

**Midwives of Eileithyia**  
**Tracing a female healing tradition in prehistoric Crete**

Vol. II

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## PART II

### TRACING A MIDWIFERY COMPLEX IN PREHISTORIC CRETE



## Chapter 5

### **The Greek Eileithyia, more than a childbirth goddess**

Naked as with the goodwill of Eileithyia  
you came forth from your mother's womb.  
– Call. *Aet.* fr. 7<sup>1</sup>

To begin this study of an overlooked midwifery complex in prehistoric Crete we shall be guided by the key elements of the methodological template devised in the previous chapter. As shown through comparative research, embedded cults of deities fostering reproduction are the most visible indicator of associated midwifery complexes. And given that birth-related practices and beliefs are extremely tenacious in premodern societies, ancient sources on midwife goddesses worshipped since the Bronze Age should shed light on therapeutic systems connected to their prehistoric cults.

In Greek mythology the primary goddess of childbirth was Eileithyia, a deity assigned a lesser place in the canonic pantheon, but broadly venerated in the Aegean and linked to a religious tradition stretching far back in time; as sound evidence attests that this likely pre-Hellenic goddess was worshipped on Crete in the Bronze Age (see Chapter 6). Our working hypothesis then is that the materials suggesting the existence of a full-blown midwifery complex in prehistoric Crete may be linked to her ancestral cult on the island. We will thus begin our research on this proposed healing system by critically addressing the Greek Eileithyia and her functions within the context of the stark realities of reproduction – the breeding ground of midwifery cult and practice – bearing in mind that the genesiac capacities of divine midwives whose worship is rooted in prehistory tend to be taken over by male gods in historical pantheons.

### **5. 1. Surviving birth: Metaphors, realities, and the male gaze**

Childbirth incarnates the continuity of human existence and constitutes thereby a primordial metaphor for the perpetuation of all other forms of life, physical and metaphysical. Yet in ancient societies life and death go hand in hand when bringing forth a child. Fateful uncertainty hovers over the woman writhing in labour, who embodies the inescapable; as in the birthing process she may become “two viable human beings, or one, or none” (Gaca 2007: 280). Speaking to the incidence of maternal death are Classical

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Trypanis at <http://www.theoi.com/Ouranios/Eileithyia.html>

Greek tombstones (Figs. 1-2), the pathos of which is occasionally emphasized by moving epithaphs (Blundell 1995: 110):

Mnasylla, the daughter you lament,  
Neotima, dead in childbirth  
In your arms, lies still in your arms  
On your tomb's pediment, the carved  
Eyelids misty. Aristotle,  
Her father, rests nearby his head  
On his right arm. A stricken group:  
Whose grief, even in the relief  
Of death, in stone goes unrelieved.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 1: Marble stele of a woman who possibly died in childbirth. A servant holds the newborn before her. Athens, c. 400 BC.



Fig. 2: Limestone stele of a woman dying in childbed supported by two females (the *maia* and her assistant?). Greece, 4th-3rd c. BC.

<sup>2</sup> Written by Perses of Thebes (second half of the 4th c. BC?). Preserved in the *Palatine Anthology* 7. 730 (Blundell 1995: 205, n. 22).

Physiological birth is rarely described in ancient texts, but imprinted in the collective consciousness is the overwhelming physicality of labour, the excruciating birth pangs, the cries, the blood shedding, the fear of a fatal outcome. So much so that in ancient Near Eastern and Greek literature childbirth is a metaphor for severe personal crisis, extreme pain, fighting, and death in the battlefield; birthing and waging war actually become images for each other (Bergmann 2008: 49-58; Loraux 1981; King 1998: 124). In the Sumerian *Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur*, the opposing armies are likened to two parturients drenched in blood; the wounded combatants are cast down in their own blood, “as if in the place where their mothers had laboured” (Bergmann 2008: 51, n. 135). A Middle Assyrian incantation equates the dying parturient to a fighting warrior biting the dust:

The (birthing) mother is surrounded by the dust(s) of death,  
Like a chariot, she is surrounded by the dust(s) of battle,  
Like a plough, she is surrounded by the dust(s) of woods,  
Like a fighting warrior, she is fighting in her blood.  
Weakened, her eyes don't see, her lips are covered,  
She doesn't open (them), the fate of death and the fate of silence, her eyes (...) <sup>3</sup>

In the Homeric tradition, birth pangs function as a paradigm for the acute suffering endured in the battlefield (*Il.* 11. 264-272):

While the warm blood was still flowing from his wound,  
Agamemnon strode around the other ranks  
with spear and sword and massive rocks. But once that wound  
began to dry and blood stopped flowing, then sharp pain  
started to curb Agamemnon's fighting spirit.  
Just as a sharp spasm seizes women giving birth,  
a piercing labour pain sent by the Eileithyiae,  
Hera's daughters, who control keen pangs of childbirth,  
that's how sharp pain sapped Agamemnon's fighting spirit.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Translated by Couto-Ferreira 2014: 292.

<sup>4</sup> Translated by Ian Johnston at <https://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/homer/iliad11.htm>

Sophocles resorts to the image of the parturient when he describes profound distress as “labouring with the heavy pains of misfortune” (*Trach.* 325). But it is Euripides who, in comparing the struggles of birth and war, best conveys women’s anxieties about parturition. His *Medea* depicts childbirth as the ultimate ordeal, worse than the battles waged by men (*Med.* 5. 248-251):

They say that we live safe from danger at home while they prove themselves in the war of spears. You fools: I would rather throw myself into the terror of battle three times than give birth just once.<sup>5</sup>

The stark realities of reproduction poignantly expressed by these literary passages are the breeding ground for the cult of divine midwives. The prehistoric roots and pervasive diachronic nature of such cults are better understood when recalling that in ancient societies childbirth-related conditions were the first single cause of death for women,<sup>6</sup> and that losing children to a host of maladies was a painfully common parental experience. It has been estimated that having three living offspring entailed having undergone as many as six pregnancies, since only one in two children survived to the age of five (Meyers 2016). In a context where the risks to both mother and infant were remarkably high – perhaps as high as 25% in each case – seeking divine protection through ritual practice was deemed essential to safeguard maternal and infant health; understandably, ritual action may not have fully alleviated the pressing concerns that led worshippers to enlist the service of deities overseeing this vital area of human welfare, but it certainly provided some relief and comfort (Garland 2013: 208, 223).

It is important to realize that antiquity was, as Parkin puts it, a very young world; roughly one third of the population would have been less than fifteen years old at any given time – the comparable figure today in the so-called developed world is about 19% (Parkin 2013: 41-42). For the rising generation, however, the likelihood of making it through the challenging stages of infancy and reaching adulthood was no better than 50/50 (Garland 2013: 223), since infectious diseases including diarrhoea, influenza, pneumonia, dysentery, meningitis, tuberculosis, typhoid and cholera took a very heavy toll on children (Parkin 2013: 48-49; Liston and Rotroff 2013: 73). Life expectancy increased significantly if surviving to one’s fifth birthday. But under that age mortality was notoriously high,

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<sup>5</sup> Translated by Bergmann 2008: 51.

<sup>6</sup> See Sayer and Dickinson 2013: 285.

particularly so during the first week after birth and at the end of breastfeeding; as full weaning, generally occurring when the child was two to four years old, entailed a change in diet associated with nutritional stress, reduced immunity and greater exposure to pathogens leading to many untimely deaths (Parkin 2013: 48, 55). One of the most impressive testimonies of the high rate of perinatal mortality striking ancient communities is the Archaic infant cemetery at Kylindra (c. 750 BC) on the Greek island of Astypalea, in use until Roman times. This necropolis yielded the skeletons of over 2700 fetuses and newborn babies inhumed in narrow-mouthed pottery vessels (*enchytrismo*) (Figs. 3-4),<sup>7</sup> thought to symbolize the maternal womb (Michalaki-Kollia 2010, Dasen 2013, Hillson 2009); on Graeco-Roman uterine gems (Chapter 4, fig. 44) and in medical texts the womb occurs depicted as an inverted narrow-necked jar (Dasen and Ducaté-Paarmann 2006: 240-241).



Figs. 3, 4: Partial view of the infant necropolis at Kylindra, and bones of a newborn preserved in one of the over 2700 burial jars that may have served as metaphorical uteri to foster the rebirth of the deceased children. Astypalea, Archaic-Roman period

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<sup>7</sup> A figurine of the Egyptian childbirth god Bes was found with the remains of a baby in one of the enchytrisms (Michalaki-Kollia 2010: 181-182).



Understandably then, women were very active in the worship of deities presiding over health, the reproductive transitions, and the growth and welfare of children (Fig. 5) (Dillon 2002: 31). Plato, who casts a disdainful eye on female ritual practices, stresses that all women engaged in ubiquitous forms of popular worship (*Leg.* 909e-910b):

It is not easy to establish temples and gods, and to do this properly requires great intelligence [*dianoia*], but it is customary for all women especially, and for people who are sick everywhere, and people in danger or trouble – no matter what kind of trouble – and conversely, when people have some good fortune, to consecrate whatever happens to be at hand right then, and to vow sacrifices and promise the building of sacred places or objects for gods, daemons and children of the gods: and because of fears caused by apparitions while awake or dreams... they chance to found altars and sacred sites, filling every house and every village with them, and open spaces too and every spot that was the place of such experiences.<sup>8</sup>

Ancient male writers, prone to view women as emotional and superstitious ‘others’, often regard the manifestations of female worship with a taint of suspicion and contempt (Wise 2007: 10, 36; Blundell 1995: 164-169). In the above cited passage from the *Laws*, Plato imputes women’s pervasive religious expressions to a lack of discernment. The Hippocratic treatise *On Virgins* (viii. 468. 13-14) scorns the customary offering of valuable clothes to Artemis made by young women who had suffered from abnormal bleeding during menarche (Dillon 2002: 20, n. 58). Aristophanes (*Nu.* 52) dismisses the (Greek) Genetyllides as foreign goddesses; while Lucian (*Pseud.* 11; *Am.* 42), who regards these divine midwives as deities of dubious character, sees their cults as playing upon the superstitions of women (Wise 2007: 36, n. 99). Negative gender stereotypes put forward to account for women’s manifold forms of worship also emerge in secondary sources. Hadzisteliou Price reports that, to explain the predominance of female statuettes at the temple of (the midwife goddess) Athena Lindia in Rhodes, the excavator “suggested that the form of everyday veneration was practised particularly by women because... they are more pious and superstitious!” (1978: 154, citing Blinkenberg 1931: 34). According to Teeter, in Egypt “women seem to have been particularly active in the cults of Hathor,

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<sup>8</sup> Translated by Stowers 2011: 46.

perhaps because they may have been less busy in the fields and workshops than the men were, but probably more so because Hathor was associated with particularly ‘female’ issues – fertility, childbirth, and love” (2011: 89); the latter a point certainly stronger than the recourse to women’s presumed greater idleness. When casting gender prejudices aside, the fact that women were subject to a greater degree of medical risks than men is the most consistent argument for their active involvement in the cult of divine protectors of birth-health-critical passages (Dillon 2002: 31); deities who more often than not were divine midwives.



Fig. 5: An exhausted newly delivered woman and her newborn (held by the midwife or an attendant), both alive postpartum. Marble relief offered to the unidentified healing goddess presiding the scene. Greece, 5th c. BC.

## 5. 2. Worshipping divine midwives, just a ‘female business’?

... not alone to women upon earth are there pains,  
but everywhere the birth-pangs are grievous.

– Opp. *H.* 1. 476<sup>9</sup>

Traditional scholarship tends to regard the cult of the so-called birth goddesses – and associated notions of fertility – mainly as a women’s business; one belonging to some kind of peripheral female ‘otherness’ to which half of humankind is too often relegated. A point must therefore be made to stress that women were not the sole worshippers of midwife-type goddesses. It is often argued that since Eileithyia facilitated childbirth, hers was essentially a ‘women’s cult’ (Burkert 1985: 171; Leitao 2007). However, we may reasonably wonder whether this argument is not somewhat misleading when considering, on the one hand, that the functions of supernatural midwives as facilitators of critical transitions transcend the domain of literal parturition; and on the other hand, that reproduction-continuity is a male business too. A brief overview of primary sources shows that Eileithyia and closely related divine midwives oversaw a number of male initiation rites and other rebirth ceremonies involving both genders; and that personal or family issues falling under the patronage of these goddesses, such as surviving (or not) childbirth, the wish for an offspring or the welfare of children, were, as might be expected, also men’s concerns.

Artemis, to whom Eileithyia was often assimilated, received offerings for a safe delivery, for recovering from gynaecological disorders, and on behalf of women who had died in childbirth; the offerings were made by those who had suffered, and also by their relatives (Dillon 2002: 20). The base of the statue of a woman named Chrysippe, consecrated by her father to Eileithyia, was found at Athens in the area where Pausanias (1. 18. 5) locates a temple of the goddess (Baur 1902: 15). We learn in Simonides (Frag. 166) that “Sogenes was born when his father Thearion was advanced in years and had made a prayer to the goddess, and the boy’s birth was as it were a favour on the part of Eileithyia”;<sup>10</sup> the goddess was thus deemed to have granted the old man’s wish of an improbable offspring. The models of men and women in sexual embrace (9th-8th c. BC)

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<sup>9</sup> Translated by Mair at <http://www.theoi.com/Ouranios/Eileithyia.html>

<sup>10</sup> Translated by Campbell at <http://www.theoi.com/Ouranios/Eileithyia.html>

from Eileithyia's cave at Tsoutsouros (Crete) (Fig. 6) strongly suggest that male worshippers also participated in the cult (Faure 1964: 91; Bultrighini 1993: 68; Prent 2005: 605); confirming that this was indeed the case are the figurines of male votaries occurring in the earlier prehistoric phases of the cave sanctuary (Fig. 7) (see Chapter 6).

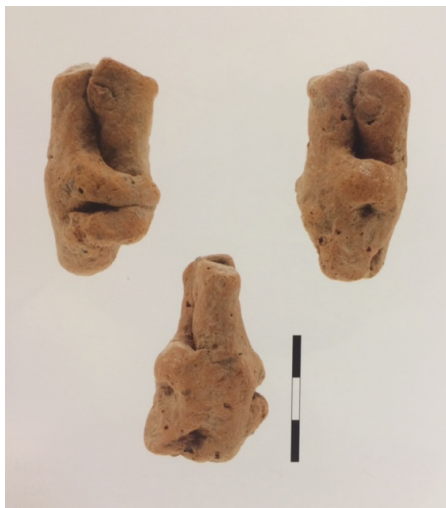


Fig. 6: Clay model of an embraced couple. Eileithyia's cave at Tsoutsouros. 8th c. BC



Fig. 7: Bronze figurine of a male votary. Eileithyia's cave at Tsoutsouros. 1700-1450 BC

It was customary throughout ancient Greece that parents grateful for the outcome of delivery dedicated their offspring to the deities protecting the birth process. In inscriptions from localities known to have hosted sanctuaries to Eileithyia, frequent mention is made of a father and/or a mother consecrating their child to the goddess (Baur 1902: 47; Parker 2005: 40 n. 12, 428; Leitao 2007: 256). From the inscribed base of a statue we learn that a couple from Paros dedicated their adoptive son to Eileithyia (Leitao 2007); significantly, in ancient sources “the ceremony of adoption is described as an imitation of childbirth, and adoption is a special rite of initiation. The stranger dies as stranger and is born again as a member of the clan” (Willettts 1955: 63).<sup>11</sup> On Delos, boys and girls entering puberty

<sup>11</sup> As Leitao suggests, the couple from Paros might have placed their adoptive son under Eileithyia's protection to present themselves as ‘natural’ birth parents (2007: 262). In New Guinea, when someone is adopted into a group not his/her own, as part of the ceremony of adoption he/she must suckle milk from the breast of a local woman; only then does the adoptee become a true new member of the society (Simoons and Baldwin 1982: 436 n. 6).

offered their hairlocks to Hyperoche and Laodice, divine midwives closely associated with Eileithyia (Sale 1961: 76-77, 79).<sup>12</sup> Similarly, during the Athenian festival of the Apatouria youths dedicated their hair to Artemis; boys upon joining the ephebes, and girls at marriage (Calame 1997: 133, n. 51). At Sparta, where Artemis Orthia was venerated along with Eileithyia,<sup>13</sup> the priestesses of Artemis oversaw the initiation of male youths entering adulthood, who were subject to ritual flogging (Paus. 3. 16. 9-11); a controlled bloodletting ceremony possibly imitating girls' initiation into womanhood, namely menarche rites.<sup>14</sup> Thirteen inscriptions dedicated by both men and women at the temple of Artemis Eileithyia in Chaeronea record the manumission of slaves under the auspices of the goddess, who may have presided over their 'rebirth' into the status of free persons (Leitao 2007: 262).

Some ancient Greek festivals and cult practices such as the Thesmophoria, the Athenian Skira or ritual maenadism were restricted to women (Dillon 2002: 109-138; Leitao 2007: 252; Blundell 1995: 163-169).<sup>15</sup> However, while some cults specifically excluded men or women occasionally or on a regular basis, in general sanctuaries/temples and cults were open to both genders (Dillon 2002: 239). As elsewhere in the ancient world, in Greece the worship of divine midwives had deep roots. Primary sources record a plethora of supernatural helpers presiding over life-cycle transitions, reproductive issues and general welfare who were venerated according to local traditions. Among such helpers are Eileithyia (Figs. 8-9, 14-15), the Moirai, Nymphs (Fig. 10), Erinyes, Eumenides, Genetyllides/Gennaiides; Artemis, Hera, Hekate, Leto, Demeter, Aphrodite (Fig. 11), Athena, Hyperoche and Laodice, Arge and Opis, Damia and Auxesia, Auge, Ariadne, Helen, Iphigenia, Lecho, Babo; as well as a number of male daemons or gods having therapeutic/apotropaic attributions over birth/infancy, such as the Cretan Kouretes,

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<sup>12</sup> In Hellenistic times, male youths in Paros offered their childhood hair to the healing god Asklepios (Leitao 2007: 259). At Athens, where his cult was introduced in 420 BC (Wickkiser 2008: 62-76), inscriptional evidence suggests – though the statistical sample is small – that fathers preferred to dedicate their children to Asklepios, whereas mothers privileged Eileithyia (Leitao 2007: 259-260).

<sup>13</sup> As indicated by archaeological evidence, a space was reserved for Eileithyia's worship within the *temenos* of Artemis Orthia (Kilian 1978: 222).

<sup>14</sup> Attested cross-culturally, male puberty rites that involve different forms of controlled bloodletting – including circumcision – often imitate the advent of menarche, women's monthly bleeding; in New Guinea the ritual subincision of the penis is actually called 'male menstruation' (Tedlock 2005: 199-200; McCracken 2003: 6-8).

<sup>15</sup> At Eileithyia's sanctuaries at Hermione and Olympia, only women served the goddess, and access to the inner sanctum with its sacred images was sometimes restricted (Paus. 2. 35.11; 6. 20. 3) (Larson 2007: 165).

Asklepios, or Zeus Hypsistos (Fig. 12) (Rouse 1902: 240-258; Baur 1902: 56-60; Sale 1961; Papachatzis 1978; Parker 2005: 411-415; Wise 2007: 28-47). Of all these supernatural protectors, the earliest attested is Eileithyia.

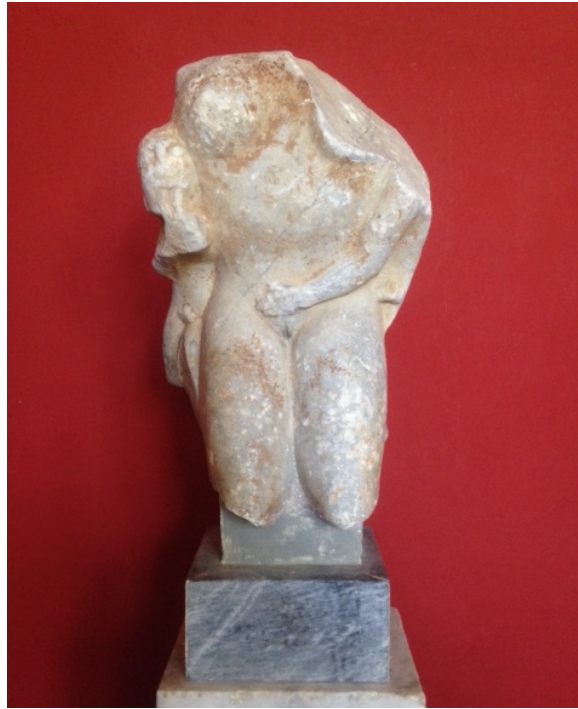


Fig. 8: Marble statue possibly depicting Eileithyia.  
Sparta, 6th c. BC



Fig. 9: Two Eileithyiai delivering Athena from the head of Zeus.  
Attic black-figure amphora, c. 540 BC



Fig. 10: Women, male youths and a boy sacrificing to the Nymphs, on an inscribed wooden panel from the cave of Pitsa nearby Corinth, a sanctuary also yielding figurines of pregnant females. 6th c. BC



Fig. 11: Marble votive of a swollen womb with incised vulva, bearing a dedicatory inscription to Aphrodite. Daphni, 4th. c. BC



Fig. 12: Marble votive breast offered to Zeus Hypsistos at Athens, where the god had no therapeutic function until Roman times

### 5. 3. Eileithyia, she who comes in deliverance: A demoted goddess 'older than time'

O Eileithyia, you free from pain  
those in terrible distress.

– *Orph. H.* 2. 10<sup>16</sup>

The early literary references to Eileithyia's ancestry make her the daughter of Zeus and Hera (Hes. *Theog.* 921-923). Or, in her multiple and probably most archaic form,<sup>17</sup> the Eileithyiai, simply the 'daughters of Hera' (Hom. *Il.* 11. 270-271), herself a midwife goddess.<sup>18</sup> According to the canonical Greek tradition, it was from her Olympian parents that "Eileithyia received the care of expectant mothers and the alleviation of the travail of childbirth; and for this reason women when they are in perils of this nature call first of all upon this goddess" (Diod. Sic. 5. 72. 5).<sup>19</sup> In Greek myth, Eileithyia is often subservient to Hera; performing as her single or multiple assistant, she becomes her instrument to take revenge on females (forcibly) impregnated by Zeus, notably in two instances.

Dispatched by Hera to prevent Herakles' birth, Eileithyia locks Alkmene's womb letting her writhe in labour. Mother and son are ultimately saved by the clever Galinthias who, outwitting Eileithyia, enables the safe outcome of delivery; for this deed Galinthias is doomed to become a weasel, an animal intimately bonded to the universe of birth (see Chapters 7-8). According to the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, when the god is to be born on the island of Delos (Fig. 13), Hera prevents Eileithyia from hearing about Leto, who ends up racked with labour pains for nine full days and nights; since birth cannot proceed in Eileithyia's absence. At last, bribed by the other goddesses, the divine midwife sets off for Delos to deliver Leto of Apollo (*HH* 3. 115-119):

And as soon as Eileithyia the goddess of sore travail set foot on Delos, the  
pains of birth seized Leto, and she longed to bring forth; so she cast her

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<sup>16</sup> Translated by Athanassakis and Wolkow 2013: 6.

<sup>17</sup> See Gantz 1993: 83.

<sup>18</sup> For references on Hera as a moon deity presiding over childbirth and menstruation, see Roscher 1886-1890, s.v. Hera: 2087-2094; Senkova 2016: 32.

<sup>19</sup> Translated by Oldfather at <http://www.theoi.com/Ouranios/Eileithyia.html>



arms about a palm tree and kneeled on the soft meadow while the earth laughed for joy beneath. Then the child leaped forth to the light, and all the goddesses raised a cry.<sup>20</sup>



Fig. 13: The labouring Leto holds onto a palm tree.  
Euboean red-figure pyxis, 400-300 BC

Eileithyia, usually in her double form, also attends a most anomalous delivery requiring a ‘cranial cesarean’. According to one of the foundational myths of Greek patriarchy, after swallowing the pregnant Metis (‘cunning intelligence’)<sup>21</sup> to forestall a threat to his kingship, Zeus gives birth to the cunning goddess of war, Athena, out of his own head (Hes. *Theog.* 886-900, 924-926). In the early representations of Athena’s birth it is the Eileithyiai alone who deliver Zeus (Fig. 14). But in the 6th c. BC there emerges a new iconographic theme originating in Athens that signals the demotion of the (multiple) divine midwife: Hephaestus (or Prometheus) becomes the facilitator of Athena’s birth by cleaving Zeus’ skull with an axe (Fig. 15), thus rendering virtually superfluous the role of the Eileithyiai (Cook 1914-1940: III, 662-726; Brown 1952: 135).

<sup>20</sup> Translated by Evelyn-White at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=HH%203>

<sup>21</sup> In other versions of the myth, Metis is suppressed and Zeus appears as the sole parent. The downgrading or removal of Athena’s mother in the story of her gestation-birth symbolically validates patriarchal control within the family (Blundell 1995: 28).



Fig. 14: Zeus in labour flanked by two Eileithyiai with upraised arms. Black-figure amphora. Vulci, 550-500 BC



Fig. 15: After splitting Zeus' head open with his axe to enable Athena's delivery, Hephaestus leaves the birth setting as the Eileithyiai receive the newborn. Athenian black-figure amphora, 575-525 BC

This myth asserting male dominance over the birth=creation process sanctions the appropriation of two domains exclusive to women. Zeus takes over the capacity to bring forth life, and the smith Hephaestus, acting like a surgeon, supersedes the midwife's function as obstetrician. Literary and iconographic sources illustrate the process leading from the demotion to the demise of Eileithyia. In Pindar (*O.* 7. 34-35), it is by the sole craft of Hephaestus and his bronze beaten axe that Zeus is delivered of Athena. In Euripides' *Ion* (452-455), Athena comes into the world without Eileithyia's help. A scene on an Archaic kylix portrays the parturient Zeus assisted by Hephaestus alone (Fig. 16): Eileithyia is nowhere to be seen and, quite significantly, Zeus performs the upraised-arms gesture auspicious of birth that is emblematic of the (supplanted) divine midwife;<sup>22</sup> suggesting that Eileithyia's power to guarantee the reproductive process has been appropriated by the chief Olympian god.



Fig. 16: Zeus is delivered of Athena by Hephaestus alone. The parturient god, holding the thunderbolt, displays upraised arms, the distinctive gesture of the Eileithyiai, who are absent from the birth scene. Athenian black-figure kylix, c. 550 BC.

<sup>22</sup> See above, figs. 9, 14-15; and Chapter 6.

Further illustrating the demise/supplantation of Eileithyia is Zeus' other anomalous pregnancy and delivery, that of Dionysos, the twice-born. As the myth goes, after striking dead the pregnant Semele with his thunderbolt, Zeus recovers Dionysos from the fire; a baby half-complete born ἀμαίευτος, 'without midwife' (Nonn. *D.* 1. 5), whom he keeps stitched into his thigh until full foetal maturity. Then, Zeus himself delivers the child from his thigh-womb, performing simultaneously as mother and midwife (Fig. 17).



Fig. 17: Zeus delivers Dionysos from his thigh without Eileithyia's assistance. Before him is Hermes, the messenger of the gods. Attic red-figure lekythos, c. 460 BC.

The midwife goddess has been superseded by the warrior god and the divine smith in the context of the consolidating Greek polis system, where metallurgy and the warrior have risen to prominence.<sup>23</sup> This process bespeaking of the decline of female status reflected in the divine realm is paralleled in the Near East and Egypt. With the rise of patriarchal cosmologies, the warrior supplants the midwife in the cosmic hierarchy of

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<sup>23</sup> Paraphrasing Eliade (1978: 53), in the Iron Age the smith takes the place of the midwife as he hastens and perfects the 'growth' of the ores, completing their gestation in the furnaces which are in some sort a new, artificial womb.

ancient Mesopotamia (Jacobsen 1973: 294). Ptah, the creator god of Memphis (Egypt), is a divine smith and sculptor who fashions human beings (Hart 2005: 128-131), thus fulfilling the genesiac function performed by the midwife in the earliest recorded religious tradition (i.e. Nintu in Sumerian mythology). The Greek Titan Prometheus, credited like Hephaestus with cleaving Zeus' head to enable Athena's birth (Eur. *Ion* 455; Apollod. 1. 3. 6), is himself said to have fashioned humans from clay (Apollod. 1. 7; Ov. *Met.* 1. 81) and taught them the art of metalworking (Apollod. 1. 3. 6). Interestingly, Etruscan representations of Athena's birth convey different cultural attitudes towards women. Zeus is invariably delivered by gentle midwife goddesses and the axe-brandishing Hephaestus is nowhere to be seen (Fig. 18); a deviation from Greek archetypes that reflects the comparatively higher status of Etruscan women (Kennedy-Quigley 2001).<sup>24</sup>



Fig. 18: Athena's birth engraved on an Etruscan bronze mirror. Three indigenous midwife goddesses perform the role of the Eileithyiai. 3rd c. BC.

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<sup>24</sup> The Greek historian Theopompus (4th c. BC) was outraged at the Etruscans, who in his eyes utterly lacked in decency because they let their women recline with them at banquets. "Greek disapproval of Etruscan women indicates that the conduct of the women of archaic central Italy did not conform to the standards of female behaviour in settled *polis* conditions" (Ford Russell 2003: 82).

In the Hellenic tradition Eileithyia is thus a lesser deity; the divine midwife even becomes dispensable to attend the birthing Zeus. In Greek mythology the functions of the goddess are largely restricted to easing or protracting labour; contrasting with the Sumerian Nintu, she is deprived of genesiac capacity. Moreover, in literary sources Eileithyia seems to be disassociated from *techne* as she displays no medical attributes; or, to be more accurate, none that is immediately apparent (see Chapter 7). But the secondary place and rather residual role assigned to Eileithyia in the Olympian hierarchy is in stark contrast with the actual popularity of her cult; a cult that was very widespread, as attested by the array of temples, shrines and cult statues consecrated to the goddess throughout the Greek world (Bruno 1989-1990: 40; Dillon 2002: 230; Themelis 2011). Among the places yielding sound historical evidence for her worship are Athens, Delphi, Chaeronea, Orchomenos, Thespies, Tanagra, Eretria, Kallion, Megara, Sparta, Olympia, Corinth, Stymphalos, Argos, Hermione, Messene, Eretria, Tegea, Aigion, Bura, Kleitor, Megalopolis, Pellene, the islands of Delos, Amorgos, Andros, Tinos, Thera, Rhodos, Astypalea (Fig. 19) (Baur 1902; Pingiatoglou 1981; Michalaki-Kollia 2010; Young 2014); and also Paros, where the goddess had a sacred well and was revered as an explicitly medical deity (see Chapter 7). As for Crete, Eileithyia's cult played a major role on the island, where she had sanctuaries at Amnisos, Inatos-Tsoutsouros, Lato, Aptera, and probably elsewhere (see Chapters 6, 8).

