representational imagery from the period, male figures are substantially more common if you only count examples from a securely dated context, but that picture equalizes somewhat if you include in the count all examples that have been stylistically attributed to Crete and the Neopalatial period.<sup>70</sup> In short, there is no predominance of women in Minoan imagery. Indeed, even if we narrow our focus to those anthropomorphic figures exhibiting some supernatural attribute, such as the ability to fly, tower over a settlement, or be calmly accompanied by fantastic or exotic beasts, we find that female figures do somewhat outnumber male ones, but not by the large margin one might expect from the scholarly debate (see Fig. 2).<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the difference between 13 images of supernat-

<sup>70</sup> Out of the corpus of 131 sphragistic images from secure Neopalatial contexts featuring anthropomorphic figures, 54% feature only male figures, 37% feature only female figures and 9% feature both. The equalization of the male/female proportions that occurs if stylistically dated seals are included has much to do with soft stone images bearing simple abstract images of women that occur frequently as chance finds, but are rarely found in administration archives, for this type see Krzyszkowska 2012, 743–745.

<sup>71</sup> At the time of writing, there are eight known female figures with these supernatural characteristics from secure Neopalatial contexts: CMS II6 6; CMS II6 8; CMS II6 33; CMS II6 35; CMS II7 1; CMS II7 29; CMS II7 77; Rethemiotakis & Dimopoulou 2000; there are five known male figures from secure Neopalatial contexts CMS II3 24; CMS

urally endowed female figures and 11 male figures (with one image having both a male and a female and one image having a figure of indeterminate sex) is statistically meaningless.<sup>72</sup> There are a complex series of reasons why for over a century scholars have seen an unusual predominance of women in a prehistoric iconography where men and women are, in fact, more or less equally represented. But it is clear that the most basic empirical foundations of both goddess-monotheism and Nilsson's goddess dominated polytheism are flawed.

Ultimately, when it comes to a discussion of prehistoric theology, the basic trajectory of scholarship means that many prehistoric archaeologists would now regard Nilsson's starting questions as inappropriate to the methods and material of their discipline. The same cannot be said for the next aspect of his work that I would like to discuss: the organization of religious space. Archaeology is, and will always be, at its most basic, a discipline that must ground its interpretations on the distribution of objects in space. It is from spatial patterns of distribution and association that we reconstruct everything from the chronological schema, through

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II6 36; *CMS* II7 27; *CMS* II8 237; *CMS* V suppl. 1A 142. Including images stylistically attributed to Neopalatial Crete the numbers become 13 female figures (with *CMS* II3 51; *CMS* II8 256; *CMS* V supplement 1B 195; *CMS* VI 280; Sakellarakis & Sakellarakis 1997, fig. 718) versus eleven male figures (with *CMS* I 223; *CMS* II8 248; *CMS* V suppl. 2 106; *CMS* VI 278; *CMS* VI 281; *CMS* X 261). There are also some images, stylistically attributed to the Neopalatial, which either have both male and female figures with supernatural attributes (*CMS* VI 321) or that have a figure of indeterminate gender with supernatural attributes (*CMS* II8 193). There are a good number of additional instances of both male and female figures that have been excluded because of various uncertainties. We may strongly suspect, for instance, that the woman accompanied by two birds in *CMS* II8 257 or Rethemiotakis 2016–2017 is the same figure as that represented in Rethemiotakis & Dimopoulou 2000 but it is only in the latter that she is flying so the two former instances have been excluded. A similar case would be the man in *CMS* XI 28 and *CMS* XI 29 whom many would identify with the man in *CMS* VI 281, but again it is only in the latter that the figure has a size difference and is flying so the former cases have been excluded. Similarly, we might wonder if the creature accompanying a woman in *CMS* II8 239 is a cat or a diminutive lion and the creature accompanying a man in *CMS* II8 236 a dog or a lion, so both have been excluded. Ultimately, these and similar uncertainties tend to cancel one another out because of the overall pattern of equal representation of men and women already discussed.