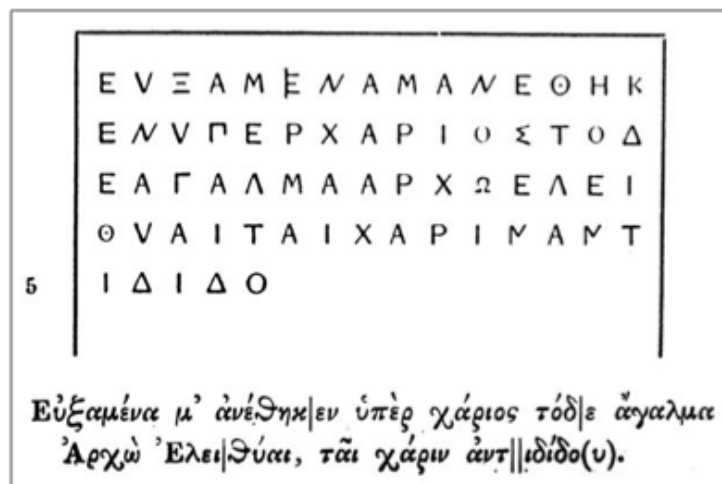


Fig. 19: Inscription recording the dedication of a statue to Eileithyia by a woman named Archo, in gratitude for a favour granted by the goddess. Astypalea, 4th c. BC

According to tradition, Eileithyia was born in Crete (Paus. 1. 18. 5; Nonn. *D.* 8. 178-179). Her Cretan origin was so revered in Greece that two of the three wooden statues of the goddess standing in her sanctuary at Athens were said to be Cretan offerings dedicated by Phaedra – daughter of Minos and Pasiphae (Paus. 1. 18. 5) (Hadzisteliou Price 1978: 81). Olen, the legendary poet who composed a (lost) hymn to Eileithyia, makes the goddess “older than Kronos” (Paus. 8. 21. 3), thus embedding her ancestry in the night of time. There is truth in the poet’s words. Eileithyia’s cult thrived on Crete long before the advent of Olympian religion; textual and archaeological evidence establishes that she, or her Minoan prototype, was worshipped at the Inatos-Tsoutsouros cave since the dawn of the 2nd millennium BC (see Chapter 6). It was hence from Crete, Eileithyia’s mythical birthplace, that her cult spread throughout the Aegean, the Peloponnese and mainland Greece, where in historical times she was venerated either by herself or assimilated to other deities such as Artemis or Hera, who bear epithets of her name (Farnell 1896: 608; Rouse 1902: 252; Hamilton 1906-1907: 353; Baur 1902: 60; Pingiatoglou 1981: 54, 93-94, 98-119).

The *Odyssey* (19. 188) mentions the Cretan cave sanctuary of Eileithyia at Amnisos, a religious landmark well known to those sailing the Aegean in Homeric times:

For the force of the wind had brought him [Odysseus] too to Crete,  
as he was making for the land of Troy,  
and drove him out of his course past Malea.  
So he anchored his ships at Amnisus, where is the cave of Eilithyia,  
in a difficult harbor, and hardly did he escape the storm.<sup>25</sup>

The name of the goddess is, however, first attested in the Mycenaean documents from Late Bronze Age Crete; a number of Linear B tablets from Knossos list offerings to *e-re-u-ti-ja* (Chapter 6, figs. 12-13). Scholars agree that *e-re-u-ti-ja/Eleuthia* is matched by Homeric Εἰλειθῖα (Ruipérez and Melena 1990: 191; García Ramón 2011: 235), but the etymology of her name remains contested. Many argue that the theonym is pre-Hellenic (Nilsson 1950: 446; Willetts 1958: 221, 1962: 169; Larson 2007: 164; García Ramón 2011: 235), as the diversity of attested forms of Eileithyia’s name in alphabetic Greek

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<sup>25</sup> Translated by Murray at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Hom.+Od.+19.+185&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0136>

points to a non-Greek form that has been hellenized in different ways (García Ramón 2011: 235); the local variants of the theonym are indeed plenty: Ἐλείθουα, Ἐλείθουα, Εἰλήθουα, Ἐλευθία, Ἐλευσία, Ἐλεύθουα, Εἰλείθεια, Εἰλιόνεια, Ἐλευθώ, etc.<sup>26</sup> Some scholars believe instead that the name of the goddess derives from an Indo-European root (Faure 1964: 87-88; Burkert 1985: 26), possibly a word stem meaning ‘free of load’ which would allude to her alleviating function as a midwife (Ruipérez and Melena 1990: 191).<sup>27</sup>

According to some researchers, the theonym would derive from ἔλευθ-/ἔλυθ-, the root of the verb ἐλεύσομαι, ‘to come’. Those adhering to this interpretation suggest that Eileithyia means ‘the Coming’, ‘the Comer’, or an invocatory ‘You who come’ (Burkert 1985: 171; Müller 2013: 282; Persson 1942: 131). Or, if considering the Cretan form Ἐλευθώ, ‘to bring’, Eileithyia would be ‘the Bringer’, a sort of *Fors primigenia* bringer of good things (Müller 2013: 282). To come in aid and bring life into the light are certainly distinctive functions of the midwife; in Arabic she is actually called *qabila*, deriving from the verb *iqbal*, ‘to come’.<sup>28</sup>

Eileithyia’s name has also been linked to the idea of liberating, namely to the root ἔλευθερ-, from which ἔλευθερος, ‘free’, and ἔλευθερεῖν, ‘to be free’, ‘to liberate’.<sup>29</sup> The goddess is indeed she who relieves/liberates from pain (Eur. frag. 696; *Orph. H.* 2. 10); among her epithets is λυσίζωνος, ‘she who loosens the girdle’ (Theoc. *Id.* 17. 60-63), a gesture symbolic of an easy delivery (Baur 1902: 67) reflecting the pervasive belief that knots/bindings obstruct labour. That Eileithyia delivers from bonds in a broader sense of the term is suggested by the aforementioned inscriptions recording the manumission of slaves dedicated to Artemis Eileithyia at Chaeronea. Like prisoners, slaves are deprived of liberty, and interestingly the protection of prisoners is a function shared by a number of supernatural helpers of birth; most probably because, like the womb, the prison is an archetypal place of darkness and confinement. This association is most ancient, since it is already attested in the Sumerian tradition: one of Nintu’s assisting midwives, Nungal, who cuts the umbilical cord and decrees the fate of the newborn, is also the goddess of prison (Ambos 2013: 251).

Noteworthy here is Agios Eleutherios (< ἔλευθερ-, ‘to liberate’), the Orthodox saint most closely associated with pregnancy and birth (Georges 2008: 126), himself a patron of

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<sup>26</sup> See Liddell and Scott 1996, s.v. Εἰλείθουα.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Faure 1964: 87-88.

<sup>28</sup> Dimitra Siliali, pers. comm. 5-3-2016.

<sup>29</sup> See Chantraine 1983, s. vv. Εἰλείθουα, Ἐλεύθερος.



prisoners.<sup>30</sup> Regarded as Eileithyia's successor in the protection of parturients and the liberation from birth-pangs (Themelis 2011: 23), the saint bears a name seemingly related to that of the goddess (Hamilton 1906-1907: 352). The old Metropolitan Church of Athens (Fig. 20), which stands in the area where Pausanias locates a temple of Eileithyia (1. 18. 5), is dedicated to Agios Eleutherios and Panagia Gorgoepikoos, 'She who rushes/comes hastily to support' (Giochalias and Kafetzaki 2012: 315); in its vicinity was found the above mentioned base of the statue of Chrysippe dedicated by her father to Eileithyia (Baur 1902: 15; Hamilton 1906-1907: 352-353). This Byzantine church was built on ground once consecrated to Eileithyia's cult (Cook 1914-1940: I, 175 n. 1), with *spolia* that may have belonged to an ancient temple, mainly ashlar blocks of Pentelic marble (Kiilerich 2005: 95). One such block displays carved torches and opium poppy capsules (Fig. 21); the torch is an attribute of Eileithyia as bringer of light=life, and the medicinal poppy a recurring emblem of ancient Mediterranean midwife goddesses (see Chapters 4, 7).



Fig. 20: The *Mikri Mitropoli*, the old cathedral church of the Archbishopric of Athens and all Greece, is consecrated to Agios Eleutherios and Panagia Gorgoepikoos

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<sup>30</sup> See <http://www.dogma.gr/imerodromio/agios-eleftherios-o-prostatis-ton-egkyon/14397/>. Other Christian patrons of both birth and prisoners are, for instance, Agia Anastasia Pharmacolitra, San Leonardo and San Domenico (Paolo Bello, pers. comm. 31-12-2017).

Agios Eleutherios' bond with birth derives not from any thaumaturgical events in his hagiography, but from the link established by folk etymology between his name and a woman's 'liberation', *eleutheria*, from the hazards of pregnancy. In Greece pregnant women are routinely wished *kali 'leutheria*, 'good liberation', that is to say a safe and easy birth. Among other names, the placenta is called *leutheri* because its delivery signals the parturient's final liberation from the endangering stages of labour. Women in childbirth sometimes clutched an icon of Saint Eleutherios, and if labour was difficult the midwife and her attendants would urge the saint to hasten the process: "*Ay' Leutheri, leutherose tin! Saint Leutheri, liberate her!*" (Georges 2008: 126).<sup>31</sup>



Fig. 21: Two torches and three poppy capsules carved on the southern door lintel of the church of Agios Eleutherios and Panagia Gorgoepikoos at Athens

## 5. 4. Conclusions

To sum up, Eileithyia's name is variously interpreted as she who comes, brings or liberates. We may thus characterize the divine midwife as she who comes in deliverance, since her advent brings on labour, the delivery of the child and the placenta, and the parturient's relief from the sharp pains of labour; in short, the liberation of both mother and child from the life-threatening dangers of birth.

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<sup>31</sup> The Latin transliteration of the Greek terms cited by Georges (2008: 126) is adjusted here.

Eileithyia is addressed as *κουροσόος*, ‘she who saves the children’, in a 4th c. BC epigram by Perses (*AP*. 6. 274) (Leitao 2007: 260). And the votives offered to her prove beyond doubt that she was worshipped not only as a goddess of childbirth but also as a tutelary divinity of children (Baur 1902: 9). However, Eileithyia’s functions stretch beyond the domain of human pregnancy-parturition and childcare, since according to literary sources she oversees as well the reproduction of land and water animals. Fourfooted beings are in need of Eileithyia (*Call. H.* 1. 12-13); the goddess “drives heifers lately relaxed from the pangs of travail to a dry resting-place high up among the crags”,<sup>32</sup> and “in spring the Eileithyiai deliver most part of the fishes from the heavy travail of spawning” (*Opp. H.* 1. 476).<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, as attested by the sources reviewed above, the divine midwife also presides over transition rites metaphorically replicating the birth process.

Contrary to common assumption then, the Greek Eileithyia was not just a *childbirth* goddess. We have underscored the stark contrast between her lesser status in the Olympian pantheon and the actual popularity of her cult, and addressed the process of demotion-demise she undergoes from Archaic to Classical times in canonical mythology, as illustrated by literary and iconographic sources on Zeus’ deliveries. Considering that the loss of status of midwife goddesses in the cosmic hierarchy appears to be a phenomenon associated with the consolidation of early state-level societies, it is likely that the broader functions of Eileithyia attested in local traditions are surviving features of her prehistoric Cretan predecessor. It has actually been argued that Eileithyia’s Minoan prototype was a more complex deity than her historical counterpart, probably performing a range of functions that transcended the specific domain of childbirth (Demargne 1929: 427, 1930: 200; Nilsson 1950: 518); an issue relevant to our research that will be tackled in the following chapters. Having introduced the figure of the Greek Eileithyia and pinpointed her various roles, it is now time to examine the evidence for the more ancestral Cretan cult of the goddess.

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<sup>32</sup> Anonymous fragment translated by Page at <http://www.theoi.com/Ouranios/Eileithyia.html>

<sup>33</sup> Translated by Mair at <http://www.theoi.com/Ouranios/Eileithyia.html>



## Chapter 6

### **The cult of the Cretan Eileithya**

Lying at the crossroads of Asia, Africa and Europe, and by far the largest island in the Aegean, Crete has a rugged landscape riddled with karst formations, underground rivers, and over 2000 caves (Rackham and Moody 1996: 24-31; Platon 2013: 154; Tomkins 2013: 59), many harbouring magnificent stalactites and stalagmites (< *stalassein*, ‘dripping’) formed over the ages by water dripping. Grottoes were the earliest places of worship in Crete (Rutkowski 1986: 65-66; Tomkins 2013);<sup>1</sup> concretions, at times resembling human and animal creatures, played an important role in the island’s prehistoric cult and may have contributed to the shaping of enduring myths, as some were venerated as cult images (Platon 1930; Faure 1964: 90; Platakis 1965; Rutkowski 1986: 10, 47, 50-51). Entering the damp darkness of water-dripping caverns in the flickering light of a torch, with rocks recalling animated beings, must indeed have been an awe-inspiring experience (Tyree 1975: 44, 56-57, 2001: 44; Rutkowski 1986: 47, 50; Tomkins 2013: 67).

Eileithyia’s earliest documented sanctuaries are grottoes at Amnisos and Tsoutsouros linked to therapeutic water sources. There is iconographic and archaeological evidence for the Minoan worship of baetyls (‘sacred stones’) in connection with ‘fertility’ rituals (Warren 1984, 1990); and it has been suggested that the concretions taken from caves to other Minoan shrines may be offerings to Eileithyia (Gesell 1985: 64). In this chapter we shall thus first address the pervasive association of grottoes, related water sources and rocks deemed to have generative power with birth, healing and the cult of divine midwives. We will then examine the relevant finds from the sites where Eileithyia’s cult is substantiated by textual evidence, and from those where it is assumed on archaeological or philological grounds.

## **6. 1. Life-giving caves, rocks and springs**

Embodying the moist womb of the earth/underworld, caves are a primordial locus of creation/origin and a common site of (re)birthing rites (e.g. parturition-postpartum, renewal, cleansing, healing, coming of age).<sup>2</sup> In ancient mythologies, they often feature as the birthplace of deities (Sporn 2013), possibly reflecting the

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<sup>1</sup> The Gerani and Pelekita caves have yielded Neolithic figurines (see Chapter 9).

<sup>2</sup> See Becker 2000: 54; McCafferty and McCafferty 2008; Hadzisteliou Price 1978: 84; Sporn 2013.

primal use of these sheltered and isolated spaces for female birth seclusion.<sup>3</sup> Eileithyia was reputedly born in her Cretan grotto at Amnisos (Paus. 1. 18. 5). And Rhea brought forth Zeus *Kretagenes* ('Cretan-born') in a cave on Mount Dikte or Ida where, concealed from his progeny-devouring father Kronos, he was raised on goat's milk or honey by tending nymphs (Amaltheia, Melissa);<sup>4</sup> tradition says that at a certain time of the year, when the birth-blood of Zeus overflows, a flood of light streams forth from the cavern (Ant. Lib. 19) (Cook 1895: 29; Postlethwaite 1999: 86). To save her child, the newly delivered Rhea tricked Kronos by giving him a swaddled stone substitute to swallow (Fig. 1); and when later Zeus forced his father to disgorge it, his 'reborn' stone avatar became the Delphic *omphalos* (Hes. *Theog.* 485-500), the 'navel' of the earth. This *axis mundi* was daily anointed with oil, and at festivals wrapped in unspun wool (Paus. 10. 24. 6) (Figs. 2-3); rituals which strongly recall the anointing with oil and swaddling of the newborn traditionally performed by midwives.<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 1: Rhea hands Kronos the swaddled stone.  
Roman marble relief, 2nd c. AD

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<sup>3</sup> Birthgiving in holy caves is attested, for instance, in modern Greece and Spain (Oikonomopoulos and Oikonomopoulou 2012: 664; Jordán Montés and Molina Gómez 2003; Fernández-Ardanaz 2003).

<sup>4</sup> On the different versions of the myth, see Picard 1948: 115-116; Willetts 1962: 214-218; Faure 1964:110-111; Crowther 1988: 39-40.

<sup>5</sup> As is recorded by ancient and medieval medical authors (Temkin 1991:108; Forcada 2012).



Figs. 2, 3: The *omphalos* stone 'swaddled' with fillets of wool on a red-figure krater, c. 425 BC; and Roman copy of the *omphalos* at Delphi

In traditional Mediterranean societies it was a deep-seated belief that certain stones had generative power. This is illustrated, for instance, by the proverbial Homeric phrase 'to spring from a tree or a rock' (*Od.* 19. 163);<sup>6</sup> the story of Deucalion and the stone-born people (*Pi. O.* 9. 42); the myth of Mithra *petrogenis*, 'stone-born' (Fig. 4); the Biblical portrayal of Yahweh as a life-giving rock (Politis 1921: 290-291;

<sup>6</sup> "For you certainly did not spring from the traditional tree or rock", says Penelope when pressing the disguised Odysseus to give an account of his birth and kin (*Od.* 19. 160-163) (Willets 1962: 67; Goodison 1989: 168).



Meinardus 1974; Goodison 1989: 167-168; 2009);<sup>7</sup> or the uterine/birth connotations of Delphi (< δελφύς, ‘womb’) and its navel, the baetylic *omphalos* (Figs. 2-3).<sup>8</sup> Behind this pervasive belief in the life-giving agency of stones could lie some empirically-based healing practices.

Among the ancestral *okytokia* (‘birth-facilitating procedures’) still recently employed by Greek *mammes* was the *tripoperasma*, the ‘passing-through-the-hole’. After administering willow leaves to the full-term pregnant woman, the midwife helped her crawl repeatedly through the hole in a big rock or tree trunk, a willow wreath, or the entrance of a small cave. The willow medication, rich in salicylic acid – an analgesic contained in our aspirin – relieved uterine pain; and the crawling further contributed to relax the cervix, thus helping the foetus move down into the birth canal. Another common *okytokia* was the use of *kilistres*, ‘stone slides’. The *mammi* gave salted bread to the mother-to-be and then had her slide repeatedly down a *kilistra*, a practice that may also have facilitated parturition; as the friction and sweating caused by the fast sliding and the intake of salt would have stimulated the pituitary gland – the release of beta-endorphins, dopamine, etc. – thus favouring both the relaxation of the cervix and uterine contractions. Infants delivered by such means were said to be ‘stone-born’, possibly explaining ancient beliefs about live-giving rocks and children sprung from them (Oikonomopoulos and Oikonomopoulou 2012: 662-664).



Fig. 4: Mithra *de petra natus*.  
Roman stone relief, 3rd- 4th c. AD

<sup>7</sup> The term baetyl means ‘House of God’, *Bet-el* (Genesis 28: 19) (Marinatos 2004: 34).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Goodison 1989: 168.

Merely touching such stones, found all over the Mediterranean and beyond, was deemed to propitiate not only birth, but also marriage and conception (Politis 1921: 284-292). Up to the 20th c., Athenian women seeking to become pregnant and safely deliver healthy children used to slide down the *kilistra* on the Hill of the Nymphs (Fig. 5) (Baur 1902: 35, n. 47; Politis 1921: 284-287), a stone sledge located near the Archaic sanctuary of these ancestral multiple goddesses who presided over female transitions; nearby stands the Orthodox church of Agia Marina, a patroness of birth and children, which is hardly a coincidence (Politis 1921: 316; Thompson 1936: 182, 188 n. 2; Ervin 1959: 158; Meinardus 1974; Wise 2007: 75). The Argive Hera, identified with Eileithyia (Farnell 1896: 608), was revered in the form of an aniconic stone pillar (Burkert 1985: 131, n. 5), and similar baetyls are attested at the Heraion of Paestum (Cipriani 1997), where Hera-Eileithyia was worshipped (see Chapter 7).



Fig. 5: Women and children at either side of the *kilistra* on the Hill of the Nymphs. Athens, early 20th c.

The cult of ancient midwife goddesses was frequently connected with water sources, which played a central role in healing, childbirth rituals and other life-cycle transitions.<sup>9</sup> Among the sanctuaries of Eileithyia associated with life-giving springs/streams are those at Amnisos, Tsoutsouros, Paros and Corinth. Athenian

<sup>9</sup> On the role of water as a healing and purifying agent in ancient and modern Greek rites of passage, see Håland 2009. The Asclepieia were generally associated with springs, and the sick tended there deemed to be helped by the doctors primarily with water (Ogden 2013: 344).

women desirous to conceive and safely deliver drank from the spring at the Pera grotto (Mount Hymettos),<sup>10</sup> sacred to Aphrodite Koliass. An association with water is known to have existed for other midwife goddesses, notably Artemis and Hera (Baur 1902: 62-63; Faure 1964: 85 n. 5, 86, 90; Chaniotis 1992a: 85, n. 235; Rutkowski 1986: 53; Cole 2004: 191-194; Prent 2005: 430); and also for the Nymphs (Larson 2001: 5).<sup>11</sup>

In the Greek ethnographic record about a thousand springs, usually linked to churches built on ancient cult sites, are reputed to be incomparable *okytokia* (birth facilitators). Rich in iron, sodium chloride and/or other minerals, these *agiasmata* ('sacred waters') may be collected from holy springs or from the 'breasts of the Panagia', round-shaped dripping stalactites found in caves or churches erected in grottoes.<sup>12</sup> In every part of Greece, midwives had identified the healing/oxytocic/galactagogue properties of highly mineralized waters long before doctors recognized their therapeutic virtues (Oikonomopoulos and Oikonomopoulou 2012: 670, 673). The waters from most of the Cretan dripping caverns, still regarded as *agiasmata* (Faure 1972: 414-419), must have played a very important role in prehistoric cave cult (Rutkowski 1986: 52-53).

As Tomkins suggests, the more regionally relevant caves in Crete possibly served as *axes mundi*, focal points within wider sacred landscapes where other features, such as rocks, rivers and mountains, were invested with cosmic significance. The location of cave sanctuaries on spots credited in the ethnographic literature as sources of life-giving water, the recurring metaphorical connection drawn between grottoes, the womb and the earth, and the frequent ritual association between death and the harvest, may have made caves particularly appropriate sites for "fertility rituals". Long-term continuities of use and deposition in a number of grottoes suggest in any case that such spaces were landmarks in ancestral geographies; 'old places', possibly associated with origin myths, which remained constants in the memory, traditions and cosmologies of the prehistoric inhabitants of Crete (Tomkins 2009, 2013). Eileithyia's cave sanctuary at Amnisos was probably one such *axis mundi*.

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<sup>10</sup> This practice survived well into modern times; adjacent to the grotto and its spring, now related to Panagia's cult, stands the Byzantine monastery of Kaisariani (Hobhouse 1813: 389-390).

<sup>11</sup> The Hill of the Nymphs at Athens hosts an ancient cistern, water channels carved into the rock, and small caves with a few concretions shaped by the water once dripping therein.

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, for a stone to be *kalogennitris*, a 'good birther', it must stand next to a sacred spring or a church of Panagia *Faneromeni* ('She who Appears'), Panagia *Eleousa* ('Merciful') or Agios Eleutherios ('Liberator') (Oikonomopoulos and Oikonomopoulou 2012: 660).

## 6. 2. Amnisos, a cosmological landscape of birth

Near the mouth of the Amnisos river, where lay a harbour of Knossos (Willetts 1958: 223; Schäfer 1991), was Eileithyia's mythical birth place (Paus. 1. 18. 5), the cave of the goddess mentioned in the *Odyssey* (19. 188), a well known religious landmark in Homeric times. Nonnus speaks of 'the childbed water' of Amnisos (*Dion.* 8. 115), a name possibly evoking the primordial waters of birth/creation; as Amnisos may have an etymological bond with *amnion*, the inner placental membrane hosting the foetus and the amniotic fluid (Willetts 1958: 223, n. 14; 1962: 172, n. 191).

It can hardly be coincidental that when the newborn Zeus was being taken from Dikte to the Idaean Cave, he lost his umbilical cord on the Amnisos plain, thereby called *Omphalion pedon*, the 'Plain of the Navel' (Call. *H.* 1. 42-44; Diod. Sic. 5. 70. 4). This myth evoking the birth story behind the Delphic *omphalos* recalls the transcendent power bestowed on the placenta and the cord, illustrated for instance by the ancient Egyptian cult of the royal afterbirth (see Chapter 4), the mythical search for Osiris' cord,<sup>13</sup> or the modern Greek custom of saving the dried umbilical stump/placenta as a keepsake and blessing.<sup>14</sup> The life-giving plain of the Amnisos river, also called Triton in antiquity, was the site of yet another story of divine birth, that of Athena Tritogeneia, so named because she was 'born from the Triton' in the *Omphalion pedon* (Diod. Sic. 5. 70. 4; 5. 72. 3) (Faure 1958: 501-502; 1972: 417). The intimate connection of Amnisos with Eileithyia, (later) Artemis, and the Amnisiades Nymphs residing in the river led Chaniotis to suggest that this water course played a role in the initiation rites of young Knossian women (1992a: 87).

Scholars have traditionally identified the Amnisian shrine of Eileithyia with a grotto presently called *Neraiospileos*, the 'Cave of the Nereids' (Marinatos 1930; Platakis 1965; Faure 1964: 82; Betancourt and Marinatos 2000: 179); a name evoking the water dripping in the cavern, as the Greek term *neraiides* is often used to broadly denote the nymphs, ancestral female spirits presiding over water sources. The most remarkable features of the *Neraiospileos* are its human-shaped concretions, some manually enhanced or smoothed by the touch of many fingers (Figs. 6-7) (Faure 1964: 84-90; Rutkowski 1986: 51). At the heart of the cave, enclosed by a Minoan wall clearly indicating its/her sanctity, is a stalagmite resembling a seated woman (Fig. 6)

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<sup>13</sup> See Blackman 1916: 203-205.

<sup>14</sup> See Georges 2008: 146; Sike 1986: 132.

(Evans 1928: 840; Faure 1964: 84; Rutkowski 1986: 51; Betancourt and Marinatos 2000: 232).



Fig. 6: Stalagmite recalling a seated female enclosed within a prehistoric wall at the centre of the *Neraidospileos*, a most ancient cult image that was beheaded probably by Christian zealots



Fig. 7: Female-shaped stalagmite, also beheaded, and pillar standing on a mound surrounded by water-holes at the back of the *Neraidospileos*

Another female-like stalagmite and a pillar encircled by water pools stand at the back of the cave (Fig. 7), where Faure recorded a concentration of potsherds “from all periods” suggesting that the mineral water was regularly collected for therapeutic uses (1964: 85-86). Close to the entrance of the grotto lies a concretion resembling a recumbent woman enclosed by a wall. Nearby is a polished rock in the shape of a womb with a marked navel (Faure 1964: 84-87; Rutkowski 1986: 51-52) that brings to mind the myth of Zeus loosing his umbilical stump on the *Omphalion pedon*; namely the Amnisos plain, which hosted a Geometric shore sanctuary dedicated to Zeus Thenatas (Faure 1964: 87),<sup>15</sup> and possibly also to Eileithyia (see below).

The stalagmitic cult images venerated in Cretan sacred caves (Faure 1964: Pls. II-VII; Rutkowski 1986: 51-52), and the concretions taken from grottoes to other Minoan shrines that Gesell regards as probable offerings to Eileithyia (1985: 64) (see Chapter 9), evoke the widespread belief in life-giving stones, whose generative/healing power was incorporated by worshippers primarily through bodily contact. Common in Minoan glyptic are scenes of naked or semi-naked worshippers embracing baetyls (Fig. 8), or otherwise engaged in intimate ritual interaction with sacred stones. Attested at Malia (Fig. 9) and other sites (e.g. Vasiliki, Gournia, Hagia Triada), baetyls are generally interpreted as vehicles for epiphany and may at times be aniconic representations of the divinity (Warren 1984, 1990; La Rosa 2001). According to Warren, the purpose of Minoan baetylic rituals was “to summon and gain, in communion with the stone, the presence and power of the divinity to achieve fertility of the natural, including human world” (1990: 201); some glyptic scenes of such rituals include the depiction of squills (*Urginea maritima*), a medicinal plant connected in modern Crete with regeneration/immortality, which may have been related to the cult of a/the Minoan “goddess of nature and fertility” (Warren 1984; 1990: 200) (see Chapter 9). On the grounds that several ancient myths link sacred stones with birth/creation and the womb (e.g. the Delphic *omphalos*), Goodison postulated Bronze Age religious beliefs associating stones “with fertility and with the regeneration or birth of human life” (1989: 168). In a recent approach to Minoan gestural performance incorporating the largely neglected sensory dimension of touch, Goodison and Morris (in press) put forward evidence suggesting that baetylic rituals may also have been related to divination and the cult of the dead.

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<sup>15</sup> As is attested by Hellenistic inscriptions (Chaniotis 1992b).

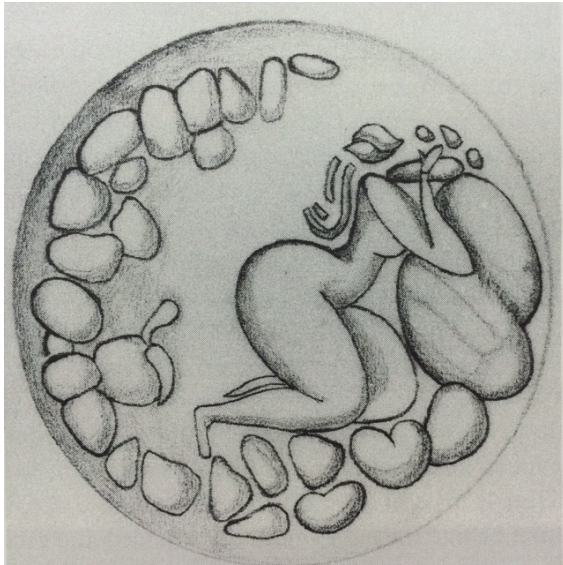


Fig. 8: Naked woman draped over a baetyl, possibly in a cave. Lentoid from Knossos, LM I-III A

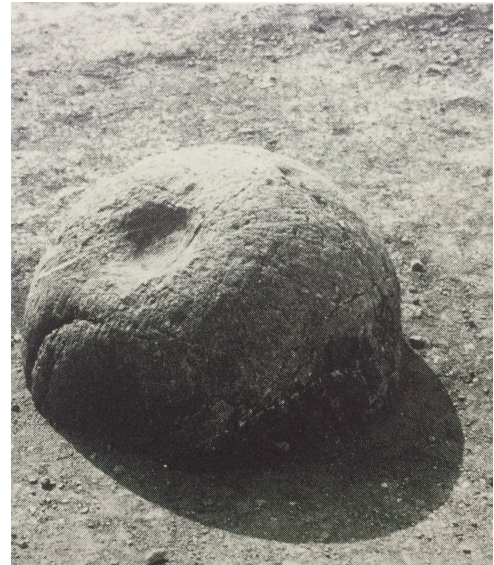


Fig. 9: Baetyl with a navel-like hollow. Central Court of the palace of Malia

Like other Cretan sacred caves yielding Neolithic pottery but no contemporary votives (e.g. figurines), the *Neraidospileos* is thought to have been an early place of habitation before becoming a Minoan shrine (Betancourt and Marinatos 2000); a dominant interpretation recently challenged by Tomkins, who argues that Neolithic ceramic assemblages in grottoes may actually be indicative of communal rituals (2013). The main evidence for Bronze Age cult at Eileithyia's cave is the low wall enclosing the central stalagmite, miniature vessels and fragments of triton shells, two votive types recurring in Minoan assemblages. The Amnisos settlement and the *Neraidospileos* were abandoned at the end of the Late Bronze Age; but cult at the cave was seemingly revived by 800 BC – when the Geometric shore sanctuary began to be frequented – and continued until the 9th c. AD, as attested by the Roman and Byzantine clay lamps that pilgrims dedicated at the grotto (Marinatos 1929, 1930; Betancourt and Marinatos 2000).