<sup>72</sup> Chi square analysis shows that this difference between the number of male and female figures would occur by chance over 70% of the times that data was collected.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Chi square} &= \sum (\text{deviation})^2 / \text{expected number} = (+1)^2 / 12 + (-1)^2 / 12 \\ &= \sum 1/12 + 1/12 \\ &= 0.083 + 0.083 = 0.166 \text{ (1 degree of freedom)}\end{aligned}$$

trade patterns, to systems of symbolic meaning. So, any study of religion in prehistory has to start from a study of religious space.

Here, the sheer quantity of new discoveries has substantially altered the picture from the time when Nilsson could argue that all shrines in buildings were domestic. The key period was the late 1960s and 1970s when two developments fundamentally changed the picture. First, Stylianos Alexiou and Geraldine Gesell showed that the Cretan shrines that were at the core of Nilsson's category of domestic shrines, characterized by cylindrical anthropomorphic figures, cylindrical stands, shallow bowls and low circular or square tables, were not, as had once been thought, typical across a long span of the Cretan Bronze Age, but instead were from a comparatively confined period at the very end—the 13th and 12th centuries.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, similar shrines containing cylindrical figures began to be discovered on the Mainland, which also dated to the 13th and 12th centuries.<sup>74</sup> In the light of these new discoveries, it also became clear that these shrines were not, as Nilsson had thought, small rooms within contemporary houses (the Cretan examples are often within the ruins of earlier periods), but were instead independently accessible spaces or structures that often have open gathering places immediately associated with them.<sup>75</sup>

The immediate impact of these discoveries can be seen in Colin Renfrew's seminal *The archaeology of cult*, which published one of these shrines and sought to synthesize the information on religious space from the rest of the Aegean Bronze Age. His discussion of religious space through time identified a major shift between the period of the Neopalatial *floruit* of Minoan civilization and the period of the 13th- to 12th-century shrines, which coincides with the end of palatial Mycenaean civilization.<sup>76</sup> In the earlier period, he said, there were no distinct religious spaces within settlements, instead, religious rituals were embedded in quotidian space and the distinct religious spaces were rural peak and cave sanctuaries. By the later period, distinct sacred buildings—we could hesitantly call them temples—had emerged more or less contemporaneously within settlements across a wide area stretching from Crete through the Cyclades to the Mainland.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Alexiou 1958; Gesell 1976.

<sup>74</sup> Taylour 1970; Kilian 1981.

<sup>75</sup> Gesell 1985, 41–56; Whittaker 1997; Prent 2005, 103–199.

<sup>76</sup> Renfrew 1985.

<sup>77</sup> Renfrew 1985, 396–398.

A book published in the same year by Gesell complicated the picture by attempting to trace the origin of the 13th- to 12th-century shrines in the material record of earlier periods.<sup>78</sup> Initial responses were unconvinced. Hägg, for example, pointed out that Gesell had pulled together a very disparate assortment of phenomena, none of which were clearly precursors.<sup>79</sup> In the years since, however, her contribution has proven to have had a much greater impact on Minoan studies than that of Renfrew. Nevertheless, Renfrew's chronological division remains, at least to the extent that in the 13th and 12th centuries there are good number of clearly distinct religious structures sharing certain consistent elements of a package of religious material culture. And the same cannot be said for the earlier period, where the distribution of religious items and features in settlements is more disparate, more variegated and thus more complex.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, headline debates in Minoan studies, like that over whether the palace was a ruler's residence or a temple, arise directly out of this complexity.<sup>81</sup>

This is not the place to dwell on the debate about the earlier period.<sup>82</sup> More interesting, in this context, is the impact that our current understanding of the shrines in the 13th and 12th centuries (that is to say overlapping the very end of the palatial Bronze Age) has on Nilsson's conceptions of continuity into the Classical period. As we saw, the form of continuity that Nilsson found most certain was continuity between the domestic goddess of Mycenaean rulers and the poliadic goddesses of the Classical period. Even though it consists of a cluster of discrete buildings around an open space, the cult centre at Mycenae comes closest to maintaining Nilsson's expectations for a palatial shrine.<sup>83</sup> There can be little doubt, given the size of the complex and its position within the citadel, that it served a highly restricted group and that it was closely linked to the ceremonial heart of the palace. Contemporary imagery suggests an intimate relationship between members of the élite and cylindrical figures

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<sup>78</sup> Gesell 1985.