The worship of baetylic images (i.e. stalagmites) associated with groundwater, votive shells and lamps befit the cult of a midwife goddess... but is this really the cave of Eileithyia mentioned in the *Odyssey*? Doubts as to its correct identification have been raised in recent archaeological research because the *Neraidospileos* yielded no figurines, namely no votives like those from Eileithyia's cave at Tsoutsouros alluding to birth/reproduction (Betancourt and Marinatos 2000: 235; Sporn 2002: 329; Kanta 2011a: 28); the few occurring at Amnisos are from the shore sanctuary of Zeus Thenatas

(Figs. 10- 11), suggesting that the ancestral Eileithyia was also worshipped there (Marinatos 1996: 138). According to Prent, the absence of such votives at the *Neraidospileos* does not necessarily preclude a cult of the goddess (2005: 559). But Kanta argues that, since Homer mentions the cave, it should contain Iron Age materials; hence Eileithyia’s grotto may not have been preserved because the shoreline has risen over the ages.<sup>16</sup>



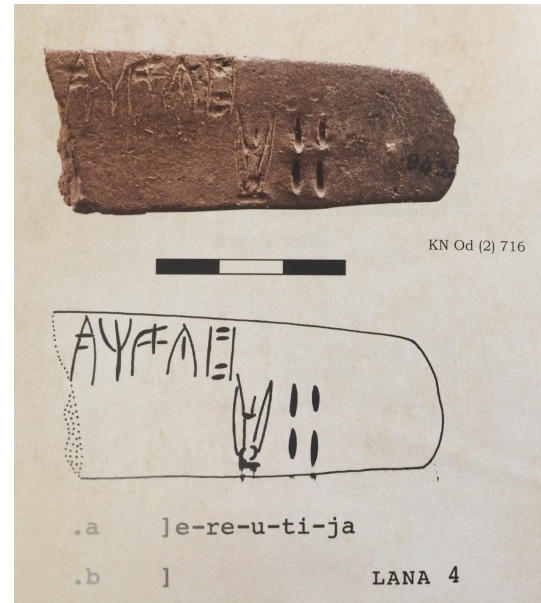
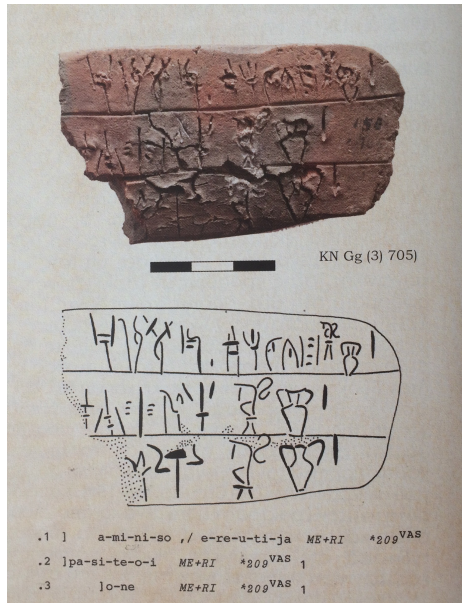
Figs. 10, 11: Naked female figurine and amulet of the Egyptian childbirth god Bes. Sanctuary of Zeus Thenatas (‘Of the Sands’), Amnisos, 7th-6th c. BC

Written sources testify to the importance of Eileithyia’s cult at Amnisos when Crete came under the rule of Mycenaean Greeks in the Late Bronze Age. The Linear B texts from Knossos, which mention Amnisos no less than 37 times, confirm the cult of the goddess at the site (Hiller 1982: 33, 35-42, 51). One tablet records the dedication of a honey-jar to Eileithyia (*e-re-u-ti-ja*) at Amnisos (*a-mi-ni-so*), followed by the same offering made ‘to all the gods’ (*pa-si-te-o-i*) (Fig. 12), suggesting that she was the main deity at Amnisos (Flouda 2011: 40-41). A set of four tablets from the Gallery of the Jewel Fresco,<sup>17</sup> one mentioning *a-mi-ni-so* and the other three a very large amount of wool offered to Eileithyia (Fig. 13) (Hiller 1982: 53; Weilhartner 2005: 63-64; Nosch 2009: 27-28; Flouda 2011: 40-41), points in the same direction. As does the fact that the grotto of the goddess was *the* religious landmark in the Knossian area known by Aegean sailors in later Homeric times (*Od.* 19. 188).

<sup>16</sup> Pers. comm. 2-9-2016.

<sup>17</sup> KN Od (2) 714, 715, 716, 718.





Figs. 12, 13: Tablet KN Gg (3) 705 records a honey-jar dispatched to Eileithyia at Amnisos; and tablet KN Od (2) 716, c. 30 kg of wool dedicated to the goddess

So much for Amnisos and the *Omphalion pedon*, the ‘Plain of the Navel’, which remains a primordial landscape of birth/origin intimately bonded to Eileithyia’s cult, despite the problematic identification of her best known Cretan sanctuary in antiquity.

### 6. 3. Eileithyia’s cave at Tsoutsouros

Tsoutsouros lies on the coastal site of ancient Inatos (south-central Crete), the harbour of Priansos, at the mouth of the Mintris; a stream still flowing all year long in fairly recent times (19th c.), when it was called *Sudsuro*, a name deriving from Turkish *sut*, ‘milk’, and *su*, ‘water’ (Galanaki and Papadaki 2011: 12). Ancient literary evidence suggests that the river was once sacred to Eileithyia (Willetts 1958: 223; Bultrighini 1993: 67; Prent 2005: 332, 430).

The cult of the goddess at Inatos is attested by Hellenistic inscriptions mentioning Ἐλεύθυια Βινατία (=Ἰνατία, ‘of Inatos’); an inscribed tomb slab reading ΕΛΟΥΘΙΑ ΧΑΡΙΣΤΗΙΟΝ, ‘a token of gratitude to Eileithyia’ (1st c. BC); and the rich votive assemblage from the Tsoutsouros cave, which harbours a slightly chlorinated mineral spring protected by a wall, most probably deemed therapeutic in antiquity (Willetts 1958: 223; Faure 1964: 90; Pingiatoglou 1981: 31; Rutkowski 1986: 53;

Bultrighini 1993: 66-68; Galanaki and Papadaki 2011: 12; Kanta 2011a: 29).<sup>18</sup> The offerings deposited at the cave reveal its continuous use as a sanctuary from the Protopalatial period (c. 1900-1700 BC) (Kanta 2011a: 29) all the way up to Late Roman times (Faure 1964: 93; Grigoropoulos 2011). The unbroken continuity of the cult spanning over more than two millennia suggests that Eileithyia's Minoan prototype may be the most ancient cave deity yet identified on Crete.<sup>19</sup>

Though still only partially published despite their importance,<sup>20</sup> the Tsoutsouros votives are crucial to our research for several reasons:

- 1) They constitute the richest assemblage associated with the worship of Eileithyia on the island, further attesting to the atavism of birth-related cults in prehistoric societies.
- 2) According to our methodological template, embedded cults of deities presiding over birth are the most conspicuous indicator of the existence of associated midwifery complexes. The Tsoutsouros votives may therefore provide clues for the identification of materials liable to belong to a healing complex related to Eileithyia's cult in prehistoric Crete (see Chapters 8-9).
- 3) Owing to the cult's unbroken continuity at the cave, the diachronic variations in the composition of the assemblage provide a unique glimpse into the evolution of Eileithyia's Minoan prototype over time. As argued below, the Early Iron Age votives are expressive of changes in the functions of the goddess that reflect the articulation of a new cultural and social order on the island; a paradigm shift heralding the consolidation of city-state ideology, detectable among others in the Cretan record by the proliferation of unprecedented iconographic themes/votive types stressing the (redefined) social role of women as mothers and of men as warriors.

Diachronically then, let us examine the relevant materials from Tsoutsouros drawing primarily, but not only, from the precious publication of the site by Kanta and Davaras (2011).

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<sup>18</sup> A few decades ago the water from the nearby *Pourgonero* cave, prized for its purgative and cathartic properties, was still collected by the locals and Cretans coming from other eparchies, sometimes as far as Heraklion (Faure 1964: 90, n. 4). We may note that the saint physician Agios Panteleimon is worshipped at the village of Tsoutsouros; this patron of doctors – often portrayed holding his therapeutic attributes, a medicine box and a long-handled spatula – is recurrently associated with *agiasmata*, 'sacred/healing waters'.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Stampolidis and Kotsonas 2013: 193.

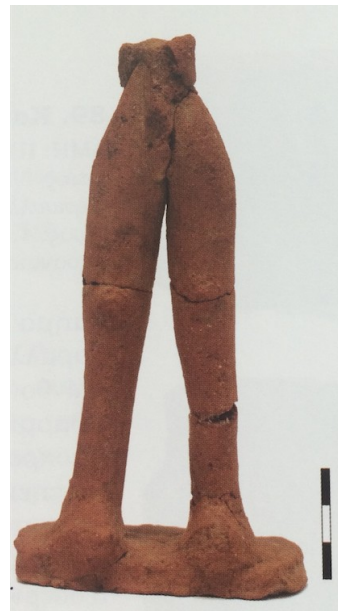
<sup>20</sup> A fuller publication of the assemblage by Betancourt and Kanta is now underway (Athanasia Kanta, pers. comm. 29-7-2017).

### 6. 3. 1. Protopalatial - Neopalatial offerings (c. 1900-1450 BC)

Most common at the cave are clay votives typically occurring at the Minoan peak sanctuaries, where healing-related practices are attested (see Chapter 8):

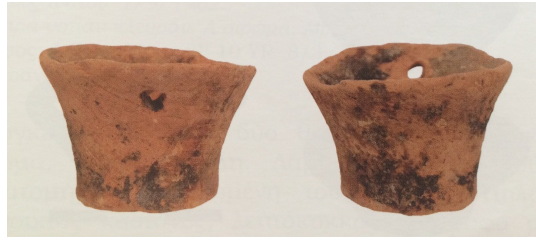
- Figurines of male and female votaries (Figs. 14-15), paralleling in style and fabric those found at the neighbouring peak sanctuary of Kophinas;
- figurines of domestic animals – documented in all prehistoric phases of the grotto;<sup>21</sup>
- offering trays/containers bearing scars/remains of applied elements;
- miniature clay vessels (cups, *pithoi*, cooking pots, lamps, etc.) (Figs. 16-17), some of which may have contained small amounts of edibles, as suggested by the carbonized seeds preserved in a miniature pot from the peak sanctuary of Traostalos (Kanta 2011a: 29; 2011b: 86, 95 n° 90; Kanta and Kontopodi 2011a: 44).

Thus Kanta argues that in the Protopalatial and Neopalatial periods the cult at Tsoutsouros much resembled that practised on the peak sanctuaries; concluding that “the great Minoan goddess”, whose “fertility, chthonic and therapeutic” attributions are apparent at Tsoutsouros and Kophinas, was worshipped at both sites, and later identified with Eileithyia at the cave (2011a: 29).



Figs. 14, 15: Clay girdled skirt of a female figurine, and lower body of a male figurine with remains of cod-piece. Tsoutsouros, Neopalatial period

<sup>21</sup> Athanasia Kanta, pers. comm. 2-9-2016. Often fragmented and difficult to date, the animal figurines require a detailed study (Kanta 2011a: 37, 2011b: 87).



Figs. 16, 17: Miniature lamp and cup with suspension holes. Tsoutsouros, Neopalatial period

Also noteworthy are other finds, such as a bronze male figurine (Chapter 5, fig. 7), a female lead pendant, and two bronze female figurines seemingly belonging to the cave's assemblage; one has both hands placed on her breasts (Fig. 18), the other the right hand on her breast, the left hand hanging at her side, and snake-like braids running down her back and torso (Fig. 19) (Kanta 2011b: 88-91).

Faure reported the occurrence of painted shells at Tsoutsouros (1964: 93); such offerings were found in abundance in the Temple Repositories of the Palace of Knossos, an assemblage containing materials strongly suggestive of a midwifery cult (see Chapter 8).



Figs. 18, 19: Female bronze figurines, probably from the Tsoutsouros cave. Neopalatial period

### 6. 3. 2. Postpalatial - Subminoan offerings (c. 1400-970 BC)

The acronym GUA, standing for ‘Goddess with Upraised Arms’, denotes the large terracotta female figures performing this gesture, generally interpreted as depictions of deities.<sup>22</sup> Together with snake tubes (i.e. tubular stands with serpentine handles), related *kalathoi*, and terracotta plaques (Fig. 20), these cult images are characteristic of the LM III communal bench sanctuaries, the standard type of shrine on Crete after the destruction of the palaces at the end of the Neopalatial period. GUA representations, usually of smaller dimensions, survive into the Early Iron Age until the Orientalizing period (Alexiou 1958: 275-292; Gesell 1976; 1985: 50-51, 58; 2010; Prent 2005: 424, 437, 2009).

Belonging to the Postpalatial-Subminoan phase of the Tsoutsouros cave are two clay female heads wearing a diadem/polos, and a pair of arms with open palms (Figs. 21- 22) probably belonging to GUA representations; a bronze GUA figurine possibly found in the grotto; and snake tubes and *kalathoi* (Prent 2005: 431; Kanta 2011a: 29-30; 2011b: 91, 100-101; Kanta and Kontopodi 2011a: 66-67).



Fig. 20: Terracotta GUA figures, plaques, and snake tubes supporting *kalathoi*. Kavousi, LM IIIC

<sup>22</sup> But see Gaignerot-Driessen (2014), who suggests they represent votaries rather than cult images.



Figs. 21, 22: Probable GUA head, and pair of detached arms with open palms belonging to a small-scale GUA. Tsoutsouros, Postpalatial-Subminoan period

Worth noting are also the following finds:

- Incense burners, some belonging to other (unspecified) phases of the grotto; according to historical sources the burning of incense was common practice in Eileithyia's cult (Kanta 2011a: 30, 37; Baur 1902: 23-24, 28 n. 37).
- Jewellery, attested in this and later phases of the cave, includes ornaments that were sewn/attached to clothes (Fig. 23) (Kanta 2011a: 37; 2011c: 155, 160). The offering of garments to deities presiding over birth, customary in ancient Greece, is probably derivative of Minoan tradition (see Chapter 8).
- The clay model of a shoe of Subminoan or slightly later date (Fig. 24). As Kanta remarks (2011a: 37), similar votives are found at the earlier peak sanctuaries, notably at Petsophas and Traostalos (Rutkowski 1991: Pl. XLI. 15-17; Chryssoulaki 2001: 62-63). In historical times shoes were endowed with 'fertility' connotations, and symbolized marriage when offered to the Nymphs, so Kanta suggests that the Tsoutsouros model may have been offered to propitiate such a transition (2011a: 37). Alternatively, it could be a birth-related token of gratitude, as shoes were among the offerings made to Greek midwife goddesses after a successful delivery (Fig. 25);<sup>23</sup> not only by women, as we hear of a father who dedicated his sandals to Artemis in thanks for begetting a healthy offspring (*Anthol. Palat.* 6. 201, 271, 277) (Baur 1902: 67; Hadzisteliou Price 1978: 211).

<sup>23</sup> On the Echinus relief, see Lee 2012a: 187-188; 2012b: 34-35.



Fig. 23, 24: LM type rosettes worn on clothes from the Proto-Achaic period; and Subminoan-Protogeometric clay shoe model. Tsoutsouros



Fig. 25: Woman entrusting her newborn to the protection of Artemis as Eileithyia *Locheia* ('of childbirth'). Above the worshippers hang dedicated shoes and clothes. Marble votive stele, Echinos, 4th c. BC

### 6. 3. 3. Protogeometric - Geometric offerings (c. 970-700 BC)

The most relevant Early Iron Age (EIA) votives from Tsoutsouros include clay models and figurines depicting the main stages of human reproduction, and small-scale GUA representations whose characteristic gesture, the upraised arms, is emblematic of Eileithyia's capacity as a midwife in later Greek iconography.

#### 6. 3. 3. 1: Models portraying intercourse, childbirth and nursing

##### 1) Bowls containing a female and male figurine in sexual embrace

Some of the male figurines are ithyphallic, so the models clearly depict intercourse (Fig. 26). Probably offered to Eileithyia to ensure conception (Kanta 2011a: 30-31), they indicate that both men and women participated in her cult (Faure 1964: 91; Bultrighini 1993: 68; Prent 2005: 605), as do the Neopalatial figurines of male votaries and the Archaic depictions of shield-bearing male dancers found in the cave; these warriors probably portray the Kouretes (Kanta 2011a: 36), the mythical (multiple) daemons appointed by Rhea to guard the newborn Zeus, who played a central role in the initiation of boys into manhood in the Cretan *poleis* (Harrison 1912: 1-29; Jeanmaire 1939: 421-455), and were associated with Eileithyia's cult in the Peloponnese (Kanta 2011a: 36).



Fig. 26: Clay model of a couple engaged in sexual intercourse. The male figurine displays a large erect penis. Tsoutsouros, 8th c. BC



The Patsos cave yielded EIA terracotta representations of embraced male-female couples, along with bronze ithyphallic figurines (Prent 2005: 607); and contemporary ithyphallic figurines at times helmeted, which have been related to male initiation rites, are attested at Kommos and Syme (Koehl 2000: 138; Prent 2005: 607). The stress on sexuality/fertility reflected by these votives, not apparent in the preceding period, represents a phenomenon characteristic of the EIA (Prent 2005: 607). Appearing now at Tsoutsouros are figurines of horses (Kanta 2011b: 136-137), an animal associated with the (armed male) aristocracy emerging on the island in the EIA (see below).

## 2) Childbirth models

Birth-related iconography is attested on Crete since the Neolithic period (see Chapter 9). However, the childbirth models recurring at Tsoutsouros in the EIA are unprecedented in the island's record. They depict two figurines in a vessel, the labouring woman and the midwife, who supports her from behind; the grasping arms, open mouth and/or tilted-back head of the parturient vividly evoke the birth-pangs (Figs. 27-29), the *odines* brought on by Eileithyia's 'Coming'. The *maia* figurines may represent the human midwife; or, despite displaying no distinctive attributes, the goddess herself asserting her protection over the mother-to-be (Kanta 2011a: 30, 32; 2011b: 86). In some instances, the parturient figurine shows no bulging belly (Fig. 28).

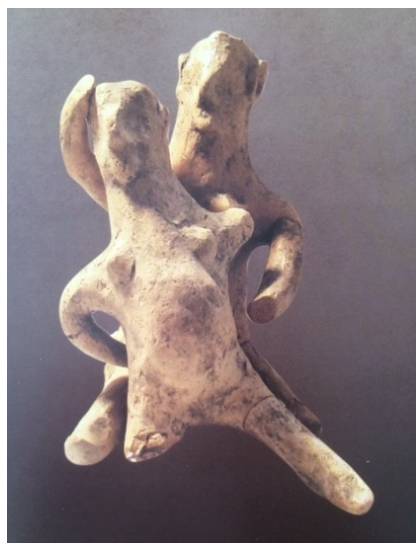


Fig. 27: Clay childbirth model of a labouring woman supported by the midwife. Tsoutsouros, 9th-8th c. BC



Fig. 28: Clay childbirth model of a parturient with no bulging belly holding onto the (human or divine) *maia*. Tsoutsouros, 9th-8th c. BC



Fig. 29: Clay childbirth model of an ailing parturient supported by the human midwife, or her divine counterpart Eileithya. Tsoutsouros, 9th-8th c. BC

### 3) Kourotrophic images

Mother/nurse-with-child representations, which are virtually absent from the Minoan (Morris 2009: 246; Budin 2010) and earlier Neolithic repertoire (Ucko 1968: 434), emerge at Tsoutsouros in the EIA in the form of clay figurines (Fig. 30), together with conceptually related models of infants in their cradles (Fig. 31) (Kanta 2011b: 186, 122). The *kourotrophoi* probably portray worshippers, except for a richly clad Daedalic figurine with a child that might represent a goddess; though she could be Eileithyia as protectress of infants, her identification remains a difficult task (Kanta 2011a: 32). The Greek Eileithyia is attested as *kourosoos*, ‘saviour of children’ (Leitao 2007: 260), but ancient sources hardly ever characterize her as a nursing deity (Baur 1902: 18; Olmos 1986: 699; Prent 2005: 413 n. 1087; Leitao 2007: 274 n. 24).<sup>24</sup>



Fig. 30: Clay figurine of a nursing female. Tsoutsouros, 9th-8th c. BC



Fig. 31: Clay model of an infant in its cradle. Tsoutsouros, early 7th c. BC

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<sup>24</sup> Only once does she appear as a kourotrophic deity. Antimachos of Colophon (4th c. BC) “mentions Eileithyia Kourotrophos together with the Cretan Diktaia (Rhea or Gaia?) and Artemis, in connection with offerings (*pelaneia*) by pregnant women, and certain ceremonies such as taking water from a special place for the bath of a woman after delivery, and the rich gifts offered after delivery” (Hadzisteliou Price 1978: 89).

### 6. 3. 3. 2: Figurines with upraised arms

EIA female figurines with upraised arms perpetuating the iconographic tradition of the large Postpalatial GUA figures are documented at Tsoutsouros, “implying that Eileithyia originates in the Minoan goddess” (Kanta 2011a: 31; 2011b: 124-125). Such representations include:

1) A group of clay figurines, known in the archaeological literature as *Dea micenea a cavallo*,<sup>25</sup> representing a female with upraised arms seated side-saddle on a quadruped (Fig. 32). If, as is generally assumed, this depiction is a late development of the theophany of the Minoan goddess riding imaginary animals, “the mounted GUA figurines from Tsoutsouros provide a further link in the chain leading from the Minoan goddess to the Mycenaean Eileithyia mentioned in the Knossian tablets, and then to the goddess of Greek times” (Kanta 2011a: 31; 2011b: 123).



Fig. 32: Clay mounted GUA figurine, probably depicting Eileithyia. Tsoutsouros, Geometric period

Two mounted GUA figurines were found at the EIA sanctuary of Hagia Triada (Fig. 33), along with figurines of embraced couples and a *kourotrophos* (D’Agata 1998: 23). One specimen is reported from the coastal shrine of Keratokampos Viannou (LM III-EIA) near Tsoutsouros, together with a pregnant figurine also

<sup>25</sup> Meaning ‘horse-riding Mycenaean Goddess’.

displaying upraised arms (Fig. 34). And another mounted GUA came to light at the sanctuary of Zeus Thenatas at Amnisos (Rethemiotakis 2005: 149-151), where the occurrence of figurines of Bes and naked females (Figs. 10, 11) prompted N. Marinatos to argue for the combined cult of Zeus and the more ancestral Eileithyia (1996).



Fig. 33: Clay GUA figurine that was likely mounted on a quadruped. Hagia Triada, Protogeometric/Geometric period

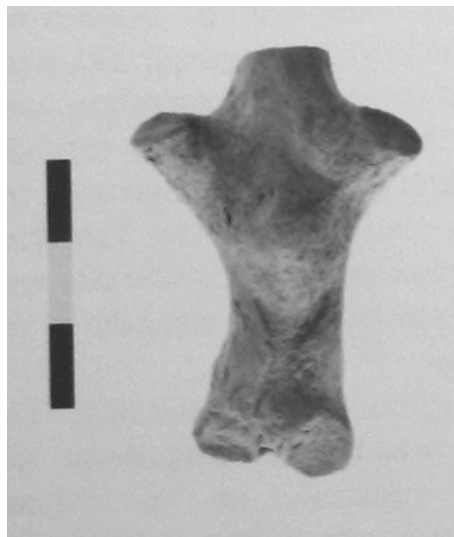


Fig. 34: Clay figurine of a pregnant female with upraised arms. Keratokampos Viannou, LM III-EIA

2) Seemingly related to the childbirth models is a vessel hosting a GUA figurine and the base of another figurine (Fig. 35), possibly pregnant like the many detached ones found in the cave (Fig. 36). If this was the scene actually represented, then the image with upraised arms may well be a depiction of Eileithyia. Two other figurines displaying the characteristic GUA gesture probably belong to the same type of model (Kanta 2011a: 31-32; 2011b: 125).



Figs. 35, 36: Bowl model with GUA type figurine; and pregnant figurine, probably detached from a vessel. Tsoutsouros, 9th-8th c. BC

Two EIA figurines with upraised arms from the Kastro at Kavousi showing an emphasis on the breasts and the pubic area suggest specific concerns with human fertility and birth, aspects that were never explicit in the Postpalatial GUA figures (Prent 2005: 432; 2009: 235 fig. 19.5); it may be noted, however, that a LM IIIA-B rhyton figurine from Kephala Khondrou depicting a parturient female was found in association with a snake tube (see Chapter 9), a cult implement characteristic of the Postpalatial bench sanctuaries focused on a GUA type deity (or deities). A squatting female pendant from Neolithic Knossos displays upraised arms (Chapter 9, fig. 4). This gesture also occurs associated with pregnancy-parturition in three MM finds, a pregnant figurine from the peak sanctuary of Petsophas (Chapter 8, fig. 10), and two seals from

Malia depicting splay-legged squatting females (Chapter 9, figs. 35-36). The above mentioned pregnant figurine from Keratokampos has the arms upraised (Fig. 34); and so does a vessel figurine with a spout opening on the lower womb, found in an EIA tomb at Ampelokepoi, near Knossos (Fig. 37).



Fig. 37: Vessel figurine from Ampelokepoi. Late Geometric/Early Orientalizing period

3) Tsoutsouros yielded also the unique clay model of a boat containing a GUA figurine, bases of other missing figurines, and the model of an embryo (Figs. 38-39), a rare depiction which finds earlier parallels at the peak sanctuary of Jouktas (Chapter 8, fig. 20) (Kanta 2011a: 35). This and two smaller boats from Tsoutsouros were initially interpreted as offerings made by sailors to Eileithyia (Hadzisteliou Price 1978: 87; Prent 2005: 605; Kanta 2011a: 35) – her close associate Artemis protected harbours and seafaring, and it has been conjectured that the Minoan goddess also performed this function (Chaniotis 1992a: 85; Prent 2005: 605).<sup>26</sup> After restoration, however, it became clear that the ship hosted the (detached) embryo figurine (Fig. 39). So, as Kanta perceptively proposes, this ship model might illustrate the belief that infants entered the world of the living in a boat manned by Eileithyia; or by the Eileithyiai, if the missing

<sup>26</sup> Ship models were dedicated to a number of Egyptian and Greek midwife goddesses worshipped as protectors of seafaring, such as Hathor, Isis and Hera (Hadzisteliou Price 1978: 87). At Samos, Hera was offered both models and real boats (Brize 1997:130).

figurines were all female (2011a: 35). As we may recall, ancient Near Eastern sources conceive birth as an ocean travel, at times likening the unborn child to a boat steered by divine midwives through the amniotic water (see Chapter 4).



Fig. 38: Clay boat containing an embryo model in a central position, to its right a figurine with (broken off) upraised arms, bases of missing figurines, and a flagpole. Tsoutsouros, Geometric period



Fig. 39: The clay embryo figurine before restoration of the ship model



Crossing the water was involved in the liminal transition to the Underworld in ancient Egyptian, Cretan<sup>27</sup> and Greek traditions; hence, the occurrence of ship models and boat imagery, seashells (e.g. tritons) and marine iconography in Cretan Bronze Age funerary contexts raises the question on whether afterlife beliefs held at the time on the island were connected to the idea of rebirth as a journey through seawater (Goodison 1989: 35-39; Watrous 1991: 294; Saunders 2007; Petrakis 2011; Vavouranakis 2011); a voyage which might have paralleled that of the embryo through the salty amniotic fluid.

#### **6. 3. 4. Archaic - Late Roman offerings (7th c. BC-4th c. AD)**

Tsoutsouros yielded 7th-6th c. BC Egyptian imports, notably the following:

- Pendant figurines of the childbirth god Bes (Kanta and Kontopodi 2011b: 168; Wilkinson 2011: 178-179).
- Pendants depicting monkeys (Fig. 40), very popular in Egypt where the animal symbolized fertility and eroticism (Kanta and Kontopodi 2011b: 169; Wilkinson 2011: 177). In Minoan iconography monkeys occur in association with females and/or crocuses, a plant having many gynaecological properties (see Chapters 8-9).
- A figurine of Nefertem, the personification of the lotus, a flower connected with Creation in Egyptian mythology, as it emerged from the primordial waters before anything else came into being (Wilkinson 2011: 174). In Hippocratic medicine the plants named *λωτός* have almost solely gynaecological applications (see Chapter 8).
- A flask in the shape of a fish (Fig. 41), probably used to contain aromatic substances; such votives were common in Egypt, where the *tilapia* fish symbolized birth and rebirth (Kanta and Kontopodi 2011b: 169).

Lastly, relevant finds from the Tsoutsouros cave are also the aforementioned Archaic depictions of the likely Kouretes (Chapter 9, fig. 62) (Kanta 2011a: 36, 2011b: 142-145, n° 138-140); a large number of Classical and Hellenistic small kraters (Kanta and Kontopodi 2011a: 47) like those from Brauron,<sup>28</sup> where girls underwent maturation rituals; animal figurines (Kanta 2011b: 140); and many Roman lamps (Grigoropoulos 2011), offerings befitting a goddess who brings life into the light.

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<sup>27</sup> In Homeric literature the Cretan Rhadamanthys, brother of Minos, rules over the life of the deceased heroes in the Elysium at the end of the earth (*Od.* 4. 563-568). And in Hesiod their afterlife realm is the Islands of the Blessed, “faraway lands next to the deep-eddying ocean” (*WD* 170-173) (Watrous 1991: 298-299).

<sup>28</sup> Athanasia Kanta, pers. comm. 2-9-2017.



Figs. 40, 41: Egyptian faience pendant with squatting monkeys, and fish-shaped faience flask. Tsoutsouros, 7th-6th c. BC

We shall come back to the finds from the Tsoutsouros cave, but let us first look at other sites where Eileithyia's cult is soundly documented, or has been inferred on a range of grounds.

#### 6. 4. Lato

Ancient Lato lies near the modern village of Kritsá (northeast Crete), on a hill overlooking the magnificent Mirabello Bay and its coastal plain. The polis was in all likelihood named after Leto (Doric Λατώ), a midwife goddess closely related to Eileithyia (see Chapter 7), the main deity at Lato as we learn from epigraphic and numismatic evidence. Eileithyia was probably worshipped also at the town's harbour, *Lato pros Kamara* (modern Agios Nikolaos) (Willetts 1958: 222-223, 1962: 171; Bultrighini 1993: 56-59; Davaras 2000: 12). And related to the goddess is the month-name Ἐλευσύνιος/Ἐλουσίνοϛ, attested at the neighbouring coastal polis of Olous (modern Elounda) (Faure 1964: 88 n. 1; Willetts 1958: 221-222, 1962: 169-170).

The Geometric-Archaic votives from Lato included the following finds:

- The terracotta plaque of a pregnant female (Fig. 42),<sup>29</sup> which has been related to Eileithyia's cult relying on the textual evidence from the site. The female bears a trilobate motif on the womb, interpreted by Picard and Ducrey as a stylized lotus flower (1969: 819-820).

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<sup>29</sup> I am grateful to Kleio Zervaki, Chief Conservator of the Lasithi Ephorate of Antiquities, for providing the high resolution photograph of this plaque.

- A kneeling female figurine in the birth-giving position characteristic of the Greek divine midwives Damia and Auxesia, and Auge ἐν γόνας, ‘on her knees’ (Demargne 1929: 401).
- Terracotta plaques of a double goddess, which Demargne interprets as the Eileithyiai (1930: 196-201).
- Terracotta plaques of a goddess with sphinxes and griffins, mythological animals performing as assistants to the main deity at Lato (i.e. Eileithyia) (Demargne 1929: 420-427; 1930: 204-205).
- Many anthropomorphic figurines: among the females are depictions of a goddess, nude (at times with the hands on the breasts) and clad (often wearing a polos). A kourotrophic image is attested. Among the male figurines, some are ithyphallic and a few probably depict warriors (Demargne 1929: 383-413; Prent 2005: 291).
- A large number of animal figurines, mainly bovids (Demargne 1929: 413-415; Prent 2005: 292).



Fig. 42: Terracotta plaque of a pregnant female with a trilobate flower-like relief on the lower womb. Lato, Geometric-Archaic period

## 6. 5. Aptera

Eileithyia's cult is documented at Aptera, the ancient polis overlooking the Souda Bay to the east of Chania (northwest Crete). The site yielded a votive inscription dedicated by a woman to the goddess, now unfortunately lost (Willetts 1958: 222; Pingiatoglou 1981: 30; Bultrighini 1993: 101; Genevrois 2017: 408).

## 6. 6. Eleutherna

It has been suggested on philological grounds that Eileithyia was worshipped at Eleutherna, as the toponym may derive from the same root as Ἐλεύθια (Nilsson 1950: 519; Willetts 1958: 222, 1962: 169-170; Genevrois 2017: 410). The ancient polis lies on the northwestern foothills of the once-forested Mount Ida (Psiloritis, central Crete), which hosts the cave where some accounts locate the delivery and upbringing of Zeus under the protection of the shield-clashing Kouretes. One of these multiple daemons of birth was Eleutherna's mythical founder, Eleuther (< ελευθερία-ελεύθερος, 'freedom', 'free'), whose attributes much resemble those of the Orthodox saint Eleutherios (Stampolidis 2008: 21, 29-30), Eileithyia's successor in the protection of pregnant-parturient women and the liberation from birth-pangs (Themelis 2011: 23). So far, excavations at the site have brought to light a Proto-Archaic temple consecrated to a goddess, not a god (Stampolidis 2008: 28).

It is noteworthy that many rock-hewn tombs from the cemeteries of Eleutherna were transformed into chapels dedicated mainly to female saints, among them Agia Galatou (< γάλα, 'milk'), who is herself afforded with attributions held by Eleuther and Agios Eleutherios. Until very recent times, newly delivered mothers still offered their newborn's first clothes to Agia Galatou so as to ensure lactation, that is to say the thriving of the child. In many Cretan regions – and the Aegean islands more broadly – the appellation Agio Gala, 'Holy Milk', given primarily to caves, may evoke ancient beliefs regarding the birth and raising of infants with goat's milk (e.g. Zeus and Amaltheia), or with water from stalactites (Stampolidis 2008: 95-97).

## 6. 7. The Stravomity cave

The Stravomity cave is the most intricate of the eleven existing grottoes on Mount Jouktas,<sup>30</sup> where lies the Minoan peak sanctuary that served the area of Knossos and Archanes (see Chapter 8). The cave, which harbours groundwater and several stalactites, appears to have been used as a dwelling in the Late Neolithic (LN)-EM, and become a cult place in the MM period. It yielded pottery spanning from the LN to the Archaic (and possibly Hellenistic) period, most notably a LN vessel containing the remains of a newborn child; ten to fifteen MM-LM *pithoi* for the storage of food (e.g. oil, grain) (Marinatos 1950: 253-257) that may have been offered to the deity (Rutkowski 1986: 63),<sup>31</sup> a LM feeding-bottle; a 5th-4th c. BC lamp, a remarkable spindle whorl and astragaloi.<sup>32</sup> On account of the female and child-related offerings, S. Marinatos, the excavator, argued for Eileithyia's cult at the grotto (1950: 257).<sup>33</sup> The LN vessel with infant bones from this cave is the earliest recorded pot burial on Crete; a funerary practice thought to have propitiated rebirth owing to the pervasive symbolic association of vessels with the uterus/womb (see Chapter 9).

## 6. 8. Pachlitzani Agriada

Pachlitzani Agriada lies in a valley near Kavousi, in the Mirabello area (northeast Crete). The shrine, built above a streambed, is a late example of a bench sanctuary that was in use from the Protogeometric to the Classical period. Probably favoured by its location in a relatively isolated inland valley, much older forms of worship seem to have survived at Pachlitzani Agriada. This is suggested by the traditional plan of the sanctuary (Fig. 43), characteristic of Minoan religious architecture and since long associated with the cult of a GUA type deity; the use of the bench to display cult objects (Fig. 43); and some of the finds pointing as well to Late Bronze Age continuities (Alexiou 1956; Prent 2005: 299, 429, 431; 2009: 232).

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<sup>30</sup> The cave is also called Likastos, Karnari and Spiliaridia. See [http://www.archanes-asterousia.gr/poi.php?poi\\_id=1\\_100&lang=el](http://www.archanes-asterousia.gr/poi.php?poi_id=1_100&lang=el)

<sup>31</sup> MM *pithoi* and a large amount of grain were found at the Kamares cave (Rutkowski 1986: 63); though this grotto yielded mainly pottery, it has been identified as a sacred cave (i.e. sanctuary) because it is unsuited for habitation (Tomkins 2013:64).

<sup>32</sup> Astragaloi are knucklebones used as dice in ancient games (Hansen 2002: 11), and also for divination (Dillon 2017: 310, 345).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Tyree 1975: 34-37.

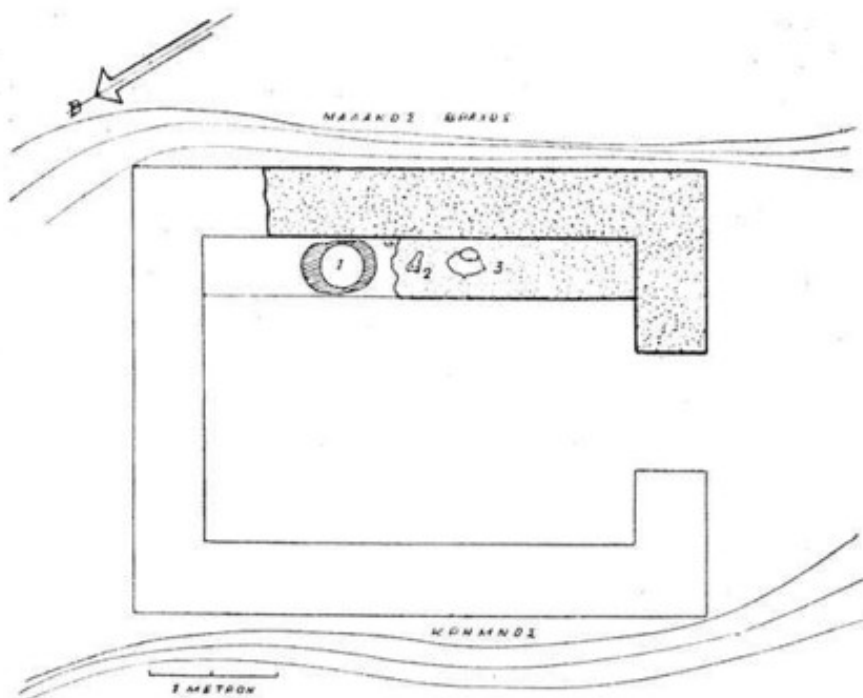


Fig. 43: Plan of the sanctuary at Pachlitzani Agriada showing the location of the finds on the bench

The assemblage from Pachlitzani Agriada included the following votives:

- A parturient figurine with the hands raised to the breasts, a dilated vagina and a carefully rendered clitoris (Fig. 44) (Alexiou 1956: 8-9; Prent 2005: 299). The image is a survival of the Postpalatial rhyton figurines from Kephala Khondrou and Gournia, both depicting pregnant-parturient females, which are usually regarded as goddesses (Chapter 9, figs. 42-43) (Alexiou 1956: 15-16; Gesell 1985: 59).
- The cylindrical pedestal, feet and skirt's hem of a large terracota female figure (Fig. 45), found on the sanctuary's bench (Fig. 43 n° 1). A survival of the LM III GUA figures, this large cult image probably portrayed a goddess perpetuating the old gesture of upraised arms (Alexiou 1956: 11; Gesell 1985: 58; Prent 2005: 429; 2009: 232).
- Clay female figurines (Fig. 46) (Alexiou 1956: 11).
- Two Daedalic plaques of nude females likely representing a double goddess (Fig. 47) (Alexiou 1956: 12; Prent 2005: 299). As we saw, analogous votives from Lato have been interpreted as depicting the Eileithyiai.



Figs. 44, 45: Protogeometric/Geometric clay figurine of a parturient with dilated vagina, clitoris, and arms at the breasts; and 7th c. BC pedestal of a cult image, probably a GUA. Pachlitzani Agriada



Figs. 46, 47: Clay figurine with applied breasts, and Daedalic plaque most likely portraying a duplicated goddess. Pachlitzani Agriada

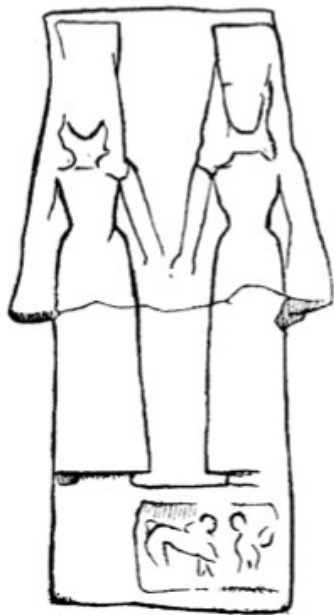
The parturient figurine and the predominance of female iconography suggest that Eileithyia was the deity worshipped at Pachlitzani Agriada (Alexiou 1956: 15-19; Prent 2005: 300; Klein and Glowacki 2009: 162).

## 6. 9. Kako Plai in the Anavlochos

Near the modern village of Vrachasi in the Anavlochos ridge (Mirabello area) lies Kako Plai, an EIA refuge site that produced a Geometric-Classical votive deposit containing, among others, the following clay artefacts:

- Plaques of a double goddess, probably the Eileithyiai (Fig. 48) (Demargne 1930: 195-204; 1931: 397-400; Prent 2005: 282-283; Pilz and Krumme 2011: 325-326); an offering type documented as well at Lato and Pachlitzani Agriada.
- Depictions of females associated with a sphinx or griffin, an iconographic theme also attested at Lato (Demargne 1930: 196, 205).
- Anthropomorphic vessels with applied breasts and head-shaped lids (Fig. 49) (Demargne 1931: 399-392; Pilz and Krumme 2011: 327-328). The earliest female-shaped vessels on Crete, dating to the EM period, are mostly interpreted as goddesses or ancestresses (see Chapter 9).
- The image of a *kourotrophos* (Demargne 1931: 405; Pilz and Krumme 2011: 326).
- A large number of human figurines, some clearly female (Fig. 50), and one distinctly male (Demargne 1931: 386-389, 392-394; Prent 2005: 282).
- A few figurines of horses and probable bovids (Demargne 1931: 394- 395; Pilz and Krumme 2001: 325).
- A model possibly depicting a plum (Fig. 51) (Pilz and Krumme 2001: 331). This fruit, likely represented also in the Temple Repositories of Knossos, has gynaecological properties known since antiquity (see Chapter 8).
- A large number of spindles whose role in the assemblage is not well understood (Demargne 1931: 381 fig. 18, 384-385; Prent 2005: 282). As mentioned earlier, Pausanias calls Eileithyia ‘deft spinner’ (of fate) (8. 21. 3). If she was indeed the goddess worshipped at Kako Plai, could the spindles be votives intended to propitiate destiny, namely some life-cycle transition lying ahead of the donors? It is noteworthy that before marriage Delian girls customarily cut off a hairlock and wound it about a spindle as a dedicatory gift to Hyperoche and Laodice, a dyad closely connected to Eileithyia’s cult on Delos (Sale 1961: 77).





Figs. 48, 49: Clay plaque of a double goddess with polos, and female-shaped vessel. Geometric-Classical deposit from Kako Plai



Figs. 50, 51: Clay female figurine, and model of a fruit possibly depicting a plum. Geometric-Classical deposit from Kako Plai

## 6. 10. Conclusions

Eileithyia's cult was deeply embedded in prehistoric and ancient Crete. The oldest cave deity to have been identified, she was worshipped in the central part of the island at the grottoes of Amnisos, Inatos-Tsoutsouros, and possibly Stravomity; to the west, at Aptaera and possibly Eleutherna; and to the east, in the Mirabello area, at Lato, probably Lato *pros Kamara* and Pachlitzani Agriada, and possibly Kako Plai. The evidence examined so far confirms that in her archaic form she was a more complex type of deity than that portrayed in later canonical Greek mythology:

- The association of her cult with fresh water (rivers/springs), a healing/purifying/fertilizing agent, is attested at Amnisos, Tsoutsouros, and Pachlitzani Agriada – if she was the goddess worshipped at the EIA bench sanctuary. The Stravomity cave harbours groundwater.
- The occurrence of painted shells, boat models and fish iconography at Tsoutsouros – as well as the coastal location of both Tsoutsouros and Amnisos – connects Eileithyia to the marine world.
- Tsoutsouros and Lato, where her cult is documented by both archaeological and textual evidence, yielded animal figurines implying that the midwife goddess oversaw not only *childbirth* but also animal welfare/reproduction.
- The EIA votives from Tsoutsouros representing the (human or divine?) *maia* and the main stages of human reproduction (intercourse, pregnancy, parturition, nursing), as well as the Archaic depictions of the probable Kouretes, suggest that both female and male initiation rituals took place at the grotto.
- The plaques of a duplicated goddess from Lato – paralleled at Pachlitzani Agriada and Kako Plai – and the fact that Homeric literature already depicts Eileithyia as a multiple deity suggest that the replicating feature of the goddess, prototypical of archaic divine midwives (see Chapter 4), is embedded in an earlier Bronze Age tradition.
- Eileithyia is linked to a GUA type goddess of Minoan ancestry at Tsoutsouros, and probably also at Pachlitzani Agriada, where LM forms of worship survived into the EIA. This is a significant connection: as in Greek iconography emblematic of Eileithyia are her mesmerizing gestures, particularly her upraised arms with open palms, a pose deemed to convey divine forces facilitating childbirth (Farnell 1896: 613-614; Baur 1902: 5; Bruno 1989-1990: 43; Bettini 2013: 84); this gesture and

other arm positions/movements characteristic of the goddess may reflect obstetrical manoeuvres traditionally performed by midwives (Bruno 1989-1990: 43-44).

Most relevant for a better understanding of the archaic identity of Eileithyia and the evolution of the goddess as a therapeutic metaphor over time are the changes in her conceptualization at Tsoutsouros in the EIA, an issue that needs to be addressed in some detail. Willetts, for whom “the links between Eileithyia, the Minoan goddess and a still earlier Neolithic prototype are relatively firm”, believes that such continuity “depends on the unchanging concept of her function” as the “divine helper of women in labour” who “has an obvious origin in the human midwife” (1958: 221; 1962: 168). Eileithyia is undoubtedly fashioned in the image of the wise-woman. However, our diachronic overview of the Tsoutsouros assemblage shows that her Minoan predecessor did not come down the ages as an unchanged religious metaphor. In the Bronze Age she appears to display broad “fertility, chthonic and healing” attributions (Kanta 2011a: 29). But at the turn of the 1st millennium BC, as her cult transitions into the EIA, she undergoes a noticeable conceptual shift. This is attested at Tsoutsouros by the emergence of unprecedented models of copulating couples, childbirth scenes, images of nursing females and infants in cradles that explicitly link the goddess to the *specific function* of fostering human birth-reproduction; a role which, as epicentral as it is in the wise-woman’s craft, constitutes *only one* of the manifold therapeutic functions inherent to this shamanic practitioner serving as human prototype for Eileithyia. This unprecedented emphasis on reproductive sexuality and the (culturally constructed) role of women as mothers emerges in the Tsoutsouros’ record at a time of profound cultural and social changes entailing a paradigm shift in Crete.

Indeed, in the 9th-8th c. BC the proliferation of sanctuary assemblages including precious bronzes (e.g. shields, tripod cauldrons) and imported luxury items, as well as tombs containing costly burial gifts, bespeak of the growing articulation of an aristocracy linked to the incipient city-states developing on the island: a male aristocracy, whose leading socio-political and military role is expressed by votive types such as weaponry and horse representations; and whose privileged connection with the divine is detectable in the appearance of hearth temples where cult often seems directed at male deities, a clear departure from Minoan religious tradition, in which male representations are relatively rare (Prent 2005: 420-424, 427, 467-469; 2007; 2009: 231 n. 3). These changes herald the consolidation of the polis system on the island; a system in which citizenship is a male prerogative closely tied to landownership, new

exclusively male institutions are ritualized (e.g. *prytaneia*, *andreia*, *symposia*) (Prent 2005: 449-450), and descent is established along the patrilineal male line,<sup>34</sup> the institutionalization of marriage ensuring that children are the husband's legitimate offspring (see Chapter 9). In the iconographic record of 7th c. BC Crete, men are most frequently represented as young warriors, funerary steles portray women holding spindle whorls and distaffs (e.g. at Prinias), and a number of depictions of nude females clearly stressing their sexuality allude to male control or subordination; evidence testifying to the articulation of the proper gender roles according to polis religion and ideology (Prent 2005: 423).

The votives from Tsoutsouros emphasizing the *production of children* and the redefined social role of women as *mothers* bespeak of these socio-political changes entailing a shift in the construction of gender; changes associated with a decline of female status necessarily affecting the conceptualization and functions of ancestral goddesses, and their position in the cosmic hierarchy. Eileithyia's Minoan prototype at Tsoutsouros, though still presiding over animal welfare, appears increasingly confined to the protection of human birth-reproduction; a trend heralding Eileithyia's demotion to the role of (minor) childbirth goddess in the canonical Greek pantheon (see Chapter 5).

Rutkowski, who challenges the idea that Eileithyia's cult remained unchanged from Minoan to Greek times, posits that in some Bronze Age sacred caves, such as Amnisos, Tsoutsouros and Stravomity, "similar chthonic deities were worshipped which must have had a fairly wide range of functions, possibly including the easing of birth". He also suggests that "rites connected to the great mysteries of birth and death" in the whole realm of humans, animals and plants were performed in the caves (1986: 64-65). Reflecting on the Lato and Kako Plai votives, Demargne argues that Eileithyia is "the Minoan goddess fallen from her primacy", confined to one specific role, the protection of childbirth (1929: 427; 1930: 196, 201; 1931: 397, 400). And in a timely reminder that we know only Eileithyia's canonical mythology, not what she may have been in Crete, Nilsson writes:

It seems to be a well founded supposition that she once had a fuller significance, and that Eileithyia is another name of the Minoan

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<sup>34</sup> The Gortyn Code (6th c. BC) details a system of inheritance betraying a social system that was now essentially patriarchal; and suggesting that custom was under pressure to diminish the rights of women (Willets 1974).

Goddess of Nature and Mistress of Animals, who survives in Artemis, but who in the case of Eileithyia was restricted to a single one of her functions, that of protecting women in childbed and bringing forth their offspring. *But this function seems to have had a more profound significance and a deeper foundation in Minoan belief* (1950: 523) (my italics).

The unbroken continuity of the cult at Tsoutsouros attests to Eileithyia's direct descent from the Minoan goddess worshipped at the cave since Protopalatial times; the same deity revered at the peak sanctuaries, according to Kanta (2011a: 29). The mention of Eileithyia's cult in the Mycenaean tablets from Knossos supports the claim that she derives from an earlier Minoan goddess presiding over birth (Flouda 2011: 40). It is significant, however, that in LM III, when the Knossian tablets were written (Driessen 2008), there is no evidence at Tsoutsouros for Eileithyia's specialization in fostering *childbirth*. What may be inferred from the cave's EIA female figurines with upraised arms is Eileithyia's connection with a GUA type goddess of Minoan ancestry surviving into the 1st millennium BC. Significantly, the Postpalatial GUA figures are thought to be connected with the earlier palatial cult of the deity represented by the faience 'snake goddesses' from the Temple Repositories of the palace of Knossos (Alexiou 1958: 253-260; Gesell 1985: 47; Prent 2005: 196); an assemblage strongly suggestive of a midwifery cult associated with Eileithyia (see Chapter 8), eliciting Nilsson's 'well founded supposition' that her function of propitiating birth had a deeper foundation and significance in Minoan belief.

Is then Eileithyia just 'an aspect' of the/a 'Minoan goddess of nature and fertility' as is often suggested?<sup>35</sup> Or rather, is she the fallen archetype of the main goddess of palatial times, originally a full-fledged divine midwife performing manifold tasks who in her assimilation to Greek religion is gradually downgraded to the *core function* of her craft (i.e. the patronage of human parturition), while retaining the upraised arms gesture emblematic of the GUA? In other words, is she the outcome of a process paralleling Nintu's demotion in the Sumerian pantheon as a result of a profound paradigm shift?

Nintu/Ninhursaga, who according to one theory is the prehistoric 'mother goddess' presiding over life, death and regeneration (Stol 2000: 75), yields before an

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<sup>35</sup> See for instance Evans 1928: 840; Lawler 1948: 5; Alexiou 1956: 17; Prent 2005: 429.

emerging male god (Enki/Ea) (Jacobsen 1973: 294). First Enki, and then his son Marduk, take over Nintu's midwifery capacity to fashion humans from clay,<sup>36</sup> a transfer of the power of creating life to male deities/heroes paralleled in other religious traditions – the Egyptians Khnum and Ptah, the Hebrew Yahweh, and the Greek Prometheus mould humans with clay (see Chapter 3). Jacobsen argues that the rise of patriarchal ideology challenged Nintu's unquestioned traditional prominence in the Sumerian cosmic hierarchy, since “a goddess as a supreme ruler, rather than a god, a midwife rather than a warrior” was difficult to fit into the emerging city-state cosmology (1973: 294). An analogous symbolic transfer in the cosmic hierarchy may have been under completion in Crete at the end of the Orientalizing period (7th c. BC), when the GUA image twilights on the island in concomitance with the consolidation of polis religion and ideology.<sup>37</sup>

Now, if the Eileithyia of Greek times is indeed the direct descendant of an archetypal Minoan goddess *patterned on the wise-woman*, she should have retained some of the healing attributes of her Bronze Age predecessor. And these attributes should be discernible in the Minoan votive record in association with materials liable to belong to a midwifery complex, in accordance with the guidelines established in our methodological template. To test the foregoing hypothesis we must therefore begin by addressing the historical record to find out if the Greek Eileithyia displays any medical emblems.

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<sup>36</sup> See the myths *Enki and Ninmah*, and *Enûma Eliš*.

<sup>37</sup> In contrast with Crete and the Eastern Aegean islands, the rise to prominence of male deities in the great sanctuaries starts earlier in the Greek mainland. At the sites of prior Mycenaean palatial centers, the worship of the so-called ‘Great Goddess’– associated with wheel-made terracota female figurines – comes to an end in the LH IIIC (c. 1190-1060 BC) (Kourou 2009: 126).

## Chapter 7

### **In search of Eileithyia's medical attributes**

## 7. 1. Eileithyia's capacity as a healing goddess: Conflicting and contrasting scholarly views

We have so far repeatedly challenged the scholarly trend that naturalizes childbirth and thus overshadows early bodies of female therapeutic knowledge and praxis emerging as integrated cultural responses (mechanical, pharmacological, ritual) to our species' reproductive issues. This trend, we argued, supports the misleading assumption that ancient deities presiding over the birth process are primarily associated with biological reproduction and the natural world, which results in their categorization as 'mother/nature' goddesses. As illustrated when we examined the figures of Nintu, Ninisina/Gula and other deities patterned on the wise-woman, reading primary sources through this lens fosters interpretations at times paradoxically opposing midwifery and medicine (see Chapter 4). Like her counterparts in other cultures, Eileithyia is often the object of such disassociations when it comes to determining her healing capacity.

Graeco-Roman healing deities were frequently offered anatomical votives, representations of body parts/organs depicting the area of affliction or concern that worshippers dedicated in the hope to regain health, or in gratitude for an effected cure (Van Straten 1981, Michaelides 2014, Draycott and Graham 2017); a ritual practice first attested in the Aegean on Minoan Crete (see Chapter 8). The occurrence of this specific type of votive at a given sanctuary unequivocally testifies to the therapeutic capacity of the related deity, and provides evidence for the ailments she/he specialized in (Oberhelman 2013).

On the Cycladic island of Paros Eileithyia had a cave sanctuary with a sacred spring (Hadzisteliou Price 1978: 149 n. 13), in use from Geometric to Roman times, that yielded archaeological and epigraphic evidence for her cult as a healing deity. The Hellenistic-Roman votives deposited at the grotto include anatomical models of female breasts and lower torsos depicting the vulva, a few inscribed with dedications to the goddess (Figs. 1-2) (Baur 1902: 56; Muthmann 1975: 254-255; Pingiatoglou 1981: 36, 52-53, 88-89, 123-124, 134; Hadzisteliou Price 1978: 149; Forsén and Sironen 1991: 176-177; Forsén 1996: 97-100, 135). Found elsewhere on Paros is a votive marble base of a *maia* named Euphrosine (2nd-1st c. BC) which displays snakes, a medical symbol probably alluding to the midwife's healing craft (Laes 2011: 160 n. 4; Dasen 2016: 14).





Fig. 1: Breasts carved on a marble plaque pierced for suspension, offered by a woman called Ora Difanou to Eileithyia at her grotto on Paros. 31 BC-310 AD

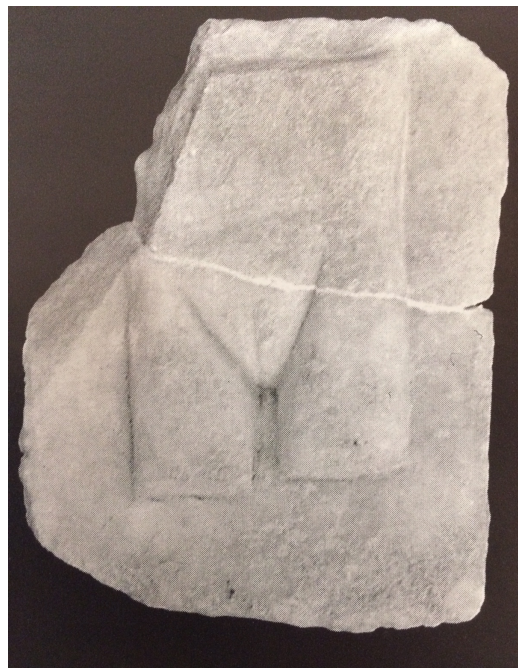


Fig. 2: Marble plaque of a lower torso with incised pubic triangle and vulva, probably from Eileithyia's cave at Paros. Hellenistic-Roman period

Nilsson, who acknowledges Eileithyia as “the divine midwife” (1925: 30; 1950: 523), argues that she was “always the goddess of childbirth, except at Paros where she was a healing goddess” because only there did she receive anatomical votives (1950: 518). Willetts, though asserting that Eileithyia “has an obvious origin in the human midwife”

(1958: 221), follows Nilsson when positing that at Paros she “was not a goddess of childbirth but a healing deity” (1958: 223 n. 16). Dietrich, who regards Eileithyia as a “goddess of nature”, subscribes to the same argument (1974: 87, n. 88). Pingiatoglou (1981: 88-89), Forsén and Sironen (1991), and Forsén (1996: 135) acknowledge Eileithyia’s healing capacity only on Paros; a capacity which, according to Leitaó, “is *wholly distinct* from her role as protector of childbirth” (2007: 257) (my italics).

These views seem rather contradictory. Are we to understand that the midwife goddess lacks healing competence except where anatomical votives *explicitly* validate her therapeutic capacity? That in her role as protector of childbirth the divine *maia* does not symbolically perform as an obstetrician? That obstetrics, the core of archaic midwifery practice, is wholly distinct from medicine, and the midwife not intrinsically a practitioner? Ancient sources indicate that this division of her skills and roles is a modern perception. According to Plato, by means of drugs and incantations, the *maia* induces labour, eases the birth pangs, promotes conception, and abortion if needed (*Theaet.* 149c-d); and Soranus says that, when skilled, she is a general practitioner (*Gyn.* 1. 4).

Other scholars take a different stand in regard to Eileithyia’s healing capacity. Warren states that she is “the only medical deity” attested in the Linear B archives (1970: 375). Kanta argues for the therapeutic dimension of her Minoan prototype, both at Tsoutsouros and the peak sanctuaries (2011a: 29). Aware of the complexity of Eileithyia’s archaic features, Bultrighini ascribes her to the “general category of deities presiding over health”; remarking that the Tsoutsouros votives clearly indicate the participation of male worshippers in her cult, and that the goddess propitiated not only childbirth but also the welfare of women and children more broadly (1993: 67-68).

Scholars endorsing the view that Eileithyia was a healing goddess only on Paros because only there did she receive anatomical votives put forward *argumenta ex silentio*, overlooking that this offering type is not the sole indicator of a deity’s therapeutic capacity. Tsoutsouros yielded no anatomical votives, and yet the childbirth models from the cave sanctuary clearly depict a medical practitioner at work: the midwife, whether Eileithyia herself or her human prototype. And later historical sources supply unmistakable evidence for the medical attributes of the goddess.

## 7. 2. Eileithyia's medical emblems in the historical record

According to our methodological template, textual, iconographic and archaeological sources relating to archaic divine midwives provide evidence for their medical attributes; these may include professional instruments (e.g. obstetric knife, birth stool/brick, birth wands) and attire (e.g. headdress), *pharmaka* (plants, animals, minerals), and/or symbols emblematic of indigenous midwifery traditions. Therapeutic attributes may occur on depictions of midwife goddesses and related imagery; in associated myths, hymns, incantations; and among the votives dedicated to such deities (e.g. umbilical cord-clippers offered to Nintu/Ninhursag, dogs and canid figurines to Ninisina/Gula).

Following these guidelines, we shall now trace Eileithyia's medical emblems in the historical record, taking into account that she was syncretized or identified with other goddesses fulfilling analogous midwifery functions (e.g. Hera, Artemis, Hekate, Juno Lucina, Uni). And that her iconography is not as fixed and obvious as that of the major canonical Greek deities (Stoop 1960: 30, 32).

### 7. 2. 1. Medical implements: Sharp cutting tools

Sharp cutting devices were essential tools in the wise-woman's medical equipment, as they are today in modern obstetrics and other therapeutic fields involving various forms of surgery. As we may recall, in the Sumerian myth *Enki and the World Order* Nintu carries the obstetric "reed that cuts off the (umbilical) cord", a knife called *lutû* which could be a sharpened reed, a flint or a bronze blade (Stol 2000: 111, 113 n. 24; Jacobsen 1973: 291, n. 67). Ninisina/Gula, "the midwife of the mothers of the land, the great physician of humankind" (Stol 2000: 79), is portrayed holding a scalpel, a lancet and other surgical instruments (Fig. 3) (Ornan 2004: 22-23; Böck 2014: 18-22). In ancient Egypt the midwifery paraphernalia involved in a number of rebirth rituals included *psš-*kf** knives, thought to have originally been used to cut the umbilical cord (Fig. 4) (Roth 1992; Roth and Roehrig 2002: 135; Nunn 1996: 165). On Crete the propitiatory agency of blades in (re)birth rites survived into modern times, as is illustrated by the apotropaic custom of placing a μαχαίρι (knife) in the home of newlyweds and at the birthing couch (Rigatos 2005: 43, cited by Clark 2011: 63 n. 37).