<sup>79</sup> Hägg 1987.

<sup>80</sup> Symptomatic of this more complex picture are excavators perplexed by the distribution of "religious" material culture across their sites, e.g., Cunningham & Sackett 2009.

<sup>81</sup> For recent waypoints in this debate see Driessen 2002; Schoep 2010; Whitelaw 2017, 150–159.

<sup>82</sup> For a lengthier discussion of it and its implications for the history of built shrines in the Aegean see Haysom 2024.

<sup>83</sup> Taylour 1969; 1970; Moore & Taylour 1999; French & Taylour 2007.

like those found in the cult centre.<sup>84</sup> But the overall picture diverges from Nilsson's model in several key respects. Nilsson's interpretation anticipated the snake figurines in the Mycenae cult centre, which he would have seen as protectors of the royal household. But the multitude of cylindrical figures are not necessarily female. As we have seen the so-called "temple" shares features with other contemporary shrines, which are not closely linked to palaces or indeed to any élite residence. Those at Gournia and Phylakopi, for example, are on the edges of their respective settlements and, with no indication of restricted access or special connection to the élite, should probably be thought of as serving the whole community.<sup>85</sup> Most problematic of all for Nilsson's continuity firmly grounded on the continuation of sacred space, everywhere this type of shrine is extinct by the end of the 12th century. Only on Crete might the type have descendants, but even here, as Mieke Prent's study has shown, any thin strand of continuity is punctuated and complex.<sup>86</sup>

Nevertheless, the concept that there is some link between religion as practised in the Mycenaean palaces and later Greek religious space has not entirely died. It is just that the focus of attention has moved from the small shrines that were sometimes within palaces to the great hall that was the palace's focus. Pivotal here, was the work of Alexandros Mazarakis-Ainian, who pointed out the religious role of the Mycenaean *wanax* in his *megaron*, argued for the religious primacy of Dark Age chieftains dwelling in their halls, and suggested a connection between the latter and the temples that were built for poliadic deities in the 8th century.<sup>87</sup> One could build on this in various ways to resuscitate Nilsson's suggestion. One could point out, for instance, that the preserved iconography of the megaron at Pylos where the throne is flanked by lions and griffins reinforces the impression from the throne room at Knossos (dated a century and a half earlier) that there is an enduring iconographic connection between the royal throne flanked by antithetical griffins/lions and

<sup>84</sup> For wall paintings depicting people holding and carrying in procession cylindrical figurines like those from these shrines see Jones 2009; Maran *et al.* 2015, fig. 7; Papadimitriou *et al.* 2015.

<sup>85</sup> In commonly published plans for Gournia the shrine can appear to be in the middle of the settlement. But this is misleading as the shrine dates to the 13th century and most of the other buildings in the plan were destroyed before the end of the 15th century. Contemporary 13th-century houses were found exclusively to the west and south of the shrine, suggesting it occupied a hill on the edge of its contemporary community.

<sup>86</sup> Prent 2005, 424–441.

<sup>87</sup> Mazarakis-Ainian 1997.



the female figure in sphragistic imagery who is similarly flanked.<sup>88</sup> By this means we could revive Nilsson's king-sponsoring goddess. Next, we could point to Tiryns where the excavators have shown how the palatial megaron after its destruction was replaced by a large hall that must have been a focal point for the community.<sup>89</sup> Or we could point to detailed studies, like that at Mitrou, where the pottery from a "Dark Age" hall suggests that some of the events it hosted were indeed distinct from the domestic norm.<sup>90</sup>