Fig. 3: Gula holding her scalpel and a bandage or swab, with the dog, her symbolic animal, a worshipper and an ibex. Agate cylinder seal, Nimrud, Neo-Assyrian period



Fig. 4: Flint blade of a *psš-kf* knife. Egypt, Predynastic period

The island of Tinos, where the ancient month *Ilithyaion* was named after Eileithyia (Salviat 1959: 380 n. 3), yielded an Archaic relief pithamphora depicting Athena's birth which portrays the midwife goddess with her *harpē* (ἄρπη), the curved obstetric knife used to cut the umbilical cord (Figs. 5-6) (Olmos 1986: 686-687, 697; Étienne et al. 2013: 63-65, 109-110).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is a rare Greek rendering of Athena's birth in that all the figures display wings. It may be noted that winged goddesses commonly occur on Etruscan depictions of the myth (Chapter 5, fig. 18) (Baur 1902: 30, 81, 86).



Fig. 5: Eileithyia with her *harpē* stands to the left of the birthing deity with upraised arms from whose head springs the armed Athena. To the right, an attendant heats water in a cauldron for the newborn's first bath. The Birth Pithamphora, Tinos, 7th c. BC

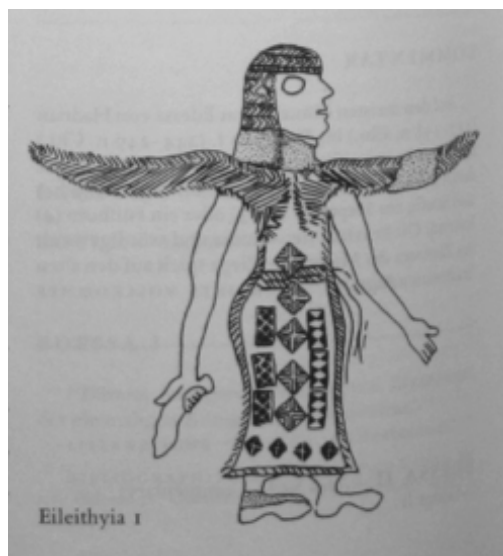


Fig. 6: Eileithyia holding the *harpē*, as depicted on the Birth Pithamphora from Tinos

This Archaic vase is relevant for various reasons. Firstly, it shows possibly the only known representation of Eileithyia's *harpē*. Secondly, the parturient deity displays upraised arms, which again connects this gesture with birth. Thirdly, most scholars regard the birthing figure as a female rather than a male deity (Zeus), some interpreting her as Athena's mother Metis ('wisdom', 'skill'), or Rhea (Étienne et al. 2013: 64); if the

parturient deity is indeed female, then the pithamphora from Tinos depicts an old myth predating the canonical version of Athena's birth in which her divine *genitrix* had not yet been suppressed/superseded by Zeus.

The *harpē* is known mainly from the mythological tradition. Kronos castrates Ouranos with a flint *harpē* fashioned by Gaia (Hes. *Theog.* 160-165). And Greek heroes typically use this curved knife to slay archaic female *drakontes* (snake-like creatures); so do Perseus and Herakles when respectively beheading Medusa and the Hydra (Vernant 2013: 229 n. 19; Ogden 2013: 118-119, 234-236). Both Ouranos and Medusa procreate from the place or consequence of severing; Ouranos from his genitals/blood/semen thrown into the sea (Aphrodite, the Erinyes, Giants and Meliae), and Medusa from her neck (Chrysaor and Pegasus) (Fig. 7) (Vernant 2013: 229 n. 19), with Perseus acting as an unusual midwife when severing her head (Nünlist 2007: 40).<sup>2</sup> The castration of Ouranos marks the beginning/birth of a new cosmic order in the Greek Creation myth. And the slaying of female *drakontes* associated with pre-hellenic cults at the hands of heroized warriors credited with the foundation of cities (e.g. Perseus, Herakles) symbolizes the advent of the polis-system paradigm. Since these mythical accounts sanction critical transitions, the *harpē* may have had a ritual significance extended beyond the domain of literal parturition, as did the Egyptian *psš-ḳf* knife.



Fig. 7: Medusa, squatting with arms upraised, births two *pegasoi* from her severed neck. Etruscan gold bulla, 5th c. BC

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<sup>2</sup> Hes. *Theog.* 174-206, 270-280.

Following Welcker (1844-1867: 199), Farnell writes:

A passage in Hesychius seems to explain *Eileithyia* as the Argive Hera, and Suidas mentions a strange statue of Hera at Argos which represented her with a pair of shears in her hand, an emblem which can scarcely belong to her as an agricultural goddess, and which can only be interpreted as alluding to the cutting of the umbilical cord (1896: 608).

The Italic Eileithyia, identified with Juno Lucina and Diana, also displays the scissors' emblem (Buffa 1933: 449). The chief attribute of Juno Martialis, herself performing midwifery fuctions,<sup>3</sup> has been interpreted as a pair of shears or as ears of grain (Fig. 8) (Mattingly 1946: 41).



Fig. 8: Juno Martialis with her scissors or ears of grain. Silver antoninianus, 251-253 AD

### 7. 2. 2. Medical attire: The physician's cap

When addressing the attire of the Sumerian Nintu we mentioned the headdress as a professional garment often worn by midwives. On two black-figure vases Eileithyia wears the characteristic doctor's cap, an attribute denoting her role as a physician (Fig. 9) (Olmos 1986: 689, 697). The same type of hat is worn by the doctor performing a cure on a red-figure aryballos of the so-called Clinic Painter (Fig. 10) (Berger 1970: 74-75 figs. 91-93, 95 figs. 116-117; Verbanck-Piérard 1998: 203-205).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Daremberg and Saglio 1873-1919, s.v. Juno, pp. 685-686.

<sup>4</sup> On this professional garment, see Berger 1970: 92-97.

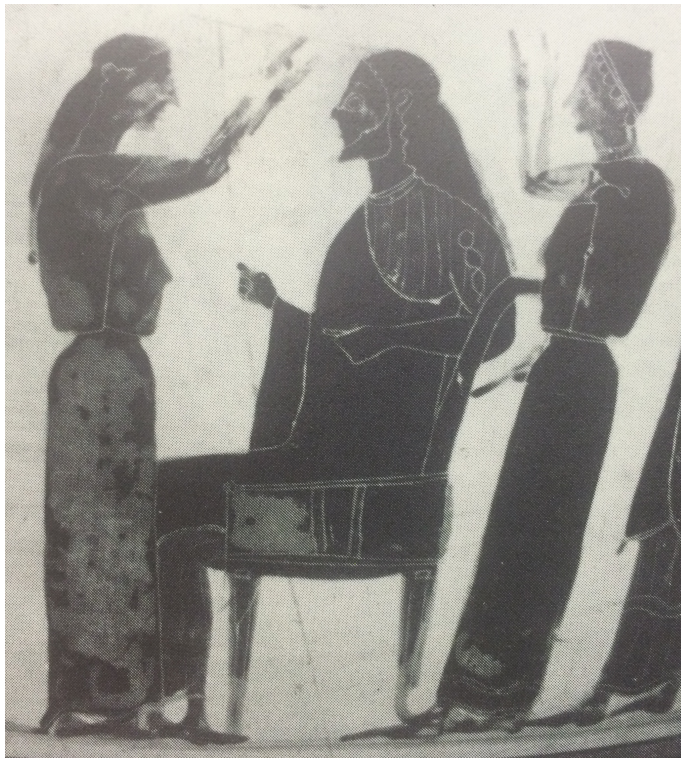


Fig. 9: An Eileithyia wearing the distinctive physician's cap stands with arms upraised behind the labouring Zeus. Attic black-figure hydra



Fig. 10: Capped physician treating a patient. Attic red-figure aryballos, c. 480 BC



### 7. 2. 3. Pharmacological plants

#### 7. 2. 3. 1. Dittany

Dittany (*Origanum dictamnus*), a species endemic to Crete and the island's most celebrated medicinal plant in antiquity, was sacred to midwife goddesses because it was used as a *pharmakon* to ease childbirth. The statues of Artemis Eileithyia, Eileithyia/Lucina and Diktynna were customarily crowned or garlanded with it (Lawler 1948: 3; Warren 1985: 202, n. 59). In the Hippocratic Corpus the plant is prescribed exclusively for the treatment of gynaeco-obstetrical conditions (Andò 2001: 277) (see Chapter 9).

The island of Delos, where Eileithyia's cult was ancestral, yielded an inscription including *stephanomata* among the offerings to the goddess upon her festival; large garlands possibly made of dittany (Lawler 1948: 3, 5). Two black-figure vases of Athena's birth depict one of the Eileithyiai holding a wreath (Fig. 11) (Roulez 1861: 301-302; Baur 1902: 76). Roulez suggested they are dittany wreaths since these were dedicated to the goddess, and the plant employed as an oxytocic drug (1861: 302).



Fig. 11: Two Eileithyiai with arms upraised, and a likely third holding a wreath, attend the parturient Zeus. Black-figure vase

In ancient Crete wreaths plaited with dittany and other plants belonging to the pharmacopoeia of midwives were commonly dedicated to goddesses overseeing the reproductive process, a ritual practice that may go back to Minoan times as suggested by the Fresco of the Garlands from Knossos (Warren 1985). The propitiatory agency of wreaths is still embedded in modern Greece, where herb garlands are used in rebirth rites such as funerals, marriage (Fig. 12) or the welcoming of spring (see Chapter 9).



Fig. 12: Attached wedding wreaths symbolizing marital union. Modern Greek tin *tama* (ex-voto)

### 7. 2. 3. 2. The pomegranate

A common attribute of Hera, Demeter, Persephone, Aphrodite, Artemis and other goddesses presiding over human, plant and/or animal (re)birth, the pomegranate is usually regarded as a fertility symbol.<sup>5</sup> This fruit having attested oxytocic properties was a relevant drug in ancient female medicine, employed among others as an antifertility agent (i.e. an abortifacient and a contraceptive) (see Chapters 8-9). The pomegranate is thus better understood as a midwifery symbol, as the term ‘fertility’ – a catchword encapsulating many different notions – conflicts with some of its traditional pharmacological uses.

The pomegranate features as an emblem of the Samian Hera, who receives anatomical votives including female genitalia, and other offerings bespeaking of her capacity as a healing goddess (Laskaris 1999: 9-10; Senkova 2016: 33-34) (see Chapter 9). Hera often fulfils Eileithyia’s functions in Magna Graecia, where she is recurrently linked to the fruit (Jannot 1980: 613, 615-616); this is the case at the Heraion at the mouth of the river Sele (Poseidonia/Paestum), where Hera-Eileithyia receives pregnant and kneeling-birthing figurines, iron keys for a safe childbirth, and female busts crowned with lilies (Zancani Montuoro and Zanotti-Bianco 1951: 14-15; Stoop 1960: 24-41; Cipriani 1997),

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Sourvinou-Inwood 1978, Preka-Alexandri 2010, Senkova 2016, Greco 2016.

another ancient gynaecological plant (see Chapter 9).<sup>6</sup> The pomegranate was an attribute of Eileithyia in Etruria, where she was broadly worshipped, either as an autonomous deity or syncretized with Ethausva, who also bore this fruit emblem. The Archaeological Museum of Florence hosts a female bronze statue holding a pomegranate (inv. n° 553) with an inscription that reads “I (am)/This is the statue of mother Eileithyia” (Buffa 1933; Pfiffig 1975: 307; Jannot 1980: 616).

In modern Greece smashing a pomegranate on the threshold of the home is a New Year’s ritual for good luck.<sup>7</sup> Until the last century small bags with pomegranate seeds, pebbles and certain plants were carried as charms to ensure lactation. The fruit was ritually shared by newlyweds, or given by the bridegroom to the bride as his first gift upon entering their house. Parallels between marriage and funerary rites are apparent in the custom of laying a pomegranate on the bier of the deceased; or in the *kollyba*, the boiled wheat with pomegranate and raisins traditionally eaten after the funeral, which is a legacy from antiquity (Lawson 1910: 13, 535, 559). The depictions of the fruit recurring in ancient funerary contexts, in Greece (Fig. 13) and elsewhere in the Mediterranean (Immerwahr 1989; Ward 2003; Langdon 2005: 9), may thus have propitiated the rebirth of the dead.



Fig. 13: Pomegranate models from the Geometric cemetery of Anavysos. Brauron, Archaeological Museum

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<sup>6</sup> Located near the Heraion at the mouth of the Sele is the Catholic sanctuary of the *Madonna del Granato* (‘Virgin of the Pomegranate’), who every August 15th is offered a boat model full of flowers recalling the boats held by Archaic figurines of the Argive Hera (Zancani Montuoro and Zanotti-Bianco 1951: 19).

<sup>7</sup> Katerina Trantalidou, pers. comm. 28-2-2016.

## 7. 2. 4. Pharmacological animals

### 7. 2. 4. 1. The dog

In Classical antiquity dogs were deemed to have healing powers, especially for pregnant and childbearing women (Day 1984: 28). The animal does not feature as an attribute of Eileithyia in the iconographic record. But according to literary evidence, the Argives, who called Eileithyia Eilioneia, sacrificed dogs to the goddess for an easy delivery (Baur 1902: 17, 22, 89; De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2006: 62; Bettini 2013: 99, n. 35). Zooarchaeology attests to the sacrifice of canids to Uni-Eileithyia in Etruria and the Latium (Bruni 2005: 22; De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2006: 63); and a votive pit containing a dog was found at Paestum in the vicinity of the Heraion (De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2006: 64), where Hera-Eileithyia displays the pomegranate and is given votive keys for a swift and safe childbirth.

As we may recall, dogs were typically offered to the medical goddess Gula, who like Hekate and Artemis bears the animal as a distinctive attribute. Babylonian incantations associate Gula with puppies; her temple at Isin yielded 33 dog skeletons including 15 puppies, and kennels are attested in her sanctuaries (Böck 2014: 40, 44, 93, 115, 173, 176). Artemis, Hekate/Enodia, Aphrodite Koliai and the Genetyllides also received dogs/puppies in sacrifice (Fig. 14); and so did the archaic Roman birth deities Genita Mana and Mater Matuta (Baur 1902: 17, 22, 89; Dillon 2002: 246-247; De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2006: 62-64; Trantalidou 2006; Bettini 1978: 128, 130, 2013: 99 n. 35). Sirona, Nehalennia, Aveta, Epona and Sequana, Gallic healing goddesses with broad therapeutic competence, who protected the reproductive process (of humans, plants and/or animals) and were associated with springs/rivers, appear represented with dogs/puppies; Sequana received anatomical votives, and Sirona was sometimes depicted with the (medical) serpent coiled about her arm (Gourevitch 1968: 256, 275-280; De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2006: 63-64). The dog is also emblematic of the Cretan Diktynna, a healing goddess overseeing the initiation of girls into marriage/childbirth (Willets 1962: 182; Sporn 2001: 228-233), linked like Eileithyia to the oxytocic dittany (Lawler 1948; Warren 1985: 202, n. 59). On coins from the ancient polis of Kydonia (modern Chania), Diktynna is shown with a dog, carrying bow and quiver, and holding a long torch (Willets 1962: 191), a common attribute of goddesses bringing life into the light.



Fig. 14: Woman sacrificing a puppy to Hekate, whose torches are stuck in the ground. Athenian red-figured lekythos, 5th c. BC

It can be no coincidence that all these goddesses perform midwifery functions. Nor can the fact that, when specified, the gender of the sacrificed canids is invariably female. Bitches, not male dogs, were offered to Eileithyia/Eiloneia, Hekate, Genita Mana (Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 52), Artemis and Enodia (Baur 1902: 17 n. 22; Lacam 2008: 43). Hellenistic coins from Kydonia portray a bitch suckling an infant who is often interpreted as Zeus *Kretagenes* ('Cretan-born') because in local myth he was raised by a she-dog, or a nymph called *Kynosoura* ('Dog's Tail')<sup>8</sup> whom Hesychius connects with Kydonia (Sporn 2001: 229-230; Flinterman 2009: 244-246). Relying among others on this evidence and Diktyнна's role as *kourotrophos* (nurse) of Zeus in coin iconography, Sporn convincingly argues that Diktyнна was represented both as a womanly figure and in the form of a bitch (2001: 229-230). An argument all the more persuasive when considering that Hekate-Artemis is occasionally depicted as a she-dog (Fig. 15); Leto, herself a midwife goddess, appears in the guise of a she-wolf (Ael. 10. 26); and Ninisina/Gula is frequently identified

<sup>8</sup> *Kynosoura* may be alluding to the Cretan Hound (Κρητικός Λαγωνικός), a most ancient breed endemic from the island which has a characteristic loop-like tail. I owe this pertinent suggestion to Kaliopi Zafeiropoulou (pers. comm. 2-2-2017).

with her hound (Fig. 16), either envisaged with a dog's head or fully theriomorphic (Fuhr 1977: 137, 143 n. 5; Ornan 2004: 14, 20).



Fig. 15: Ionian seal depicting Hekate-Artemis as a whelping bitch. Archaic period

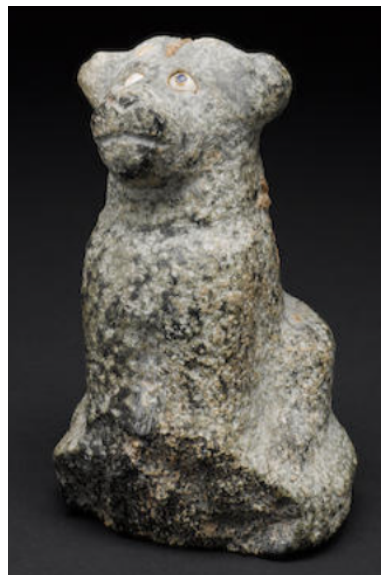


Fig. 16: Basalt dog figurine dedicated to Ninisina. First Dynasty of Isin, 19th c. BC

Why are divine midwives so persistently linked to she-dogs? Plutarch tells us that, according to Socrates, the Argives sacrificed bitches to Eileithyia/Eiloneia because of the ease with which they bring forth their puppies (*Quaest. Rom.* 52). When reporting the puppy sacrifice to Genita Mana, Pliny says that the Romans regularly employed sucking whelps as expiatory victims because their flesh was considered to be most pure (*HN* 29. 14. 4). In modern scholarship the beneficial effect of the canid's saliva in the curing of wounds/sores through licking is often adduced to explain the attribution of the animal to Gula and other healing deities (Fuhr 1977: 143 n. 5, 144; Böck 2014: 38; Ornan 2004: 18; Trantalidou 2006: 114; Ogden 2013: 369 n. 113). But none of these arguments aptly accounts for the pervasive association of dogs with goddesses patterned on the midwife. So the answer to our question should be sought elsewhere, most likely in the medicinal applications of the bitch and the puppy in gynaeco-obstetrical practice, the core of the wise-woman's expertise.

Pliny, who draws from the vast repository of ancient Mediterranean folk medicine, records the use of the bitch's placenta and milk to facilitate delivery;<sup>9</sup> stating that the afterbirth of the ewe was also a very useful remedy for women's complaints (*HN* 30. 43. 14). Present-day Nigerian midwives administer dried ewe's placenta orally to ease difficult labour (Onuaguluchi and Gashi 1996). In European, Moroccan, Chinese, Vietnamese, Javanese and Mexican midwifery traditions the human afterbirth – usually prescribed dried and pounded – has a long history as a drug to hasten birth, expel the dead foetus, prevent afterpains, promote lactation and treat infertility (De Nobleville and Salerne 1757: 478-480; Mérat and De Lens 1837: 174; Croft Long 1963: 238; Burd and Huang 2011: 3-4; González Casarrubios and Timón Tiemblo 2018: 291).<sup>10</sup>

Was then the administration of the bitch's placenta to ease birth an empirically-based treatment? This appears to have been the case. A major endocrine organ in mammals, the placenta contains oxytocin and high levels of prostaglandin (Fields et al. 1983; Onuaguluchi and Gashi 1996; Burd and Huang 2011: 3), the two chief endogenous compounds activating uterine contractions and lactation (Neville and Walsh 1996: 25, 26; Kota et al. 2013). According to modern clinical research, the intake of placenta extract increases the opium-like substances released during childbirth, thereby enhancing the tolerance to labour pains (Burd and Huang 2011: 3-4). Moreover, it fosters milk secretion in newly delivered mothers (Soyková-Pachnerová et al. 1954; Burd and Huang 2011: 4); may help to arrest postpartum bleeding and promote lochial discharge after delivery (Burd and Huang 2011: 3); and effectively alleviates menopausal symptoms (Lee et al. 2009). This would explain why placentophagy is such an ubiquitous behaviour among mammals,<sup>11</sup> and why the afterbirth is a cross-cultural midwifery drug.<sup>12</sup>

The use of the bitch's milk to expel the foetus reported by Pliny is already attested in Hippocratic medicine (Andò 2001: 125, n. 283); the milk of the sow was employed for the same purpose (Plin. *HN* 28. 77. 19). Significantly, breast milk contains high concentrations of oxytocin (Takeda et al. 1986). Sheep/ewes and pigs/sows were commonly bred in the ancient Mediterranean. The dog however, perhaps the first animal to

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<sup>9</sup> Parts of the dog and the coyote (the womb?) are used in indigenous Mexican midwifery to ease delivery (Guerrero Ortiz and Retana Guiascón 2012: 32)

<sup>10</sup> According to Cretan *iatrosophia* ('medical knowledge'), eating an animal's uterus fostered conception (Clark 2011: 89).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Soyková-Pachnerová et al. 1954; Young and Benyshek 2010.

<sup>12</sup> In modern Greece powdered dry placenta was also employed to treat inflammations of the male genital organs (Sike 1986: 132).

have been domesticated, was that living in closest companionship with humans (Clutton-Brock 1995: 10-15). Birthing/lactating bitches may thus have been the most readily available mammals to provide a regular supply of placentas and milk for gynaecobstetrical uses.

But there is more to the connection of bitches with specifically female healing practices. The myths of Zeus *Kretagenes* suckled by a she-dog,<sup>13</sup> Asklepios fed by two bitches when abandoned at birth (Paus. 2. 26. 5), Romulus and Remus raised by a she-wolf, and similar legends of animal-parented children attested cross-culturally may reflect the use of animal milk substitute to rear infants when their mothers died in childbirth, or could not breastfeed them – and no other lactating woman was available; an ancient practice (Fig. 17) which has survived until recent times in Europe (Fig. 18), and is still in place in many parts of the world (Sadler 1896: 177; Rabdill 1976: 21-26; Niehoff and Meister 2003: 182-183).



Fig. 17: A child and a calf suckling together from a cow.  
Ancient Egyptian scene, n. d.

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<sup>13</sup> As mentioned earlier, in other versions of the myth baby Zeus thrives on goat's milk.





Fig. 18: Orphaned infants reared on donkey's milk at the *Hospice des Enfants Assistés*. Paris, 1895

Now, what about the connection of divine midwives with whelps? Artemis and Hekate bear the epithet *Skylakotrophos*, 'Nurse of puppies' (Trantalidou 2006: 110), which could reflect a healing practice attested in both historical and ethnographic sources: the breastfeeding of puppies (and other young mammals) by women. This procedure, encouraged by midwives and doctors until the 19th c. in Europe, is still performed in many cultures for therapeutic reasons: to develop good nipples, stimulate lactation and maintain the mother's milk supply, relieve breast engorgement after the death of an offspring, disperse mammary nodules, prevent conception (Rabdill 1976: 26-27; Simoons and Baldwin 1982: 429-432, 435; Gourevitch 1990: 94), and also to expel the afterbirth, as breastfeeding right after delivery fosters uterine contractions.<sup>14</sup> Given that oxytocin is released in response to sucking (Neville and Walsh 1996: 25), we may argue that the breastfeeding of puppies 'to develop good nipples' could actually be a means to trigger the onset of labour in full-term pregnant women. Significantly, in Near Eastern and European healing traditions puppies have been the preferred animals to be suckled for gynaecobstetric purposes; the dog serving womankind in other therapeutic ways, as living canids laid upon the sore breasts were used as pain relievers, and eating dog meat considered a remedy against barrenness (Rabdill 1976: 27-28).

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<sup>14</sup> When the writer Mary Wollstonecraft was dying of puerperal fever after giving birth in 1797, the attending doctor applied puppies to her breasts in a likely attempt to remove the infected placenta from her womb (Tomalin 2004: 280-281).

Earlier on we mentioned Lamaštu, the Akkadian demoness deemed to cause childbirth and infant mortality, who acts as Gula's opponent and is often portrayed suckling whelps and piglets. Drawing parallels between this iconography and the ethnographic practice of suckling young animals to relieve breast engorgement, Wiggermann perceptively suggested that women's prophylactic breastfeeding of puppies might explain the attribution of the dog to Gula (2010). The cross-cultural data discussed here testifying to the use of bitches and puppies as oxytocic/galactagogue/healing agents in midwifery lend support to Wiggermann's suggestion, and to our contention that the Babylonian medical goddess is made in the image of the wise-woman (see Chapter 4); allowing us to confidently argue that the dog is an attribute of Gula, Eileithyia and other ancient midwife goddesses because the animal played a relevant therapeutic role in female medicine.

Mesopotamian, Hurrian and Hittite cultic texts describe rituals in which puppies were employed to 'absorb' impurity from people and places (Edrey 2008: 271); in ancient Anatolia wise-women used puppies (and piglets) in ceremonies aimed at cleansing, promoting conception and preventing death (Collins 2006: 173-174). A number of Greek cleansing/healing rites involved the rubbing of a puppy on the person to be purified (*periskylakismos*), or on the diseased portion of the patient's body so that the animal might absorb the ailment (Hartswick 1990: 242; De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2006: 63-64); on a votive stele, worshippers of the Gallic healing goddess Sequana are shown holding puppies and rubbing them against their bodies (De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2006: 64).

Dogs and figurines of canids were buried under doorways/gates in Mesopotamia (Black and Green 1992: 70; Ornan 2004: 18). In the Graeco-Roman world, dog skeletons are attested in analogous foundation deposits under city gates/walls/defensive installations (e.g. at Rome – Porta Mugonia – Paestum – Porta Marina – Ariminum, Fidenae; at Caerwent and Chester-le-Street in England) (De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2006: 65; Lacam 2008: 36). On the island of Rhodes (Lindos), a dog was offered to the war god Enyalios/Ares in the month of *Artemision*, connecting him to Artemis, who propitiated the army's transition into the wild borderlands and battle itself (Gonzales 2008: 134). During their puberty initiation Spartan boys underwent ritual flogging under the auspices of Artemis (see Chapters 5, 9), and sacrificed a dog to Enyalios (De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2006: 63).

During the Roman *Lupercalia*, a spring festival focused on the Lupercal cave where the mythical she-wolf suckled Romulus and Remus, a dog and two goats were sacrificed

(Fowler 1916: 90-91, 310-320); women wishing to conceive and ensure a safe delivery presented their hands to ritual flogging with thongs of the flayed animals' skins (Plut. *Caes.* 61. 2). Several Roman rites propitiating agropastoral welfare also involved dog sacrifice. Puppies were offered before sowing, harvesting, vintaging and the shearing of sheep, to protect the budding crops (at the Porta Catularia, 'Puppy's Gate'), and prevent wheat from developing *robigo*, the rust disease (Simoons 1994: 238; De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2006: 65). Similar agricultural rituals aimed at ensuring the seasonal rebirth of vegetation have survived into modern Greece (Sergis 2010).

Last but not least, canids occur in ancient funerary contexts (Day 1984, Trantalidou 2006), notably in association with infants. A Hellenistic well near the Hephaisteion in the Athenian Agora yielded the skeletons of about 500 fetuses/newborns/infants and 150 dogs/puppies possibly offered to Hekate (or Artemis or Eileithyia) (Liston and Rotroff 2013). A well at the Sebasteion of Eretria in Euboia (3rd c. BC) contained the bones of at least 19 neonates and 26 dogs (Chenal-Velarde 2006: 27-28). At Messene, the Agora well hosted the remains of several hounds and *c.* 264 infants (3rd-2nd c. BC), probably deposited there by mothers and midwives; and the grave monument K3, produced 25 infant inhumations in pots (*enchitrysmoi*) and 4 dogs buried among them (Bourbou and Themelis 2010). Infants interred with puppies were found at the Late Roman cemetery of Poggio Gramignano near Lugnano in Teverina, a mortuary practice that has been related to Hekate's cult (Soren 1999). At the ancient necropolis of Paphos in Cyprus (2nd c. BC-4th c. AD), dogs were buried amidst humans, some accompanying fetuses/newborns in funerary vessels (*enchytrismoi*) (Raptou 2009: 92-97); the cult of Aphrodite-Astarte may have a bearing on these burials, since hounds were sacrificed at her Paphian sanctuary.<sup>15</sup> In the Levant, which has a long history of canid inhumations in cultic contexts, the unique cemetery at Tel Ashkelon (5th-4th c. BC) hosting the burials of about 1400 dogs – mostly puppies – is thought to be connected to a healing cult of Astarte (Edrey 2008). A common feature of Punic settlements is the Tophet, an infant cemetery yielding small urns with the cremated remains of fetuses/newborns and very young animals including puppies (Whitaker 1921: 257-260; Schwartz et al. 2010);<sup>16</sup> often carved on the stelae marking these

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<sup>15</sup> See Trantalidou 2006: 114, 116.

<sup>16</sup> A few references in Roman and Biblical sources, prone to respectively cast Carthaginians as barbarians and impious, describe them as regularly engaging in child sacrifice. Modern scholarship has thereby often interpreted the Tophet as a burial ground for sacrificed infants. However, the Tophets host mainly fetuses, newborns and infants up to 5-6 months old, an age distribution consistent with the high rate of infant mortality in antiquity; strongly suggesting that Tophets were

graves is the image of Tanit – equivalent to Astarte – at times represented with upraised arms (Fig. 19).<sup>17</sup> Lastly, there is Bronze Age evidence for puppy sacrifice in Crete (see Chapter 8).

The broadly documented use of dogs in rites propitiating health, purification, human and agricultural fertility (e.g. conception, birth, sowing, harvesting), and other critical/liminal transitions including death suggests that the animal’s healing symbolism may have stemmed from its role in birth-related practices; as discussed earlier, midwifery *pharmaka* (and paraphernalia) were often employed to ease initiatory and other rebirthing rites metaphorically replicating the passage of parturition.



Fig. 19: Tanit with upraised arms, caducei (staves with entwined snakes), and astral symbols. Stone votive stele, Carthage, 2nd-1st c. BC

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cemeteries for those who died shortly before or after birth of natural causes (Ribichini 1997, Schwartz et al. 2010). Scholars favouring the traditional interpretation argue that since the young animals interred in the Tophets were surely sacrificial victims, so too were the buried children (Schwartz et al. 2010). Further undermining this argument is the deposition of foetuses/newborns with puppies documented in other cultures across the ancient Mediterranean; a ritual practice seemingly related to the cult of midwife type goddesses.

<sup>17</sup> On the variants of the Tanit symbol, see Bisi 1967: Fig. 7.

#### 7. 2. 4. 2. The snake

A symbol of generation and renewal associated with notions of human and agricultural fertility/abundance/welfare, the snake was worshipped as a good spirit protector of the household in the Graeco-Roman world (*agathodaimon*, *genius loci*) (Fig. 20) (Harrison 1912: 277-288; Willetts 1977: 120; Dunand 1981: 277; Ogden 2013: 247-309). Dwelling between the upper and the underworld, this liminal creature had strong chthonic connotations and was considered a guardian of the dead,<sup>18</sup> for it embodied the mysterious forces of the earth's womb, the residence of the departed and the seeds soon-to-germinate.<sup>19</sup> It is often argued that the ophid's faculty to cyclically shed its skin became for the ancients a symbol of resurrection/rebirth and was thereby linked to beliefs about death and the afterlife.<sup>20</sup> Yet, the ancestral therapeutic role of snakeskins in childbirth could also be related to this symbolism, as suggested below.



Fig. 20: *Agathodaimon* (household snake), and *Agathe Tyche* (good fortune) with the cornucopia, symbol of abundance. Stone relief, Delos, Hellenistic period

<sup>18</sup> See Daremberg and Saglio 1873-1919, s.v. Draco, p. 408; and Bevan 1986: 264.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Bevan 1986: 263. To the Athenians, the deceased were the *Dimitrioi*, 'the people of Demeter' (Harrison 1991: 599), the goddess presiding over the birth/rebirth of grain; an instance illustrating the symbolic bond between the dead and the seeds.

<sup>20</sup> See Daremberg and Saglio 1873-1919, s.v. Draco, p. 408; and Willetts 1977: 120.

Because of its manifold therapeutic applications, the snake was a healing emblem (Lawrence 1978, McDonald 1994); one recurringly protecting the womb on Graeco-Roman medical gemstones (see Chapter 4). And the ophid was also associated with divination, the capacity of seeing-hearing ‘beyond’; snakes rear the newborn seer-to-be Iamus after he is delivered by Eileithyia and the Moirai (Pi. O. 6. 39-47), and bestow the prophetic gift upon other mythical seers.<sup>21</sup> Serpents, oracular activity and medical practice were closely connected in antiquity; as is apparent for instance at the Asklepieia (Schouten 1967: 37), the healing centres dedicated to Asklepios proliferating from the 5th c. BC on, where incubation was a common therapeutic procedure (Sineux 2013),<sup>22</sup> and snakes, deemed to foster conception, licked the patients’ ailing parts (Ogden 2013: 367-370; Rigoglioso 2009: 39). Asklepios displays the ophid as a symbol of his medical capacity, like other ancient Mediterranean healing deities (Ogden 2013: 310-346). However, it is not Asklepios but Hygieia, his daughter in the canonical tradition though originally an independent healing goddess, who is typically depicted feeding the (medical) serpent from a phiale (Fig. 21) (Ogden 2013: 201-206, 317-321). In fact, the handling and tending of sacred (harmless) snakes was primarily a female ritual activity (Lawler 1946: 121, n. 26; Ogden 2013: 201-206, 319-21, 370-371).

The Latin Bona Dea, commonly represented feeding a snake from a phiale while holding a cornucopia (Fig. 22) (Brouwer 1989: 347; Ogden 2013: 319-320), was an archaic healing deity presiding over women’s and agricultural fertility whose temples housed tame serpents (Brouwer 1989: 16, 224, 241, 327, 241). Evidence for Bona Dea’s medical capacity includes the dispensary attached to her temple on the Aventine containing “all kind of herbs” from which the priestesses made and distributed medicines (Macr. Sat. 12. 26-27); her epithets *Oclata* (= *Oculata*) – alluding to her capacity as a healer of eye-diseases – and *Lucifera* (Brouwer 1989: 346), ‘Light-bringer’, a title characteristic of Classical divine midwives; as well as her identification with Hygieia (Brouwer 1989: 346-347) and other goddesses/mythical females with therapeutic competence such as Hekate, Medea (Fig. 26), Juno, Angitia or Damia.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Cassandra and her twin brother Helenus acquire their prophetic gift when, left as babies overnight in a temple of Apollo, the sanctuary’s serpents lick their ears. Likewise, the grateful orphaned snakes reared by Melampus bestow upon him the divinatory gift by licking his ears (Ogden 2013: 138-139; Sancassano 1997: 129-134).

<sup>22</sup> Incubation was a iatromantic practice based on the interpretation of dreams.

<sup>23</sup> See Parra and Settis 1986: 121; Brouwer 1989: 224, 241-243, 237-238; Ogden 2013: 320; Mastrocinque 2014: 128-129.



Fig. 21: Hygieia feeding her snake from a phiale. Marble statue, 1st c. AD.



Fig. 22: Bona Dea, holding the cornucopia, feeds her serpent from a phiale. Altar, 1st c. AD.

Intimately bonded with serpents is the Italic Angitia (< *anguis*, ‘snake’), a healing deity who seems to have been portrayed, like Hygieia and Bona Dea, feeding her ophid from a phiale (Ogden 2013: 320). Angitia presided also over the generation of crops and possibly animals (Dench 1995: 164); the plural form of her name, *anciti*, suggesting that she was a multiple goddess (Dench 1995: 164; Ogden 2013: 207 n. 78), a prototypical feature of archaic divine midwives. The Roman tradition makes her sister to Circe and Medea (Dench 1995: 99, 159), two expert pharmacologists in Greek mythology (Fig. 23). Among the peoples worshipping Angitia, best known are the Marsi,<sup>24</sup> reputed iatromantic snake-handlers and herbalists (Letta 1972: 96; Dench 1995: 159, 161) deemed to descend from the goddess, who would have taught them her healing craft.<sup>25</sup> We shall come back to these snake-handling therapists when addressing the ‘snake goddesses’ from the Temple Repositories of Knossos (see Chapter 8).

<sup>24</sup> Angitia’s cult was widespread in the central and southern Italic peninsula; she was worshipped not only by the Marsi and all other Sabellian peoples, but also by the Umbrians and the Oscans (Letta 1975: 302).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Daremberg and Saglio 1873-1919, s.v. Draco, p. 412.



Fig. 23: Medea, a priestess of Hekate, feeds the serpent of Colchis with drugs, thus enabling Jason to steal the golden fleece. Red-figure krater, c. 320-310 BC

A daemon/spirit of generation (Harrison 1912: 282), the serpent is a recurring attribute of goddesses presiding over birth (Baur 1902: 45; Papachatzis 1978). Hekate, who bears the dog and torch emblems,<sup>26</sup> is linked to snakes (Ogden 2013: 320) and to a rich female pharmacopoeia.<sup>27</sup> Closely related to Hekate are the Erinyes (Ogden 2013: 254-259), whose name appears in the singular form (*e-ri-nu*) on the Linear B list of gods from Knossos (Ventris and Chadwick 1973: 127, 306, 411). These most ancient multiple deities of destiny and retribution are at times explicitly worshipped as childbirth and ‘fertility’ goddesses (Baur 1902: 39; Papachristodoulou 1968: 128; Wise 2007: 35). Also called Eumenides/Semnai, the Erinyes display the snake, torch and dog attributes (Roscher 1884-1890; Ogden 2013: 254-259; De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2006: 63). Votive reliefs of the Eumenides from Argos, which according to Baur were dedicated to the goddesses in their capacity as patronesses of childbirth (1902: 39), show them holding serpents and poppy heads/flowers (Fig. 24) (Papachristodoulou 1968: 119-120; Salapata 2009: 336). In

<sup>26</sup> On her attributes, see Roscher 1884-1890, s.v. Hekate.

<sup>27</sup> Hekate had a ‘botanical garden’ at Colchis including powerful alkaloid plants, such as aconite, mandragore, opium poppy, belladonna, as well as *melaina* (*Claviceps purpurea*) (Wink 1998: 16), a highly psychoactive oxytocic drug well known to midwives (see Chapters 3, 9).



the Hippocratic Corpus the opium poppy is prescribed mainly for the treatment of female conditions (Guerra Doce 2006: 141).



Fig. 24: The Eumenides bearing snakes and opium poppies. Votive relief, Argos, 4th-2nd c. BC

The serpent is an attribute of Demeter (Bevan 1986: 275-276), a torch-bearing goddess of grain and the harvest (birth-rebirth of the crops) closely connected to women's reproductive cycle; as is apparent from the Thesmophoria and (aspects of) the Eleusinian mysteries celebrated in her honour, the set of gynaeco-obstetric plants associated with her cult (e.g. opium poppy, crocus, vitex, pine, pennyroyal, violet) (see Chapter 9), and the explicit patronage of childbirth she occasionally holds in inscriptional sources (in Magna Graecia)<sup>28</sup> and vase iconography (Fig. 25). Snake-shaped jewellery was dedicated at the sanctuary of the Knossian Demeter, perhaps a direct descendant of the Minoan snake-goddesses worshipped at Knossos (Bevan 1986 : 275).

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<sup>28</sup> See Brugnone 2011.



Fig. 25: Eileithyia and Demeter delivering Zeus of Athena.  
Attic black figure amphora, c. 570-560 BC

At Lycosoura (Arcadia), Artemis was represented with her dog, two serpents in one hand and a torch in the other (Paus. 8. 37); leading Reinach to argue that she descended from the Minoan snake-goddess (1906: 158-159). The key of her temple at Lousoi (Arcadia) is serpent-shaped (Fig. 26).<sup>29</sup> Sculptures of Messenian priestesses of Artemis portray them wearing snake-bracelets, a common offering type at her sanctuaries (Figs. 28-29). The temple of the Ephesian Artemis – who was identified with Hekate – yielded an Archaic depiction of a goddess with serpents. A similar one was unearthed at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, where the snake motif recurs on the bases of early bronze figurines (Bevan 1986: 268-271). A goddess fulfilling Eileithyia's functions in human birth and fostering also animal reproduction,<sup>30</sup> Artemis is associated with female pharmacological plants (e.g. mistletoe, mugwort, willow) (Harris 1916), and worshipped as a healing goddess in various local traditions (see Chapter 9).

<sup>29</sup> In iconographic sources the priestly function of *kleidouchos* (i.e. the keeper of the temple key) is primarily associated with females, a great responsibility since temples functioned as treasuries. Images of men carrying temple keys are rare; the chief signifier for male priesthood is the sacrificial knife, as men traditionally performed the ritual butchering of animals. In the domestic context, the woman of the house was usually the one responsible for looking after the door keys, which in time became a symbol of marriage (Connelly 2007: 92-93).

<sup>30</sup> See Daremberg and Saglio 1873-1919, s.v. Diana, p. 134.



Fig. 26: Inscribed bronze key from the temple of Artemis at Lousoi. Arcadia, Late Archaic or Early Classical Period

The connection of the ophid with childbirth seems to be very ancient. On Egyptian midwifery paraphernalia dating to the Middle Kingdom (c. 2050-1700 BC) Beset type goddesses who protect the periparturient and the newborn are represented handling snakes. Such images occur in a unique ritual deposit from the Ramesseum, which included birth wands (Fig. 27) and other artefacts strongly suggesting that it was the professional kit of a wise-woman (see Chapter 8).



Fig. 27: Beset type deities handling serpents on a hippopotamus ivory birth wand. Ramesseum deposit, Thebes, 18th c. BC

We finally come back to Eileithyia, who in historical times is also connected to the serpent. According to Pausanias, at Olympia she was worshipped together with the infant/snake Sosipolis, because the goddess herself had brought that child into the world (6. 20. 5). As the etiological myth goes, when the Arcadians invaded the land of Elis, a woman (Eileithyia) carrying a baby approached the Elean generals saying to have seen in dreams that the child would fight for the Eleans. The infant was thereby placed before the army, and when the Arcadians attacked it turned into a snake frightening them off. At Olympia, on the spot where after the battle the serpent went into the ground, the grateful Eleans built a sanctuary to Eileithyia and the serpent Sosipolis, ‘Saviour of the city’.<sup>31</sup> Henceforth, every year an elderly priestess of the goddess was appointed to bring bathing water and honeyed barley-cakes to the snake deity dwelling in the shrine (Paus. 6. 20. 2-5). Eileithyia is thus portrayed as skilled in divination through dreams – a shamanic feature of the wise-woman – and associated with a snake cult involving the feeding of ophids with honey-cakes, which is probably rooted in an earlier Minoan tradition (see Chapter 8).

Bevan, who has studied animal iconography in sanctuaries of Artemis and other Greek deities, reports that Olympia is the cult place yielding by far the largest number of snake-bracelets, “symbols of birth and fertility” (Figs. 28-29) (1986: 270). The fact that many were found at the altar of Artemis bespeaks of the importance of the serpent in her cult as a healing deity (Young 2014: 143, 146); a cult linked in all likelihood to the worship of Sosipolis and Eileithyia, who is often identified with Artemis (Bevan 1986: 270; Young 2014: 143, 146). Significantly, the altar of Artemis at Olympia also yielded figurines of dogs (Trantalidou 2006: 110-114).

The Acropolis sanctuary of Stymphalos (Peloponnese) produced inscriptional evidence attesting to Eileithyia’s cult and snake-bracelets probably offered to her for a safe delivery (Young 2014: 143).<sup>32</sup> Many dogs were ritually sacrificed at Stymphalos, gnawed bones suggest that hounds may have been kept at the sanctuary (Ruscillo 2014: 262, 266), and a puppy burial is documented at the site (Stone 2014: 329 n. 58). A stele from Delos including an inventory of Eileithyia’s temple records silver serpents among the offerings

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<sup>31</sup> The probable remains of this sanctuary are located west of the Treasury of the Sikyonians (Pingiatoglou 1981: 40-41).

<sup>32</sup> Snake-shaped amulets were customarily worn by Athenian children (Eur. *Ion.* 24-26) (Sancassano 1997: 128-129); a practice possibly associated with the cult of Athena in her role as protectress of children (Young 2014: 143).

dedicated to the goddess,<sup>33</sup> hers was one of the oldest cults on the island (Homolle 1891: 156).



Figs. 28, 29: Votive bronze snake-bracelet and detail of the reptile's head. Olympia, Archaic period

Considering the recurrence of the snake as an emblem of midwife goddesses, was the ingrained symbolic association of the ophid with (re)generation/(re)birth merely allegorical, the shedding of its skin providing a ready metaphor for renewal? Or rather, was the serpent connected with birth because of its practical medicinal uses in obstetrics, and *thereby* a pervasive symbol of (re)generation? When the snake features as an attribute of female deities fostering the reproductive cycle, modern scholarship emphasises its 'fertility' and 'chthonic' aspects but rarely takes into account the healing dimension of the animal, which sheds some light on our queries.

We learn from ancient medical texts that the snake was an important pharmacological agent in midwifery. In the Hippocratic Corpus snake in wine, taken orally, is prescribed to expel the retained placenta (Lawrence 1978: 135-136). Pliny records the use of the snakeskin administered in wine to facilitate delivery, and underscores the abortive (i.e. oxytocic) properties of the slough (*HN* 30. 44), stating that a fumigation made with dried snake acts as a powerful emmenagogue (*HN* 30. 43. 14). The ancient custom of attaching a snakeskin to the parturient's loins as a birthing amulet (Plin.

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Bevan 1986: 272.

*HN* 30. 44), which has been perpetuated into modern times (Gélis 1976: 326, 1986: 44; Gitcheva 2002: 929), likely derives from the perceived uterotonic agency of the slough.

Ethnographic survivals indicate that such treatments were deeply embedded in the Mediterranean. Until recent times in Provence (southeastern France), village women used to catch harmless serpents for medicinal purposes, regularly using snakeskin infusions to ease childbirth (Musset 2004: 430), a widespread oxytocic treatment (Gélis 1986: 45) likewise documented in the Balkans,<sup>34</sup> where snakeskins were also taken orally to promote lactation and conception (Kristić 1955);<sup>35</sup> practices recalling the Cretan custom to feed serpent sloughs to female animals so as to bring them into oestrus (see Chapter 8).<sup>36</sup> In traditional Chinese medicine snakeskins are prescribed to facilitate breech births (Read 1982: 33-34). In rural Mexico the rattle of the rattlesnake (*Crotalus durissus*) is used to ease parturition (Enríquez Vázquez et al. 2006); and for this same purpose Filipino midwives administer fumigations of snakeskins (Oracion 1965: 273).

The Asklepian healing serpent probably originated in the domestic cult of snakes and related deities, which is first attested in the Aegean in Minoan Crete (Schouten 1967: 35-36) (see Chapter 8). The cult of (harmless) household serpents, pervasive in the Graeco-Roman world (Fig. 20), survived into the 20th c., notably in Greece and the Balkans where the home snake was deemed the *genius*/guardian of the house. The ophid received food offerings (e.g. milk, bread crumbs), its appearance was greeted with delight,<sup>37</sup> and killing it considered little short of sacrilege (Lawson 1910: 259-261; Evans 1935: 153). Interestingly, for Serbian peasants, who called it *domachitsa*, ‘house-mother’, the death of the home snake heralded that of the housewife herself (Evans 1935: 153). And according to an ancient tradition perpetuated into modern Greece, the home snake (*oikouros ophis*) was never found in the homes of childless couples (Oikonomopoulos and Oikonomopoulou 2012: 696).

It is commonly argued that tame serpents were kept in homes to avert mice and vermin (Lazenby 1949a: 248; Dimitropoulos and Ioannidis 2002: 29). But if this was their primary function, why did barren couples never engage in the care/cult of the *oikouros*

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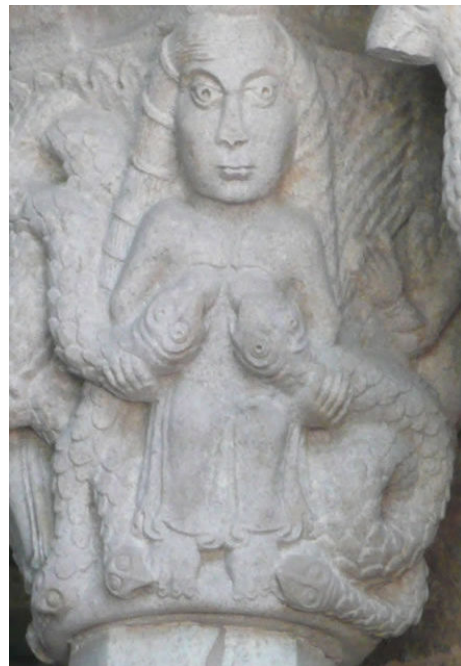
<sup>34</sup> Predrag Kilibarda (pers. comm. 21-12-2017).

<sup>35</sup> I am grateful to Predrag Kilibarda for addressing me to Kristić’s research on popular medicine in Bosnia-Herzegovina and translating the relevant passages.

<sup>36</sup> One of the oxytocic amulets made by modern Greek *mammes* (midwives) contained a snake’s head (Oikonomopoulos and Oikonomopoulou 2012: 675).

<sup>37</sup> It was believed, for instance, that if the home snake slept under the bed of an infant, the child would prove very prosperous (Papacostas and Thomas 1904: 119).

*ophis*? And why would the Serbian housewife be doomed if the *domachitsa* died? Considering the persistent use of snakeskins to ease childbirth, it may be the case that household serpents ensured a regular and readily available provision of sloughs that was essential for women; a provision needless for the childless, who therefore kept no domestic serpents. The intimate connection of the ophid with midwifery cult and practice lends support to this interpretation, as does the fact that the tending of sacred snakes was primarily a female activity in antiquity. Of interest here is a passage of Lucian stating that Macedonian women kept home serpents and suckled them “just like babies” (*Alex.* 7), which echoes the long-held belief that ophids are fond of breast milk.<sup>38</sup> Snakes cannot suck as mammals do (Boos 2001: 134), but their use to stimulate lactation through nipple-licking should not be excluded.<sup>39</sup> One actually wonders if Medieval representations of Lust as a woman breastfeeding serpents (Figs. 30-31), which have been interpreted as a subversion of Classical personifications of the Earth (Luyster 2001), may somehow be derivative of the female custom reported by Lucian.



Figs. 30, 31: Females breastfeeding snakes carved on Medieval capitals. Church of Notre-Dame de Mailhat (France), and Sacra di San Michele (Italy)

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<sup>38</sup> This belief had wide currency in Europe and the folklore of other peoples across the world (Boos 2001: 134).

<sup>39</sup> If that was the case, the snakes’ fangs should have been removed to prevent injuring the breasts.

There is little existing research validating the claimed efficacy of animal substances in ancient *materia medica* because these have largely been neglected when compared to botanical drugs (Alves and Rosa 2005, Von Staden 2008). Our attempt to locate scholarship on the chemical composition of snakeskins has been to no avail, but their cross-cultural use to ease childbirth suggests they might contain uterine stimulants yet to be (re)discovered by modern clinical research. In any case, the notion that for the ancients the serpent slough offered a ready metaphor for medical renewal, made explicit by Apollodorus of Athens and later Greek authors (Ogden 2013: 343), could have stemmed from its use as an oxytocic drug, a *pharmakon* of life/(re)birth. This would be in line with the reptile's strong symbolic associations with agricultural fertility, the realm of the dead and the notion of immortality.<sup>40</sup>

The serpent occurring as a central motif on traditional Cypriot wedding breads (Fig. 32) (Boskaridou 2011)<sup>41</sup> might be a survival of its ancestral bond with birth-motherhood. And the same goes for the dough snakes decorating, along with flower and pomegranate motifs, the customary wedding bread in Crete, the wreath-shaped *gamokoulouro* (Chapter 9, fig. 93).<sup>42</sup>



Fig. 32: Traditional wedding bread from Cyprus with a life like snake

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<sup>40</sup> Snake iconography is well attested in ancient funerary contexts (Schouten 1967: 36; Salapata 2006; Young 2014: 321; Pieraccini 2016).

<sup>41</sup> I am grateful to Dimitra Siliali for this reference.

<sup>42</sup> See [http://cretan-tradition.com/product\\_info.php?products\\_id=146](http://cretan-tradition.com/product_info.php?products_id=146)



### 7. 2. 4. 3. The weasel

Lastly, sacred to Eileithyia is the weasel, an attribute she shares with the midwife goddesses Hekate and Leto (Ael. *NA* 10. 47; Ant. Lib. 29.4.1), the latter identified with the Egyptian Wadjet (Hdt. 2. 59). In ancient Greek the weasel was called *galē* (γαλέη/γαλή), a term designating also other mustelids<sup>43</sup> and the ichneumon, the Egyptian mongoose.<sup>44</sup> Like dogs/bitches and (home) snakes, tame weasels were often kept within the household in antiquity (Lazenby 1949b: 302; Kitchell 2014: 95). Historical sources attest to the cult of these animals, and to their pervading symbolic connection with birth-motherhood, a bond which has long puzzled modern scholarship. Let us try to shed some light into this perplexing animal emblem of Eileithyia.

At Herakleopolis, the Egyptians revered the weasel-like ichneumon, sacred to the goddesses of birth (Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.39.5; Ael. *NA* 10. 47). Mummified mongeese were placed in statuettes of Wadjet (James 1982), and when children were spared from serious illnesses, ichneumons received thank-offerings of bread and milk (Diod. 1. 83).<sup>45</sup> At the Greek polis of Thebes the weasel was worshipped in honour of Galinthias (< γαλή) (Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.39.6; Ael. *NA* 12.5);<sup>46</sup> as according to a myth addressed below this woman metamorphosed into a weasel by Eileithyia/Lucina enabled Alkmene's obstructed delivery of Herakles, thus saving mother and child from a most likely death. Out of gratitude, Herakles made an image of Galinthias to set by his house and offered her sacrifices; a cult perpetuated by the Thebans, who before the festival of the Herakleia sacrificed to Galinthias first (Ant. Lib. 29).

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<sup>43</sup> Weasels form a diverse grouping of small carnivorous mammals (mustelids) that includes weasels, martens, badgers, otters, ferrets, ermines, polecats, stoats, sables and skunks. In popular taxonomies they are often interchangeable. See Liddell and Scott 1996, s.v. γαλέη; Hutchinson 1966: 222; Musacchio 2001: 172.

<sup>44</sup> In antiquity weasels and ichneumons belonged to the same symbolic complex (Tedeschi 2007: 226).

<sup>45</sup> Until recent times, weasels were given similar offerings across the Mediterranean. In Spain, France and Italy the animal is at times named by expressions meaning 'bread and cheese' or 'bread and milk' (e.g. *paniquesa*, *pankese*, *pankero*, *panacàscia*, *panlet*); terms betraying an ancestral cult of mustelids which involves their ritual feeding with such fare (Rohlf's 1966: 147; Bambeck 1972-1974: 8; Mesnil and Popova 1992: 94; Alinei 1992). On the Greek island of Zakynthos it was regarded as a good omen for the family when a weasel entered the house, was fed bread crumbs from the table, and then jumped on top of it (Bettini 2013: 101).

<sup>46</sup> On the Theban cult of Galinthias, see Rocchi 2000.

The mythico-ritual complex of the weasel-woman<sup>47</sup> survived into modern Greece, as illustrated by the *Nyphitsa* ('weasel', literally 'little bride'), the popular Athenian tradition of inviting the mustelid to partake in wedding ceremonies. Rodd recorded this ritual in the late 19th c.:

The legend is that the weasel is envious of brides, having been a bride herself, though the reason or manner of her metamorphosis into an animal is not assigned. She exhibits her envy by making havoc among the wedding gifts and provisions. Therefore, in the house where these are collected, sweetmeats and honey are put out to appease her, known as 'the necessary spoonfuls', and a song is sung with much ceremony in which the weasel is invited to partake and spare the wedding array (1892: 163).

The association of the mustelid with women's transition into marriage/motherhood must have been tenaciously rooted, since it has left conspicuous imprints in the linguistic record of Europe and beyond; ancestral practices and beliefs often lie embedded in words. Studies in the field of comparative linguistics indicate that the weasel is most commonly referred to through metaphorical terms alluding to the (youthful) woman, marriage and female sexuality. Quite remarkably, the mustelid [*< mustus*, 'young', 'fresh', 'new'] is designated by expressions meaning 'little/beautiful lady', 'little bride' or 'newlywed' in an array of languages and dialectal variants, over a broad geographic area stretching from the Atlantic to the Black Sea, and from the Baltic to the southern shore of the Mediterranean (Alinei 1992: 4; Hutchinson 1966; Bambeck 1972-1974; Coseriu et al. 1979: 36-37; Mesnil and Popova 1992; Witczak 2004; Kaczynska and Witczak 2007).

However, the most striking appellatives for the weasel are those identifying the animal with a 'little midwife': *comadreja* (Spanish), *kumairelo* (Tolosan), *cummatrella* (Campanian), *cumarella* (Abruzzian), *cumătriță*, *cumetritl* (Romanian) (Coseriu et al. 1979: 36-37; Bambeck 1972-1974). These terms derive from late Latin *commater*, 'with (the) mother', namely the *obstetrix*, she who stands before the mother in childbirth. Inscribed in the same semantic field is *kalogennousa*, a Cretan name for the weasel deriving from the verb *καλογεννώ*, 'to generate/birth easily/well', or from the adjective *καλόγεννος*, -η, -ο, 'generating without troubles' (Babiniotis 2002: 819; Kaczynska and

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<sup>47</sup> For ancient and modern tales about women turned into, or associated with, weasels, see Bettini 2013: 198-204.

Witczak 2007: 298). But *kalogennousa*, ‘she who generates easily’, may not be the only Cretan appellative linking the weasel to the universe of birth. *Daskalissa* and *syndeknari*, two other less obvious words by which the islanders denote the animal,<sup>48</sup> could also be alluding to midwifery. Since *daskalissa*, ‘little teacher’, evokes wisdom and expertise, gifts cross-culturally identifying the midwife, whom the Cretans call *mastorissa*, ‘she who is skilled’. And *syndeknari* means ‘god-mother’, as we saw a title of respect commonly used to address the midwife in cultures where she is acknowledged as the spiritual mother of all the infants she has delivered.<sup>49</sup>

The pervasive nomenclature equating the mustelid to a little bride and a little midwife clearly locates the animal in the semantic universe of women’s initiation into motherhood. This, in turn, evokes the amulets containing badger’s hair customarily offered to the newly delivered mother and her child in the Abruzzi (Italy) (Canziani 1928); the use of the skin of another mustelid, the otter, as a childbirth charm in the Scottish Highlands (Beith 1995: 180); the belief held in Montenegro that weasel furs eased delivery (Mesnil and Popova 1992: 96), and the Hungarian custom of offering such pelts as wedding gifts (Dömötör 1982: 126). An analogous custom documented in Renaissance Italy links the weasel to the girdle, a garment symbolizing female sexuality since antiquity (see Chapter 8). Italian inventories from the 16th c. record golden mustelid heads as expensive marriage gifts (Fig. 33); portraits of wealthy ladies depict them holding weasel pelts, at times outfitted with these golden mustelid heads, which are attached to their girdles by a chain (Figs. 34-35) (Musacchio 2001).<sup>50</sup> And weasel iconography occurs also on contemporary birth trays (Fig. 36) (Musacchio 2001). Some art historians have interpreted the ‘weasel girdles’ as flea-catchers worn to draw vermin away from the body, but there are no known references to such a function in primary texts (Musacchio 2001: 175). Relying on

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<sup>48</sup> On the nomenclature of mustelids in Cretan Greek, see Kaczynska and Witczak 2007.

<sup>49</sup> For the common identification of the midwife and the weasel with a god-mother, see Bettini 2013: 206-211.

<sup>50</sup> Among such paintings are the portraits of Lucina Brembati by Lorenzo Lotto, c. 1518 (Accademia Carrara di Belle Arte, Bergamo); Countess Livia da Porto Thiene and her Daughter Deidamia by Paolo Veronese, c. 1552 (Palazzo Pitti, Florence) (Musacchio 2001: Figs. 2 and 3); Bianca Ponzoni Anguissola by Sofonisba Anguissola, c. 1557 (Staatliche Museen, Berlin) (Fig. 34); Eleonora Gonzaga by Titian, c. 1536-1537 (Galleria Degli Uffizi, Florence) (Fig. 35); A Noblewoman by Lavinia Fontana, c. 1580 (National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington DC); A young woman or Courtesan Antea by Parmigianino, 1536 (Museo Nazionale Di Capodimonte, Naples); Camilla Gonzaga and Her Three Sons by Parmigianino, 1539-1540 (Museo del Prado, Madrid); Family portrait by Giovanni Antonio Fasolo, c. 1560 (Fine Arts Museum, San Francisco); Queen Isabel de Valois by Juan Pantoja de la Cruz, 1565 (Museo del Prado, Madrid); and An unknown lady attributed to William Segar, c. 1595 (City of Kingston-upon-Hull Museum).

contemporary and ancient sources, Musacchio has, on firmer ground, argued that in the Renaissance mustelids were intimately connected with marriage, pregnancy and childbirth, serving an apotropaic function in these critical life-cycle transitions (2001).



Fig. 33: Jewelled mustelid head.  
Venice, *c.* 1550-1559.