The problem is that once we raise our eyes from chasing all the connections that could still support some version of Nilsson's argument, to the wider context revealed to us by our rapidly advancing understanding of the years following the collapse of the Mycenaean palace, these individual elements quickly disperse into the bigger picture and the thread of continuity dissolves. First, now we have, at sites like Kalapodi, indications of distinct religious structures throughout the so-called Dark Ages, reducing the need for religion to be confined for a period to the chieftain's house before re-emerging into its own space with the onset of the *polis*, as imagined by Mazarakis-Ainian.<sup>91</sup> Second, as the period following the decline of the palaces increasingly emerges as a more self-confident and dynamic one than previous generations of scholars could have imagined, we can now observe how it deliberately rejected or reinterpreted palatial ideology. At Tiryns, for instance, it is noticeable that the new hall moves the palatial hearth outdoors, where it could have illuminated a much larger group of people, and fails to reproduce the powerful and otherworldly imagery of the old palatial wall paintings. This latter is not due to technical deficiencies. Wall paintings are not that difficult to produce. The communities of the era were making some decorated pots (a much greater technical feat) that were far superior to their palatial predecessors and may have been beginning to experiment with newly imported metallurgical technologies.<sup>92</sup> A pyxis from Lefkandi, meanwhile, reinterprets the old image of antithetical griffins, once depicted with an imposing stiff regality, now with a gentle familiarity. Most problematic of all, the more we understand the continuity of some other aspects of life through the so-called Dark Ages, the more the discontinuity of religious space

<sup>88</sup> Lang 1969, 100–103; Hägg & Lindau 1984; Galanakis *et al.* 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Maran 2001.

<sup>90</sup> Van de Moortel & Zahou 2011, 292.

<sup>91</sup> Niemeier 2013.

<sup>92</sup> On this as an age of innovation see Rutter 1992; Thomatos 2006; Maran 2012.



within settlements emerges as a problem. Taking as an example Knossos, the results of the Knossos Urban Landscape Project combined with the studies of scholars such as Eleni Hatzaki have demonstrated how the settlement there remained a stable one throughout the period of the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization, through the Dark Ages and down to at least the end of the 7th century.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, it has now been shown that even in the Dark Ages it was probably a large nucleated settlement and not the ephemeral scatter of hamlets once imagined. Over the same period, we can observe a more or less continuous burial record, where long-term traditions are maintained alongside sudden innovations and gradual adaptations.<sup>94</sup> By contrast, the evidence for religious space is startlingly discontinuous. The Shrine of the Double Axes is abandoned at the end of the 13th century, the Caravanserai Spring Chamber cult is confined to the 12th and 11th centuries, the Classical sanctuary over the south-west wing of the palace is unlikely to predate the 9th century, while other known Classical sanctuaries cannot be shown to predate the Archaic period.<sup>95</sup> Here, I would say the pressing interpretive need facing scholars today is precisely the opposite of that which faced Nilsson. Whereas he sought dim strands of continuity within a largely dark and disjointed broader picture, the challenge today at a site like Knossos is to account for religious discontinuity in an increasingly illuminated and articulated bigger picture of continuity.

This brings me to the final aspect of Nilsson's work that I would like to talk about, his precise conception of continuity. I stated at the beginning of this paper that the time since Nilsson had been marked by both classicists and archaeologists turning away from questions of continuity. As a broad-brush statement of the direction of travel this statement is fair. But, as always, in detail things are more complicated. Nilsson continued to provide inspiration to a variety of prominent scholars of Greek religion even after the general tenor of the discipline changed. I give two examples of very different kinds of scholars to illustrate the point.

The treatment of prehistoric religion in Walter Burkert's *Greek religion* owes a great deal to Nilsson's account. Burkert explicitly talks about Nilsson as the most important scholar of Greek religion to have preceded him.<sup>96</sup> His approach to the evidence is similar to that of Nilsson—pro-

<sup>93</sup> Hatzaki 2005; Kotsonas *et al.* 2018.

<sup>94</sup> Coldstream & Catling 1996.

<sup>95</sup> Prent 2004.

<sup>96</sup> Burkert 1985, 2.

gressing from prehistory forwards and from the Classical period backwards and grounding the strongest arguments where the two progressions meet, but at the same time being happy to assemble rather isolated and disconnected pieces of evidence into a general trajectory of continuity. He follows Nilsson in particular instances such as his discussion of the origins of Hermes.<sup>97</sup> And he shares Nilsson's general model of continuity as deriving from the deep well of tradition provided by the unchanging lifestyles of Greek peasants.<sup>98</sup> In one respect, however, Burkert's account is radically different from that of Nilsson and that is in its treatment of foreign influence on the development of Greek religion. Nilsson had accepted some degree of this but in almost all cases quickly sidesteps the issue. More often than not, when there are common features between eastern religions and those of the Aegean he attributes it to the Anatolian origins of the Minoans. This makes his reading of continuity in some things—like the *potnia theron*—radically different than that of Burkert and, indeed, most modern scholars, who would emphasize the fact that over the millennia between the Middle Bronze Age and Classical period the populations of the Aegean were under recurring cultural influence from the Near East.

Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood provides a very different example of a scholar whose work is influenced by Nilsson. Progressing over her career from an initial study of Minoan material to an extended interest in Classical religion, it is no surprise that she repeatedly returned to the question of continuity.<sup>99</sup> The influence of Nilsson is evident even in her latest works. For example, when in *Hylas* she unpicks the hypothetical diverse prehistoric strands that might have contributed to the Classical identity of Dionysos, it is no coincidence that one of these strands is a youthful Minoan god.<sup>100</sup> Where Sourvinou-Inwood departed from Nilsson was in her understanding that Nilsson's and Burkert's unchanging well of peasant tradition is, in fact, a myth. She, unfortunately, never gave a complete account of her vision of change from the Bronze Age to the Classical period. But she did give frequent glimpses of it, and from these it is clear her model involved religion being inextricably intertwined with a society

<sup>97</sup> Burkert 1985, 156.

<sup>98</sup> Burkert 1985, 15, 52–53.

<sup>99</sup> On C. Sourvinou-Inwood's scholarship see Kavoulaki 2018.

<sup>100</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood 2005, 171.

that, rather than being a well of unchanging peasant tradition, was undergoing profound top-to-bottom changes.<sup>101</sup>

It is in these two aspects that a modern version of Nilsson's attempt to write a unified account of religion from prehistory to the Classical period would have to depart from his paradigm. We can now see numerous moments where the conceptual world of people living in the Aegean was impacted by contact with the Near East: from the Minoan adoption of symbols like the griffin or the so-called *tawaret*, through the Mycenaean interaction with the global élite iconographies of its neighbours, or the "Dark Age" adoption by Aegean communities of Cypriot objects, technologies and monsters, to the revolutionary revisualizing of the divine world that accompanied the Orientalizing period.

At the same time, it is now clear that over the period between the Late Bronze Age and the Classical period the Aegean hosted a wide variety of societies that varied in every aspect from patterns of subsistence economy, through social structure to world-view. It is also now well understood that changes in one area of society profoundly change all the others. World-view and patterns of agricultural production, for example, will necessarily have warped as social structures changed. But, unlike Nilsson, we can now get numerous glimpses of these profoundly changing societies. From the small interacting villages of the Cretan uplands, with their bench shrines and cave sanctuaries, gradually crystallizing into the town-sized communities that later authors would have called *poleis*;<sup>102</sup> through the maritime settlements of the Euboean Gulf with their interactions with the long-lived sanctuary at Kalapodi;<sup>103</sup> to the inhabitants of the western Peloponnese with their ash-altar sanctuaries at Lykaion and Olympia,<sup>104</sup> we are close to the point that we can populate the period between the end of the Mycenaean palaces and Herodotos' statements about the nature of Greek religion, with a variety of living dynamic communities and their dynamic and distinctive religious systems.<sup>105</sup>

These two factors would make a modern version of Nilsson's book very different. The state of the evidence forced Nilsson to look at the disjointed evidence and seek to prove connections, thus resulting in "the

<sup>101</sup> Discussions of change and continuity can be found widely in her work but four of the most stimulating are Sourvinou-Inwood 1993; 1995; 1997; 2003.

<sup>102</sup> Wallace 2010.

<sup>103</sup> Kaiser *et al.* 2011, 12; Lemos 2012.

<sup>104</sup> Eder 2006.

<sup>105</sup> See, for example, Eder 2019; Haysom 2020.

question of continuity”. Today we have the evidence to describe in increasing detail a complex narrative that extends over the millennium and a half between the first cities on Crete and Herodotos. In short, whereas Nilsson had to structure his book around proving a point driven by a single question, now we are moving towards being able to describe the period almost as if we were writing a history.

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