Fig. 34: Bianca Anguissola wearing a weasel girdle,  
portrayed by her daughter, Sofonisba Anguissola, 1557



Fig. 35: Eleonora Gonzaga with a weasel girdle. Titian, *c.* 1536



Fig. 36 : Infant with a weasel on a wooden childbirth tray. Masaccio, *c.* 1428

However, the weasel's connection to actual midwifery practice, suggested by the linguistic record and the animal's role as an attribute of ancient midwife goddesses (Eileithyia, Hekate, Leto/Wadjet), remains unexplored. A first insight into this issue is found in Trota of Salerno's *De mulierum passionibus* (12th c.), a major reference on women's medicine broadly disseminated throughout Europe by the Late Middle Ages. Trota, whose treatments stem from the female oral tradition (Green 2008a: 58), prescribes a vaginal pessary containing weasel oil and musk to promote conception (Boggi 1979: 22). Beyond, or rather, beneath its apotropaic function the weasel was then a pharmacological animal in Medieval female medicine; and quite a relevant one in antiquity if we pay heed to Galinthias' myth, a prototypical tale about obstructed labour (dystocia), a major cause of maternal and infant mortality.

The general outline of the myth, recorded by various sources, is as follows.<sup>51</sup> Hera/Juno attempts to hinder Alkmene's delivery of Herakles. To this end, she dispatches Eileithyia and the Moirai (Ant. Lib. 29), the Pharmakides (Paus. 9.11.3), or Lucina (Ov. *Met.* 9. 281-323),<sup>52</sup> who by holding their hands entwined keep the mother-to-be in continuous birth-pangs.<sup>53</sup> But they are tricked by Alkmene's attendant, the clever Galinthias/Galanthis/Historis, who devises a ruse to loosen their grip on the parturient's womb: she utters a joyful cry in their hearing that Alkmene has been delivered, which so startles Hera's envoys that they release their hands, and thereby Alkmene is finally able to bring forth Herakles. Subsequently, the angered Eileithyia/Lucina turns Galinthias/Galanthis into a weasel as punishment for her deceitful behaviour (Figs. 37-38).<sup>54</sup> According to Ovid, the mustelid is doomed to give birth through the mouth for having assisted Alkmene by uttering a lie. In another version of the story, Hekate takes pity on the metamorphosed Galinthias and appoints the weasel to be her sacred attendant (Ant. Lib. 29).

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<sup>51</sup> For a thorough overview of the extant versions of the myth, see Bettini 2013.

<sup>52</sup> Lucina, Eileithyia's Roman counterpart, is an epithet of Juno, whose Greek equivalent is Hera.

<sup>53</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4, the idea that knots and 'binding' gestures obstruct delivery is a cross-cultural belief. See, for instance, Stol 2000: 82-83; Bowen 1999: 424; Hulubas 2011: 77; Bettini 2013: 69-82.

<sup>54</sup> Pausanias does not mention Historis' metamorphosis into a weasel. In a shorter version of the legend (Ael. *NA* 12. 5), a weasel running by Alkmene loosens the bonds of her womb.



Fig. 37: The weasel-Galinthias at the birth of Herakles.  
Ovid's *Metamorphoses vulgare*, Venice 1497

Ancient sources, keen to portray females as irrational and suspicious creatures, emphasize the woman-weasel's association with magic, superstition, trickery, sorcery, or deviant sexuality. And modern scholarship, perpetuating many a gender stereotype, tends to relegate Galinthias' character to this same domain. The weasel is deemed to have had magical/apotropaic potency; is connected to witchcraft; related to magic/superstitious practices owing to the binding gestures performed by Hera's envoyes to obstruct Alkmene's labour; or associated with miraculous delivery on account of the ancient belief that the animal gave birth through the mouth (Papathomopoulos 1968: 134-138; Celoria 1992: 189; Canto Nieto 2003: 205-208; Bettini 2013). It has also been argued that the resemblance between Galinthias' name and that of the weasel (*galē*) is accidental, or assignable to pareymology (Maas 1888: 614; Hiller von Gärtringen 1910: 607; Forbes Irving 1992: 206). But these are unlikely propositions considering the weasel's pervasive connection with marriage-motherhood-birth-midwifery in the historical, ethnographic and linguistic records. Another interpretation of the role played by Galinthias=the weasel in Herakles' birth can actually be proposed; one which challenges the gender bias assigning women's ritual/therapeutic practices to magic/superstition, and takes into account that female healing lore may occur *encoded* in mythical narratives.



Fig. 38: The delivery of Herakles, with the weasel-Galinthias escaping to the left. Maiolica childbirth tray, Urbino, c. 1525-1530

When addressing Galinthias' myth it is pertinent to recall that at the core of the story lies a primary concern to women: *surviving* parturition. Relevant in the myth then is not so much what obstructs Alkmene's labour, but rather *who* is credited for its unlikely positive outcome: a woman transformed into a weasel, hence identified with the animal. It has been noted that those whom the gods metamorphose tend to be versions of the deity in question (Bevan 1986: 83). And Galinthias/Galanthis, who is metamorphosed by a midwife goddess (Eileithyia/Lucina), acts herself like a wise-woman. So much so that in Pausanias' account (9. 11. 3) Galinthias is called *Historis*, 'she who knows', 'she who is skilful', the most common expression designating the midwife (see Chapter 3).<sup>55</sup> Galinthias=the weasel is therefore the practitioner able to deliver Alkmene when she is in the dire straits of stalled labour.

Through the metaphors embedded in Galinthias' myth we are thus told that the weasel *facilitates* difficult birth. In fact, the animal acts precisely like a 'little midwife' (*comadreja, kumairelo, cummatrella, cumarella, cumătriță, cumetritl*), one 'who births easily' (*kalogennousa*), as is expressed by the linguistic record. What does this possibly

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Papatthomopoulos 1968: 136; Canto Nieto 2003: 206; Bettini 2013: 28.



mean? Could it be that, like the bitch and the snake, the weasel provided an obstetric *pharmakon*, one of those oxytocic drugs so crucial in midwifery practice because they hasten labour, promote the expulsion of the placenta, and reduce the risk of postpartum haemorrhage? This was indeed the case. An ancient author validates the foregoing hypothesis that a weasel-based oxytocic lies mythically encoded in Galinthias' story, and metaphorically imprinted in the appellatives equating the mustelid to the midwife: Pliny reports that delivery is facilitated when the parturient has taken the liquid that flows from the uterus of a weasel by its genitals (*HN* 30. 43. 14).

We have here a clear description of an oxytocic medication to be administered orally, like the snakeskin, or the placenta and milk of the bitch. Yet, without inquiring into the chemical composition of the weasel's perineal secretions, scholars tend to assume that the remedy was ineffective or related to homeopathic magic. French believes that such treatments did "little good, except as they exercised a placebo effect and prevented dehydration" (2004: 54). And Bettini states:

This is a disgusting remedy, but one that makes a certain sense. The liquids that have 'flowed out' of the weasel's uterus could have a positive influence in the 'flow' of childbirth. The weasel's magic works here not at a metaphorical distance but by means of direct contact between its bodily fluids and the body of the labouring woman (2013: 98).

It may, however, be ill-advised to underestimate the efficacy of traditional animal-based *pharmaka*. Serving as a reminder is the oral administration of the opossum tail to ease childbirth, an ancient Mayan remedy still used in indigenous Mexican midwifery (Enríquez Vázquez et al. 2006: 495).<sup>56</sup> This treatment has also been relegated to folk beliefs (Bettini 2013: 128-129). But it actually rests on sound empirical knowledge, as according to laboratory analyses opossum tail extracts contain prostaglandins, hormone-like compounds that function as oxytocics, and are effective in very small doses when taken orally (Ortiz de Montellano 1990: 187).

Deeply rooted symbols do not stem from sheer imagination or unwarranted beliefs. Enduring emblems of birth-midwifery like the serpent, the dog and the weasel can only be grounded in the *material responses* they provided to parturition, the first single cause of

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<sup>56</sup> This treatment was first recorded in the 16th c. by the pioneering ethnographer Bernardino de Sahagún (Temprano 1990: 465).

female death; therapeutic responses available to women in the immediate domestic context, as these animals often lived within the household.

When discussing the prehistoric funerary evidence for female shamans, we suggested that the woman in Çatalhöyük's grave 513 could be a midwife because she was interred with a puppy and a weasel. If this interpretation is correct, then the wise-woman's bond with both dogs/puppies and mustelids can be traced back to Neolithic southwestern Anatolia. The association of mustelids with female therapeutic practices seems in any case attested as early as 12.000 BP in the southern Levant; since the Natufian grave from Hilazon Tachtit, confidently interpreted as that of a shamaness, included two marten skulls (see Chapter 3).

### 7. 3. Conclusions

Our comparative and anthropological approach to a range of data testifying to Eileithyia's healing competence undermines the scholarly contention that she was a medical deity only on Paros, because only there did she receive anatomical votives. This long-held assumption disregards, firstly, that healing is an *inherent* capacity of midwives and their supernatural counterparts. Secondly, that while anatomical votives provide indisputable evidence for a deity's healing agency, this evidence is *not* exclusive. And thirdly, that supernatural midwives, often the most ancestral healing spirits/deities in early agrarian societies, are not *specialized* in the patronage of human medicine; as in primal medical cosmologies healing is enmeshed with broad notions of 'fertility' encompassing the (re)creation (birth-rebirth) and sustenance of humans, animals and plants, namely the reproduction, welfare and continuity of all living beings.

When neither anatomical models nor explicit textual data validate the therapeutic competence of divine midwives, this capacity may be revealed 1) by their attributes, if regarded as potential emblems of knowledge-*techne* rather than symbols of nature-fertility; 2) by depictions of midwife goddesses at work (e.g. the Eileithyiai delivering Zeus, the childbirth models from Tsoutsouros depicting the divine/human *maia*); and 3) by their epithets, for instance, 'Eye healer' (*Oculata*) and 'Light bringer' (*Lucifera*) – given to Bona Dea – 'Rearer of puppies' (*Skylakotrophos*) – given to Artemis and Hekate – or other titles such as 'Opener of the Womb', 'Aiding birth' (*Lochias*), 'Giving a quick birth'

(*Okylochía*), ‘Girdle loosener’ (*Lysizonos*), ‘Of birth-pangs’ (*Mogostokos*), ‘Saving in travail’ (*Soodina*), or ‘Helping in childbirth’ (*Odinon eparogos*) (see Chapter 4).

Applying the methodological template devised in Chapter 4 to the study of textual, iconographic and archaeological sources relating to Eileithyia, we have identified apparent and encoded medical attributes displayed by the goddess in historical times. These include obstetric cutting tools, the *harpē* and the shears; a professional garment, the physician’s hat; as well as dittany, the pomegranate, the dog (bitch/puppy), the snake and the weasel, plants and animals that supplied pharmacological/mechanical remedies, mainly but not only oxytocic drugs/treatments easing the hazardous passage of parturition. Some of these medicinal agents (e.g. pomegranate, puppies) were used in transition/propitiatory rites (death/rebirth, purification/renewal) mirroring childbirth, as was the case also with midwifery paraphernalia (e.g. in Egypt and Mesopotamia) (see Chapter 4).

In historical times Eileithyia shares her animal medical attributes with a number of cognate goddesses. However, only she, Hekate and Leto/Wadjet display the weasel, a particularly persistent symbol of birth-midwifery as indicated by the linguistic and ethnographic records. The cults of Hekate and Leto originate respectively in Caria and Lycia (southwestern Anatolia),<sup>57</sup> and Wadjet is an Egyptian deity. Eileithyia is thus the only Cretan-born goddess bearing the weasel as a pharmacological emblem. Significantly, two important Minoan assemblages contain depictions or faunal remains of mustelids along with materials which are either clearly indicative, or strongly suggestive of a midwifery cult. Let us then follow the trail of the weasel in the Minoan votive record, as the animal might belong to a medico-religious healing complex associated with Eileithyia’s prehistoric cult on the island.

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<sup>57</sup> See Willetts 1962: 173; Marquardt 1981; Boedeker 1983.



## Chapter 8

### **On the trail of the weasel: Mustelids in the Minoan votive record**

## 8. 1. Evidence for a healing cult at the Minoan peak sanctuaries

Along with sacred caves (see Chapter 6), the peak sanctuaries were most popular cult places of the Minoans. These community shrines, located on accessible mountain summits overlooking the associated settlements, emerge at the end of the 3rd millennium BC in the process towards urbanisation and centralisation leading to the system of the palaces (Peatfield 1987: 90-92).<sup>1</sup> They commonly produce clay figurines including anatomical votives, pottery and water-worn pebbles, with the offerings often tucked in crevices (Fig. 1) (Rutkowski 1986: 72-98; Peatfield 1987: 90-92, 1990: 117-119; Nowicki 1994: 33-35); the pebbles possibly symbolizing water sources/springs, which are usually found within walking distance of the sites (Soetens 2009: 264, 268). About 25-30 peak sanctuaries have been identified to date, mostly in central and eastern Crete. Among the longest-lived, in use during the Protopalatial and Neopalatial periods, are Jouktas (serving Knossos and Archanes) (Fig. 1), Vrysinas (serving part of the Rethymno area), Kophinas (serving the Mesara plain), Traostalos (serving the Zakro area), and Petsophas (serving the Palaikastro area) (Peatfield 1987: 90, 1990: 119, 127; Nowicki 2007; Soetens 2009: 266).



Fig. 1: Large crevice at the peak sanctuary of Jouktas

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<sup>1</sup> Following Tomkins' argument that Neolithic ceramic assemblages in Cretan caves indicate communal ritual action, not mere habitational practices as conventionally assumed (2013), Peatfield suggests that this may be the case also at the peak sanctuaries yielding Neolithic pottery (e.g. Jouktas, Traostalos, Astipadhes) (2016: 6-7).

These rural shrines are most relevant to the (pre)history of medicine in the Mediterranean. Because of the anatomical votives and occasional explicit depictions of ailments they have yielded (Figs. 2-4, 7-8), scholars generally agree that the peak sanctuaries hosted a cult involving activities related to healing (Davaras 1976: 246, fig. 318; Peatfield 1990: 122, fig. 2; McGeorge 2008: 122-123; Arnott 1999: 3-4; Chryssoulaki 2001: 62; Morris and Peatfield 2014: 59-62). The models of body parts from these Minoan shrines are regarded as the prototypes of the anatomical votives found in sanctuaries of Classical healing deities (e.g. Asklepios), and of the modern *tamata* consecrated in Greek Orthodox churches as tokens of gratitude or supplications for cures (Fig. 5) (Peatfield 2000: 11; Morris and Peatfield 2014: 61; McGeorge 1987: 414; 2008: 122). The location of peak sanctuaries in the vicinity of water sources, the dedication of water-worn pebbles and the religious significance of the living rock/crevices into which votives were placed evoke the important role played by water, caves and certain stones as life-giving agents in later healing cults (see Chapter 6).



Fig. 2: Clay female figurine with a swollen leg. Peak sanctuary of Traostalos



Fig. 3: Clay votive hand from the peak sanctuary of Petsophas likely depicting osteoarthritis, and image of this joint disease

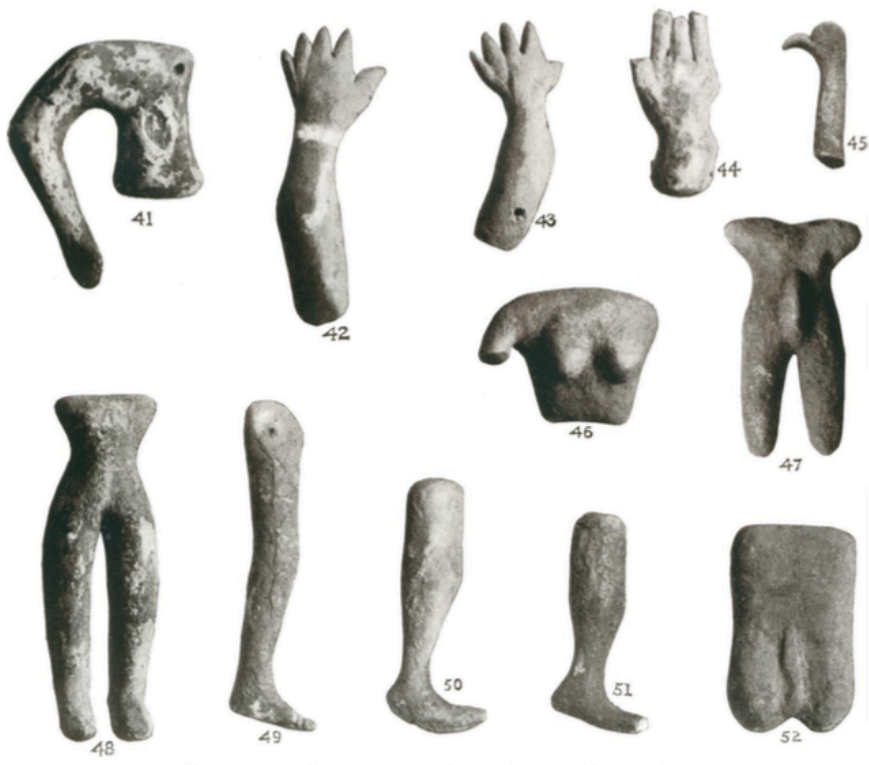


Fig. 4: Clay anatomical models including torsos, arms and legs. Peak sanctuary of Petsophas



Fig. 5: Modern tin *tamata* sold in Greek ecclesiastical shops that Orthodox worshippers dedicate in churches



## 8. 2. Cracking the code: The enigmatic weasel figurines from Petsophas

The first archaeologist to acknowledge the healing dimension of peak sanctuary cult was John Myres. When excavating Petsophas, above Palaikastro in northeastern Crete, he unearthed clay models of hands, legs, feet and torsos (Figs. 3-4, 7-8), that he insightfully interpreted as embodying concerns about diseases (1902-1903: 381). Together with the anatomical votives, Myres found other common peak sanctuary offerings such as clay figurines of male and female votaries, miniature vessels, and animal figurines. The latter included cattle, goats, sheep, swine, birds, beetles, dogs and tortoises; as well as a creature with pointed nose, prick-ears, long neck and tail, and a peculiar kink in the back, that Myres recorded as the commonest non-domestic species occurring at Petsophas (1902-1903: 377, 381). This animal, at first variously identified as cat, fox or weasel, is actually a mustelid, probably the *kalogennousa* (Fig. 6) (Myres 1902-1903: 377, n. 2), a Cretan term for the weasel which means ‘she who births easily’,<sup>2</sup> deriving from the same root as *kalogennitria*, the set of traditional practices to ease difficult birth.<sup>3</sup> The appellative *kalogennousa* evokes the rich linguistic, ethnographic and historical evidence linking mustelids with birth-midwifery assembled and analyzed in the previous chapter, notably the myth of Galinthias and Pliny’s statement that the weasel provided a drug used to facilitate delivery; a range of evidence leading us to conclude that the mustelid was a pharmacological animal in ancient Mediterranean obstetrics, and thereby an attribute of midwife goddesses.



Fig. 6: Clay models of weasels. Peak sanctuary of Petsophas, MM I-IIB

<sup>2</sup> See Babiniotis 2002: 819; Kaczynska and Witczak 2007: 298.

<sup>3</sup> See Oikonomopoulos and Oikonomopoulou 2012: 657.

The concentration of weasel figurines recorded at Petsophas is unique to this peak sanctuary,<sup>4</sup> and to date remains an intriguing feature of the shrine's assemblage. Myres, who listed the *kalogennousa* models among the few finds raising "any real [interpretive] difficulty" (1902-1903: 381), thought that the weasel had an evil repute among pastoral people.<sup>5</sup> He deemed it "vermin", "definitely noxious", an unsuitable offering as a first fruit of the chase, and thus argued that worshippers dedicated the figurines of weasels "by way of imprecation, or out of gratitude for deliverance from their ravages" (1902-1903: 381). Evans followed Myres' lead (1921: 153), and so have subsequent scholars variously portraying mustelids as unclean animals, ground vermin, bestial enemies of mankind, lowly creatures, or pests (Mackenzie 1917: 275; Hutchinson 1962: 219; Willetts 1962: 72; Dietrich 1974: 292, 299; Marinatos 1993: 117; Jones 1999: 33). In a different voice, Rutkowski argues that weasels, often kept in Greek houses to exterminate mice, might have been domesticated. He recalls that the animal was symbolic of fecundity in Classical Greece (1991: 36, n. 64), and so does Watrous, who otherwise considers Rutkowski's views unconvincing (1996: 27, 87).

No new insights have been offered on the weasel figurines from Petsophas, nor have questions been addressed as to their occurrence *together with* anatomical models attesting to healing practices. And yet the *kalogennousa* seems to have held in Minoan ritual a role not to be neglected, since the mustelid also features in the Temple Repositories of the Palace of Knossos, possibly the most iconic of Minoan cult assemblages; a deposit broadly contemporary with the Petsophas material which is highly suggestive of a midwifery cult, as argued below.

Neolithic and/or Bronze Age levels from several sites in Crete, such as Knossos, Chania, Kavousi-Vronda, Kavousi-Kastro, Kommos, Chrysokamino Chomatas and Phaistos, have produced some faunal remains of mustelids from domestic contexts (Reese et al. 1995; Jarman 1996; Snyder and Klippel 1996; Floyd and Betancourt 2010; Watrous and Hadzi-Vallianou 2004a: 224). Rarer, but significant, is the occurrence of mustelid bones and/or iconography in cult and funerary contexts, both in Crete and the broader Mediterranean (see below). Aegean archaeologists note the economic value of mustelids as sources of food and pelt (Myres 1902-1903: 377, n. 2; Nowicki 1999: 157; Snyder and

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<sup>4</sup> Weasel figurines from other sites may come to light when the assemblages from the peak sanctuaries will be more thoroughly published.

<sup>5</sup> In modern Crete weasels were known to kill chicken, but only if mistreated. When cared for, namely fed, they protected the domestic animals, like a cat or a dog. Farmers kept them for this purpose and to repel mice (Stelios Pagkalos, pers. comm. 29-1-2018).

Klippel 1996; Trantalidou 2013: 481);<sup>6</sup> their use to keep rodents at bay (Trantalidou 2013: 481); and the medicinal properties of the badger's fat, highly appreciated in the ancient and modern worlds (Yannouli 2003: 184).

Occasionally, scholars also mention the weasel's ancient connotation with fertility (Rutkowski 1991: 36, n. 64; Watrous 1996: 87; Trantalidou 2013: 482), but since the animal's obstetrical use underpinning this 'fertility' symbolism has not been recognized, it remains unexplored by those addressing the presence of the *kalogenoussa* in the Minoan votive record. So, bearing in mind that in ancient Mediterranean midwifery the mustelid provided a drug employed to hasten birth, let us look at the weasel figurines from Petsophas (Fig. 6) (Myres 1902-1903: Pl. 13. 56; Rutkowski 1991: 111-112, Pl. 48. 10, 13; 49. 6) *within* the peak sanctuary's assemblage. Remarkably, the Petsophas' votives include female anatomical models and figurines embodying gynaeco-obstetrical concerns, and offerings that might be related to women's initiatory rites:

- Lower body models with thighs spread apart, marked pubic triangles and incised vulvas (Figs. 7-8) (Rutkowski 1991: Pl. 43. 1-7; 44. 3-6, 9-12). The splay-legged posture most likely alludes to childbirth, though none of these models has a bulging belly; but neither do all the parturients portrayed in the EIA childbirth scenes from Tsoutsouros (Chapter 6, fig. 28).
- Torsos displaying breasts (Fig. 7) (Myres 1902-1903: Pl. 12. 46).
- Schematic nude female figurines with breasts (Fig. 9).
- A standing pregnant figurine with upraised arms (Fig. 10) (Myres 1902-1903: 370, Pl. 11. 22), the auspicious gesture of birth emblematic of Eileithyia in later Greek iconography.
- A small standing figurine seemingly gravid (Fig. 11).
- Female figurines with legs wide apart sitting on stools, and a few detached stools (Myres 1902-1903: 373-374). Two such figurines are clearly pregnant (Fig. 12) (Rutkowski 1991: 91); another one, wearing a skirt, has neither bulging belly nor breasts (Fig. 13). It is worth recalling here that the Chalcolithic birth deposit from Kissonerga (Cyprus) included figurines of splay-legged females seated on stools, one with a child emerging between her thighs (Chapter 2, figs. 22-23).
- A model interpreted by Rutkowski as representing a womb or a liver (?) (1991: 116).

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<sup>6</sup> The badger bones from Kavousi-Kastro have skinning, dismemberment and defleshing marks that attest to the consumption of the animal's meat and, probably, the use of its pelt (Snyder and Klippel 1996).

- Two clay fillets that Myres identified as wreaths or, “very probably”, dedicated girdles like those from the Temple Repositories of Knossos (1902-1903: 378, Pl. 11. 32-33). Girdles had a bearing on female transitions and the cult of goddesses fostering the reproductive cycle. As for wreaths, they were customarily offered to Eileithyia-Artemis and cognate deities in historical Crete (see below and Chapter 9).



Fig. 7: Clay lower female torsos with marked genitals and/or legs spread open, and a breasted torso; several display suspension holes for hanging upon dedication. Petsophas



Fig. 8: Clay anatomical model with incised pubic triangle and pierced breasts. Petsophas



Fig. 9: Schematic clay figurines with breasts. Petsophas



Fig. 10: Clay pregnant figurine with upraised arms. Petsophas



Fig. 11: Clay figurine with bulging belly. Petsophas



Figs. 12: Clay pregnant figurine with legs spread apart in the birthing posture. Petsophas



Fig. 13: Clay female figurine with spread legs seated on a stool. Petsophas

The fact that such votives occur at Petsophas along with figurines of weasels brings to the fore the therapeutic dimension of the animals represented in peak sanctuary assemblages, which is rarely addressed but should not be disregarded in the context of a healing cult. Zootherapy was common practice in antiquity, as indicated by the wealth of Egyptian animal-based drugs (Nunn 1996: 137-162), or the over a hundred animal species playing a pharmacological role in the Hippocratic Corpus (Von Staden 2008: 175). Remedies containing animal substances were also an integral part of the Byzantine *iatrosophia* ('medical wisdom') that survived until recently on Crete (Clark 2011). It is therefore not far fetched to suggest that in Minoan times the species depicted in the Petsophas assemblage (cattle, goats/agrimi, sheep, pigs, birds, beetles, weasels, dogs and tortoises) satisfied a range of basic needs including therapeutic ones. Calling for attention are the figurines of tortoises and dogs dedicated at the sanctuary (Figs. 14, 18) (Myres 1902-1903: 377; Rutkowski 1991: 108-109, 112, Pls. 48. 2, 11, 12; 49. 2; 50. 1-5 ), as they may be conceptually related to the gynaeco-obstetrical votives and models of weasels.

The connection of tortoises with women and healing is atavistic. We may recall two of the discussed prehistoric graves attributed to shamanesses: the Natufian burial of Hilazon Tachtit which hosted 86 tortoise shells and two mustelid skulls (Chapter 3, fig. 1), and the Mesolithic grave from Bad Dürrenberg containing 65 tortoise shell fragments. In Classical antiquity the tortoise was preeminently sacred to Eileithyia and cognate goddesses (Baur 1902: 73). Artemis Orthia (Sparta) – who bore the epithet *Chelitis* (< χέλυς, 'tortoise') (Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2. 33) – Artemis Elaphebolos (Kalapodi), Artemis Laphria (Kalydon), Athena Lindia (Rhodes) and Aphaia (Aegina) received in offering shells and/or figurines of tortoises, also an animal attribute of Aphrodite Ourania (Paus. 6. 25. 1) and the Phoenician Astarte (Bevan 1988). Contemporary with the Petsophas material are midwifery devices from Middle Kingdom Egypt displaying turtle iconography. These include a baby's feeding cup, birth wands, and segmented rods thought to be conceptually and functionally connected with the birth bricks (Figs. 15-17) (Wegner 2009: 473-474, fig. 13; Teeter 2011: 169; Fisher 1968: 30-32). Up to recent times in Upper Bavaria and Tyrol, barren women wishing to conceive offered wax and iron tortoises to the Virgin Mary because the uterus was identified with this animal (Baur 1902: 73).

It has been argued that the tortoise is associated with fertility because it lays many eggs (Rappenglück 2006: 227) – like the pomegranate because of its many seeds. Ancient and later medical sources offer, however, a broader outlook on the issue. The Ebers Papyrus records a tortoise-based remedy "to release a child from the belly of a woman"

(Nunn 1996: 195). The Babylonian medical compendium from Assur prescribes eating turtle meat to ease birth (Stol 2000: 71). In the Hippocratic Corpus tortoise-based treatments are predominantly gynaecological – to stimulate postpartum lochial discharge and promote conception (Von Staden 2008: 187, 202). According to a French medical encyclopedia, in the 19th c. tortoise blood was a remedy for uterine conditions (Mérat and De Lens 1837: 369).<sup>7</sup> Turtle shell/gelatin occurs in traditional Chinese recipes to arrest uterine bleeding (Dharmananda 2000; Hou and Jin 2005: 128, 590).



Fig. 14: Clay tortoise figurine.  
Petsophas



Fig. 15: Faience feeding cup displaying  
a tortoise on both sides of the spout.  
Middle Kingdom Egypt, 1850-1700 BC

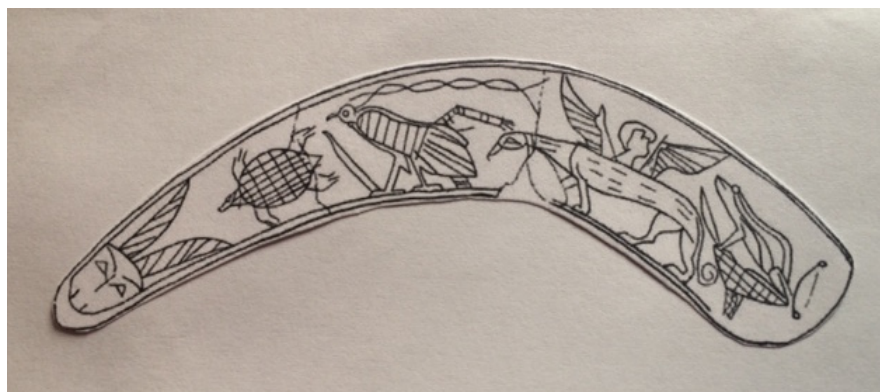


Fig. 16: Birth wand with tortoise imagery from the Ramesseum ritual deposit.  
Middle Kingdom Egypt, 18th c. BC

<sup>7</sup> Until the past century, tortoise blood was regarded as a most effective antipyretic in the Pelješac peninsula (Croatia) (Hovorka 1900: 124). I owe this reference to Predrag Kilibarda.



Fig. 17: A tortoise and other protective animals on a steatite ritual rod pertaining to the paraphernalia of Egyptian midwives. Middle Kingdom, 19th-17th c. BC

In the previous chapter we discussed plentiful evidence for the offering of puppies in rebirth/cleansing rituals, and argued that Eileithyia – and cognate goddesses – received dogs in sacrifice because bitches and puppies supplied relevant obstetric/lactation treatments. According to the available data, Petsophas and Jouktas are the two peak sanctuaries to have yielded confidently identified figurines of dogs (Figs. 18-19) (Jones 1999: 45).<sup>8</sup> They may refer to the animal's role in the hunt or as guardian of flocks, as has been proposed (Myres 1902-1903: 381; Platon 1951: 111; Zeimbekis 1998: 253), but the potential therapeutic agency of dogs should also be taken into consideration, as it is suggested by some remarkable finds. Palaikastro, the settlement served by Petsophas, yielded zooarchaeological evidence for puppy sacrifice (Wall-Crowther 2007; Cunningham and Sackett 2009: 91; Karetsou and Koehl 2014: 337), and Jouktas produced figurines of puppies (Fig. 19) (Karetsou and Koehl 2014) *along with* votives suggesting female health concerns; such as a pregnant figurine, over 60 models interpreted as embryos or women crouching in childbirth (Fig. 20) (Karetsou 1981: 146; Watrous 1996: 70), and figurines with splayed legs which are on display at the Heraklion Museum.

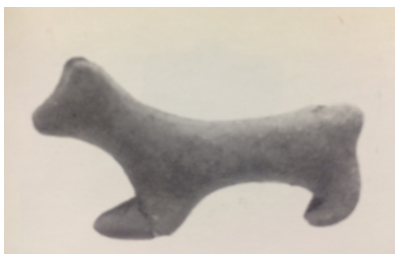


Fig. 18: Clay figurine of a dog. Petsophas

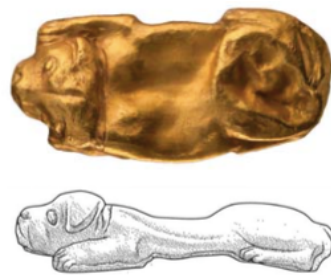


Fig. 19: Gold figurine of a puppy. Jouktas, MM IIA-LM IB

<sup>8</sup> We exclude the dog models from Thylakas (Jones 1999: 45), as according to Davaras the finds from the site date mostly to the later 1st millennium BC (2010). Nevertheless, further research is required to ascertain if Thylakas was or not a peak sanctuary in Minoan times.





Fig. 20: Miniature clay models interpreted as embryos or females squatting in childbirth. Jouktas

In their recent publication of the MM II-LM I puppy models from Jouktas, Karetsou and Koehl recall the association of dogs with the Babylonian medical goddess Gula, the use of canids/puppies in many healing/purification rituals, and the Classical evidence for dog sacrifice in wells (see Chapter 7). Noting that the latter practice is documented at LM II-III Palaikastro, the authors emphasize the sacral connotations of dogs in the Aegean Bronze Age, as witnessed for example by the sealing of a lactating bitch from Knossos and the seal of a likely goddess with a lactating bitch from Asine (Argolis) (Fig. 21) (Karetsou and Koehl 2014). We may add a unique seal from Knossos that portrays a lactating bitch with two puppies (Fig. 22).



Fig. 21: Lactating bitch held by a likely goddess on a seal from Asine. LM I-II

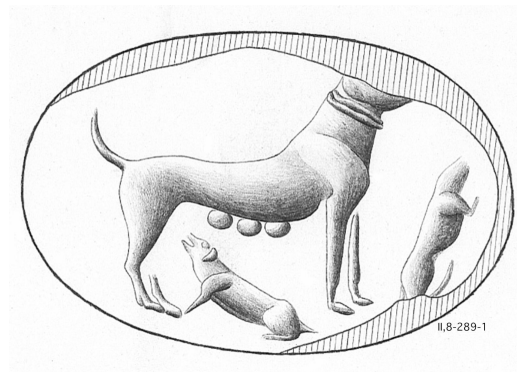


Fig. 22: Two puppies and a lactating bitch on a seal from Knossos. LM I-II

Female health concerns are expressed at peak sanctuaries other than Petsophas and Jouktas. Prinias yielded a remarkable anatomical model with a slit vulva, incised pubic hair and two suspension holes representing the breasts (Fig. 23); Traostalos, a naked figurine with an incised pubic triangle (Chryssoukaki 2001: 61); and Stou Mamaloukou, a pregnant figurine and a female torso with prominent breasts.

On the basis of these votive types Watrous argued for the cult of a goddess of childbirth, like the Cretan Eileithyia, or a goddess of marriage, like the later Hera (1995: 399, 402). Such offerings do indeed point to the worship of a female deity concerned with birth and reproductive health issues; but assuming that formal marriage was institutionalized in Minoan Crete is problematic, as the visual record betrays a notorious indifference to the depiction of the nuclear family, kourotrophic images (Papageorgiou 2008: 95), or scenes that could be interpreted as wedding rituals. In a recent contribution on Aegean Bronze Age medicine, Arnott mentions a pregnant figurine from Petsophas and the squatting models from Jouktas as “evidence for childbirth and the work of midwives” (2014: 51). The scholar, who has repeatedly postulated the existence of these therapists in the prehistoric Aegean (1996: 267; 1997: 277 n. 109, 278), speaks of wise-women, remarking that “midwives with a much wider healing competence are well known from other early societies”, such as the Hittite ‘Old Woman’ (Arnott 2004: 162-163, n. 28), a practitioner soon to be addressed.



Fig. 23: Clay votive with perforated breasts, incised vulva and pubic hair. Peak sanctuary of Prinias

By themselves, the gyneaco-obstetrical votives from Petsophas support the cult of a supernatural wise-woman, but can her identity be plausibly discerned? According to the published data, the models of weasels and tortoises are unique to Petsophas (Jones 1999: 45-46). In association with the anatomical offerings and figurines embodying female health concerns, these animal models strongly suggest that specialized practices relating to midwifery were performed at Palaikastros' peak sanctuary, and point to the worship of the native Eileithyia, the only goddess later displaying *both* the weasel and the tortoise as sacred emblems. Finds from Palakaistro might indicate that the dog (represented at Petsophas) was also among her therapeutic attributes already in the Bronze Age.

Block M, a MM architectural complex on Palaikastro's main street possibly serving a supra-domestic function, produced two human figurines matching in type those found in peak sanctuaries, and five animal models including a remarkably life-like mustelid (Fig. 24) (Knappett and Cunningham 2012: 5; Evely 2012: 227, 252-253). The area of Block M was stripped in LM I and two wells were built there, one incorporating a natural cavern (Cunningham and Sackett 2009: 91). These wells yielded LM II-III depositions of 28 adult dogs and puppies – many skeletons of which were articulated – a neonatal piglet and mustelids (beech martens) (Wall-Crowther 2007). As argued by Cunningham and Sackett, the offering of puppies and piglets should be regarded as part of the cultic life of the inhabitants of Palaikastro, since cross-cultural parallels attest to the use of such newborn animals in purification rites (2009: 91). A deposit from one of the wells contained puppy bones associated with the articulated skeletons of a lamb and a marten (Wall-Crowther 2007: 194), suggesting a *connection* between puppies and mustelids as sacrificial animals in possible purification/renewal/rebirth rituals. In this context, it is significant that mustelids had also a funerary dimension at Palaikastro, and elsewhere in prehistoric Crete.



Fig. 24: Weasel figurine from Block M at Palaikastro. MM period

The communal ossuaries at Palaikastro produced MM II vessels containing animal models (Dawkins 1923: 12); one such vessel hosts the figurine of a weasel (Fig. 25). And a tholos tomb at Porti (Mesara) yielded a MM seal crowned by a squatting animal, probably a weasel according to Xanthoudides (1924: 68), or more likely another mustelid, a Cretan badger (Figs. 26-27). Interestingly, dogs also appear to have fulfilled a funerary function in prehistoric Crete. Stone lids of pyxis topped by a recumbent dog were found in Prepalatial tombs, one at Mochlos, another at Zakros (Fig. 28); a third comes from Hagia Triada (Warren 1969: 82; Karetsou and Koehl 2014: 334-335). And several sites (e.g. Knossos, Archanes-Fourni, Gournes, Karphi) have produced Postpalatial instances of dogs buried with humans in tombs (Day 1984: 23-24).



Fig. 25: Bowl with a weasel figurine from an ossuary at Palaikastro. MM II



Fig. 26: Drawing of a MM steatite seal from a tomb at Porti, probably portraying a badger

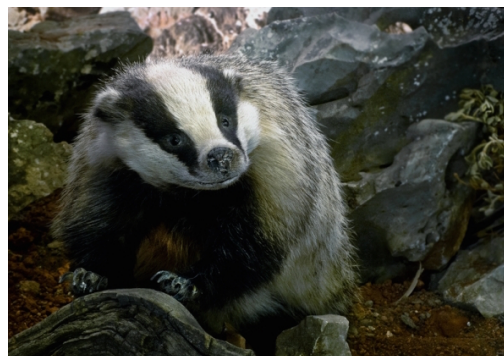


Fig. 27: Cretan badger (*Meles meles arcalus*)



Fig. 28: Lid of a steatite pyxis with a handle in the shape of a recumbent dog. Mochlos, EM II

Though of later date, relevant here is an EIA pit found beneath a burial at Kavousi-Vronda (Mirabello area), containing articulated skeletons of adult dogs and puppies, probable mustelid bones<sup>9</sup> and remains of donkeys (Coulson et al. 1983: 408; Day 1984: 22). Day perceptively proposed that the association of puppies with Hekate may be pertinent to this burial (1984: 27). However, considering that the role of psychopomp is prototypical of archaic midwife goddesses, an alternative interpretation may be suggested. In the EIA-Archaic period the indigenous Eileithyia was worshipped in the Mirabello area, so her association with dogs, mustelids *and* equids – attested by the EIA mounted GUA figurines from Tsoutsouros – may be pertinent to the burial pit at Kavousi-Vronda; since dogs/puppies, mustelids and donkeys had a bearing on birth-related practices,<sup>10</sup> they could well have played a role as agents of rebirth.

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<sup>9</sup> The authors report “fox or marten” bones. But as the fox does not occur in Crete (Myres 1902-1903: 377, n. 2; Kaczynska and Witczak 2007: 296), we assume that the remains belong to mustelids.

<sup>10</sup> An ancient Egyptian spell invokes the oxytocic power of the amniotic fluid of the female donkey. A haematite medical gem at the British Museum (G 294) depicts two donkeys on a uterus, possibly symbolizing their control over the opening and closing of the womb which are essential in childbirth. In Hippocratic gynaecology ass milk is prescribed to arrest bleeding after miscarriage and to treat amenorrhea. The animal’s dung is also recommended as fumigation and to be taken orally (Dasen 2008: 274, n. 57), probably causing more harm than benefits to women’s health. In Greece donkey’s milk has traditionally been an important substitute nourishment for infants (Niehoff and Meister 2003: 182).

### 8. 3. Mustelids in votive assemblages beyond Crete

So as to contextualize within a broader ritual landscape the Cretan materials discussed so far and others soon to be addressed, let us briefly examine the occurrence of mustelid bones and/or iconography in prehistoric and ancient votive assemblages elsewhere in the Aegean and the broader Mediterranean.

Among the finds from the sanctuary of Phylakopi (LH IIIB2, 13th c. BC) in the Cycladic island of Milos are bones of a beech marten, tortoise shells, seashells, marine iconography, depictions of lilies, a female figurine with upraised arms (Psi type), the so-called Lady of Phylakopi, probably the cult image of a goddess (Renfrew 1985: 278, 326, 373, 375, 389, 479);<sup>11</sup> and a dog figurine resembling the puppy models from Jouktas (Karetsou and Koehl 2014: 334). The faunal assemblage from the Acropolis sanctuary of Stymphalos (Arcadia) included remains of mustelids (beech marten, otter), tortoises, many sacrificed dogs, and deer (Ruscillo 2014: 250-251, 257, 266); inscriptions from the sanctuary (4th-2nd c. BC) attest to the cult of Eileithyia, to whom the occurring snake-bracelets were probably dedicated for a safe delivery (Young 2014: 143).

The Etruscan and Roman records offer enlightening data. The sanctuary at Pyrgi produced remains of mustelids (weasel, badger), canids, tortoises and deer (Donati 2004: 142, 146-148, 156; De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2006: 63; Trentacoste 2013: 98 n. 42); the main deity at Pyrgi was Uni, whom the Greeks identified alternatively with Eileithyia and the sea goddess Leucothea (De Grummond 2016: 153). The remains of canids, turtles and deer found in the *area sacra* of Tarquinia also appear to be associated with Uni's cult (De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2000: 392; Bonghi Jovino 2005: 73, 80-81; Rask 2014: 293); images of splay-legged crouching females with upraised arms found in Tarquinian tombs have been interpreted as goddesses protecting both birth and the dead/rebirth (Fig. 29) (Jannot 1980; Perkins 2012: 159-160). Mustelid (otter) and dog bones occurred at the sanctuary of Poggio Colla (Trentacoste 2013: 83, 85); the site produced a stele naming the goddess Uni (Warden 2016: 213), and a Bucchero stamp of a birthing female with upraised arms (Fig. 30) (Perkins 2012). A pit at the Etruscan sanctuary of Ortaglia (Volterra), consecrated to an unidentified goddess overseeing female concerns, contained, among others, bones of mustelids (marten, badger), canids (wolf, fox), tortoises and deer (Bruni 2005).

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<sup>11</sup> Except for the tortoise shells, these materials recall finds from the earlier Temple Repositories of Knossos (see below).

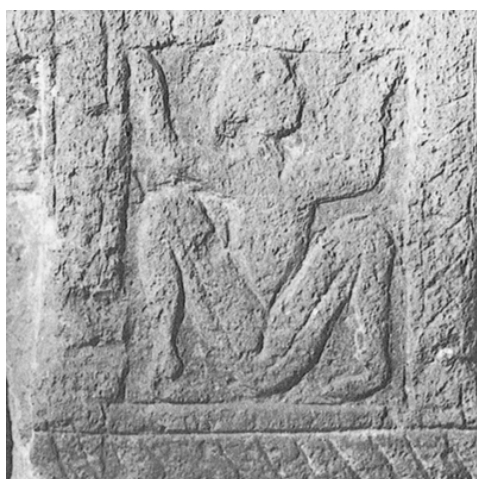


Fig. 29: Crouching female with raised arms carved on a tomb slab. Tarquinia, 6th c. BC

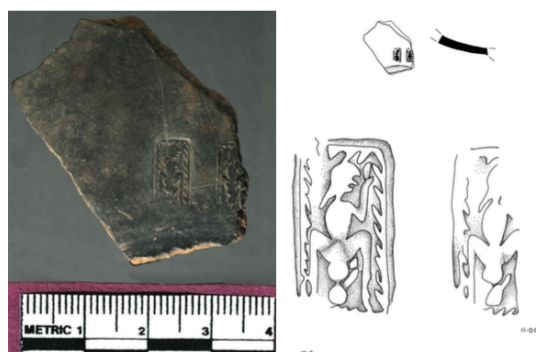
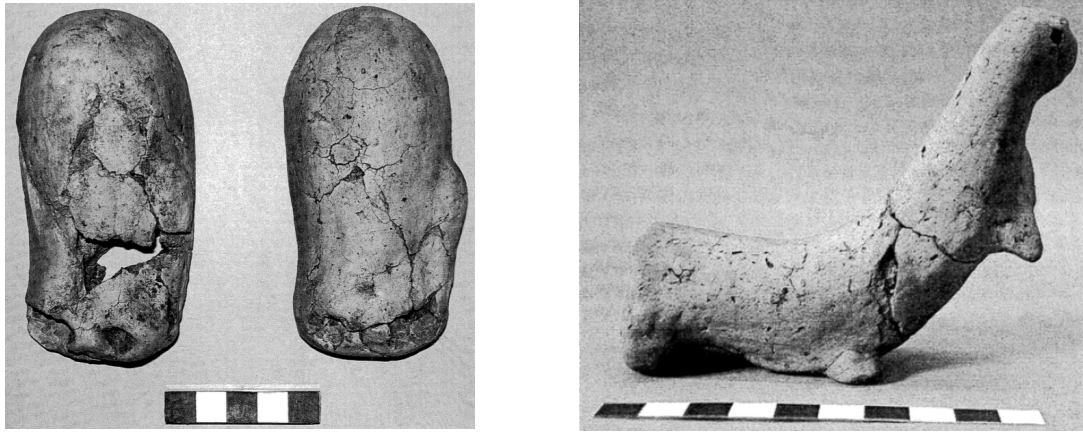


Fig. 30: Stamp of a birthing female with raised arms. Poggio Colla, Orientalizing period

Mustelids (badger), dogs – many of them puppies – tortoises and deer were among the animals dedicated at the Archaic temple of Mater Matuta and Fortuna at Sant’Omobono in Rome (Rask 2014: 293; De Grossi Mazzorin and Minniti 2000: 393; Trentacoste 2013: 98, n. 44); both goddesses presided over birth/motherhood (Fowler 1916: 155-156). Lastly, mention must be made of a temple deposit (2nd c. BC) from the Roman site of Praeneste which evokes the myth of Galinthias/Galanthis, metamorphosed into a weasel by Eileithyia/Juno Lucina because she unblocked Alkmene’s obstructed delivery of Herakles; as we have argued, a story encoding the animal’s oxytocic agency in ancient obstetrics. The Praenestine deposit included the bones of a mustelid or a cat and other animals (oxen, ovicaprids, birds); two clay anatomical models of uteri (Fig. 31); two iron keys – typically offered to ease childbirth (‘unlock’ the womb); a bronze statuette probably portraying Juno; and several most peculiar clay figurines with a woman’s face, short limbs and the arched back characteristic of mustelids (Figs. 32-33), that Tedeschi convincingly interprets as representing Galinthias (2007). The archaeologist reports the occurrence of the weasel/ichneumon motif on contemporary Praenestine cistae, bronze caskets customarily offered as bridal gifts. Interestingly, she also mentions in passing the weasel figurines from Petsophas as a much earlier example of mustelid iconography (Tedeschi 2007: 215-216).



Figs. 31, 32: Clay votive uteri and weasel-like female figurine from the temple deposit at Praeneste, 2nd c. BC

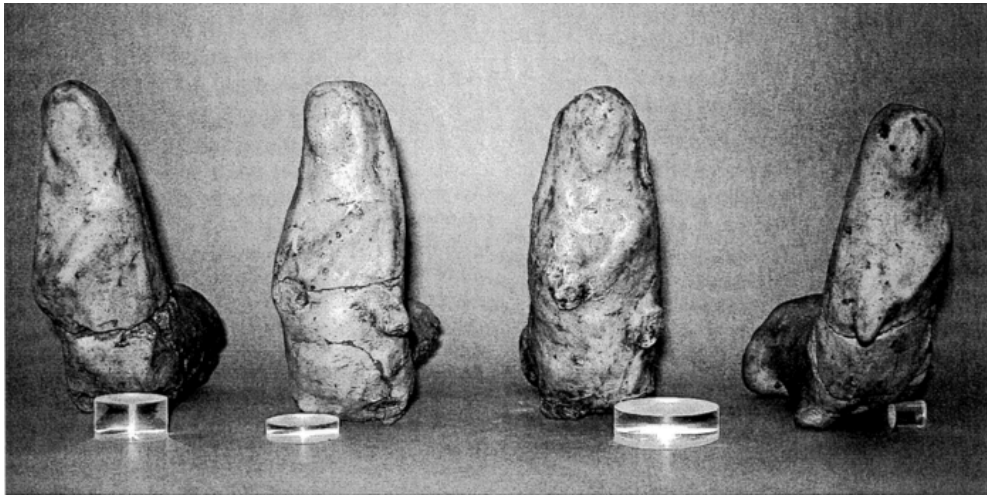


Fig. 33: Group of weasel-woman figurines from the temple deposit at Praeneste

The Greek, Etruscan and Roman archaeological data collected here indicate that mustelids, tortoises and canids (as well as deer) had close cultic connections with goddesses fostering the birth process. This is a set of associations, with a deep and long-term history, embedded across the Mediterranean and beyond. The evidence for puppy and mustelid sacrifice at Palaikastro thus supports our contention that the gynaecological votives and models of weasels, tortoises and dogs from Petsophas are suggestive of healing practices related to a midwifery cult. Following the trail of votive mustelids we have cast our eyes beyond Crete. We may now return to the Minoan record, as it provides data lending further support to the hypothesis that, far from a pest, the weasel was a sacred animal belonging to the wise-women's pharmacopoeia already in Bronze Age Crete.



#### 8. 4. The Temple Repositories of Knossos: A weasel skull as (re)interpretive key

The Central Palace Sanctuary at Knossos opened onto the Central Court, the large rectangular square around which the palace was built and the main focus of ritual activity at the site.<sup>12</sup> Within that focal sanctuary Arthur Evans discovered two stone cists carefully sealed (1921: 464-466), possibly a foundation deposit containing part of a shrine that was buried under the second palace, after the first was destroyed by an earthquake associated with the eruption of the Santorini volcano (Goodison and Morris 1998: 124; Panagiotaki 1993: 50-52; 1999: 74, 148; 2000: 5). Evans, who called these cists the Temple Repositories (TR), described their contents as the most remarkable evidence of early palace cult (Fig. 34) (1921: 464).



Fig. 34: Finds from the Temple Repositories, as arranged by Evans upon their discovery

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<sup>12</sup> Central Courts, a main feature of Minoan palatial architecture, appear in the EM period and are thought to be at the origin of the monumental complexes called palaces that emerge on Crete at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC (see Chapter 9).

The materials from the TR (MM IIIB-LM IA),<sup>13</sup> which offer a partial picture of a broader system of religious beliefs and rituals (Rethemiotakis 2008: 81), included the famous faience ‘snake-goddesses’; models of girdled robes decorated with crocuses; models of girdles, crocuses, lilies, lotus and pomegranate; a vase with a rose-leaf spray in relief; astral symbols; plaques of animals suckling their young; marine iconography and a wealth of seashells (Evans 1902-1903: 38-94; 1921: 495-523; Panagiotaki 1993; 1999: 71-179); deer antlers; as well as the complete skull of a mustelid and fish vertebrae which Evans first believed to be the remains of a snake (Fig. 35), only later identifying the cranium as that of a weasel (Panagiotaki 1993: 54; 1999: 118-119).

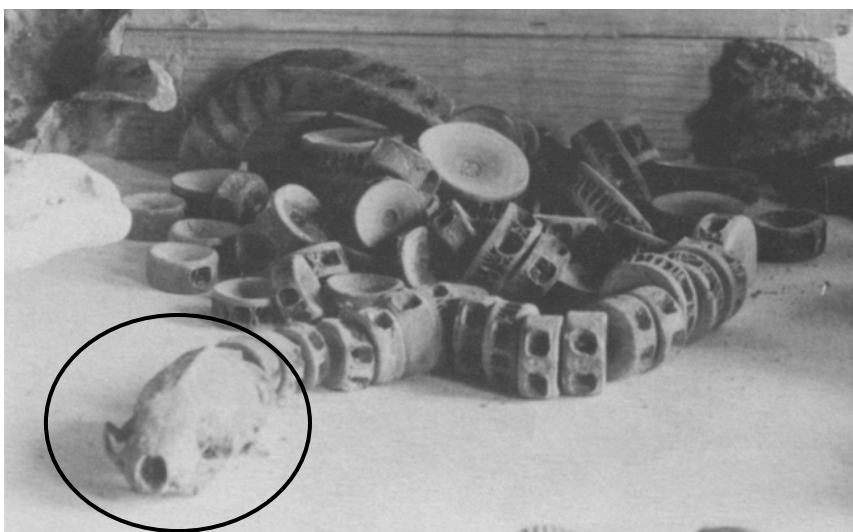


Fig. 35: Weasel skull and shark vertebrae from the TR, as arranged by Evans

The weasel skull, whose function remains unknown (Panagiotaki 1999: 119), has gone largely unnoticed; as has the fact that the (identified) plants depicted in the TR are later recorded as important gynaecological drugs in Hippocratic and other medical texts. According to Hatzaki, “although Evans was incorrect to associate the [weasel] skull with the [fish] vertebrae, and to identify the remains as those of a snake, it is tempting to retain the association and to consider the remains as those of a ‘monster’, a symbolic representation of a ‘snake’ intended for display” (2009: 23). But this is an unlikely proposition in light of the related TR finds. Bearing in mind the wealth of comparative data discussed in this and previous chapters, let us now examine the relevant TR materials

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<sup>13</sup> On the dating of the TR deposition, see Panagiotaki 1998; 1999: 136-148; 2007.

within the broader context of ancient midwifery traditions and the historical cult of Eileithyia, the only Cretan-born deity bearing the weasel as a healing emblem.

#### 8. 4. 1. The ‘snake goddesses’

The TR yielded three female figurines (Evans 1921: 500-506; Panagiotaki 1993: 54-55, 57), and detached arms of two or three other missing figurines (Fig. 47) (Panagiotaki 1993: 58-59, 98, 101), all made of faience, a vitreous material first developed by the Egyptians, who associated it with notions of rebirth (Panagiotaki 2000: 159-160). Best known are the two reconstructed statuettes. The largest displays a tall cylindrical polos crowned by a snake, a snake-plaited girdle, and serpents coiled around her outstretched arms, torso and lower womb (Fig. 36). The smaller figurine holds snakes in her upraised hands (Fig. 37).<sup>14</sup> Both wear long skirts, and bodices revealing their bare breasts.



Figs. 36, 37: Faience figurines of snake-handling females from the TR

<sup>14</sup> This figurine missed an arm and the head upon discovery (Evans 1921: 502). The small feline on her largely restored headdress was not at first identified as belonging to this statuette, the head of which is a complete reconstruction (Panagiotaki 1999: 98).

Evans believed that the largest statuette portrayed the “Great Mother” of the Minoans; a “Goddess of Maternity”, he argued, on account of her “matronly” bare breasts and the sacral value of the girdle in the assemblage (1902-1903: 85; 1921: 500). The bare breasts of the TR figurines have henceforth been invoked to support the existence of a presumed mother goddess central to Minoan religion (Nilsson 1950: 85; Christou 1968: 145); interpreted as symbolizing the maternal/nurturing/kourotrophic aspects of the ‘snake goddesses’ (Panagiotaki 1993: 54; 1999: 104, 273), or as signifying breast-feeding/fertility (Jones 2001: 264). Visitors to the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion thus read that the exposed breasts of the TR figurines are “symbolic of the fertility of women, the goddess and, *by implication, nature itself*” (my italics); a modernist binary view conflating women with nature and fertility.

Morris observes that most interpretations of bared female breasts in Aegean Bronze Age art tend to ascribe them a singular meaning, and fail to “explore the possibility of complex, richly layered meanings or of metaphoric rather than (or as well as) literal symbolisms” (2009: 243). She notes that on the Xeste 3 frescoes from Thera, thought to depict female transition rites, the exposed breasts are a potent visual indicator of age/stage of sexual maturity (see Chapter 9). She also argues that, while Early Minoan vessel figurines connect women’s breasts with liquid nourishment and pouring (see Chapter 9), to assume that the bare bosom of the TR figurines typifies them as nurturers is inconsistent with the notorious absence of kourotrophic images in the Minoan repertoire (Morris 2009: 246-247). Indeed, the lack of Bronze Age kourotrophic iconography in Crete strongly argues against any notions of a ‘mother goddess’ in the Minoan pantheon (Olsen 1998: 391; Goodison and Morris 1998: 114-116; Budin 2010).

In our Western tradition women’s breasts are heavily dichotomized as either sexual or maternal attributes, a binary construct that has strongly influenced scholarly approaches to bare breasts in ancient art (Morris 2009: 243). Since every culture builds its own semantic understandings of the body (Morris 2009), possibly more enlightening than to speculate about the meaning of the TR figurines’ bosom is to address the activity they perform. The depicted females are engaged in rites involving snakes, a distinctive feature of Minoan religion. In line with the traditional interpretation of the serpent when it occurs associated with prehistoric female images, scholars underscore the ‘chthonic’ and ‘fertility’ aspects of the ophid in Minoan cult (Evans 1902-1903: 85, 87; Picard 1948: 113; Willetts 1962: 120; Christou 1968: 145; Panagiotaki 1999: 104, 149; Gesell 2004: 132), but tend to ignore its potential medical symbolism. Yet the snake, still used in Mediterranean

ethnozotherapy (Quave and Pieroni 2013), has been a rich repository of remedies since Sumerian times (McDonald 1994), surviving into the present as a foremost pharmacological symbol; and this despite its strongly negative Judeo-Christian connotations.

When considering such a remarkably tenacious therapeutic symbolism, it seems ill-advised to assume that the snake lacked medicinal value in prehistoric Crete, only to become a healing emblem in historical times (e.g. of Apollo, Asklepios). Glaukos, the legendary son of Minos and Pasiphae who drowned in a honey jar, was brought back to life (rebirth) with a healing herb provided by a serpent; a Cretan myth, possibly linked to puberty rituals (Muellner 1998), which assigns medicinal knowledge to the ophid. A lekythos in the shape of a poppy capsule, found in a EIA tomb at Prinias, may have contained opium for medicinal purposes, as suggests the snake in relief below its handle (Chapter 9, fig. 83) (Stampolidis 1998: 78, 130). Some of the Minoan peak sanctuaries, the locus of a healing cult, have yielded votive models of snakes (Figs. 38-39).

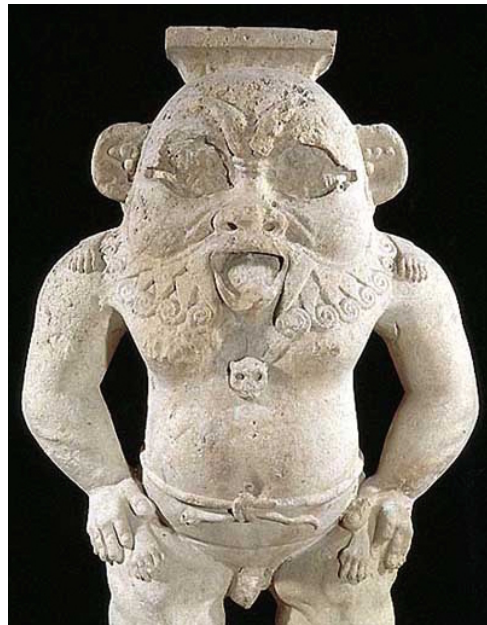


Figs. 38, 39: Clay snake models from the peak sanctuaries of Jouktas and Vrysinas

Although not in connection with the TR figurines, Evans reported that in Crete snakeskins “are still preserved as possessing certain curative or apotropaic virtues”; in the spring young men in courting age hung them up on trees as charms “for the girls to look at” (1935: 168, 183 n. 2). Such charms were not just looked at but used pharmacologically. Called *poukamiso* (‘shirt’) or *fidotomaro*, the slough of serpents has traditionally been employed in Crete to treat persistent fever (Rigatos 2005: 361) and reproductive issues. Elderly Cretans in the Rethymno prefecture still remember that when a female animal showing no standing oestrus<sup>15</sup> was required to produce an offspring, she was fed a

<sup>15</sup> Namely the short period when the female animal allows copulation.

snakeskin mixed with vegetables; the elders declare that “she would subsequently mate”.<sup>16</sup> This Cretan practice constitutes yet another example illustrating how persistent is the ancestral use of the serpent as an emmenagogue/oxytocic agent, already documented in Hippocratic medicine (*Morb. mul.* 1. 78) (see Chapter 7).<sup>17</sup> Connected with the pervasive pharmacological use of snake sloughs to induce uterine contractions are the amuletic snakeskin girdles to ease childbirth recorded by Pliny (*HN* 30. 44), attested in Medieval sources (Jones and Olsan 2015: 409, n. 6), and surviving in the Mediterranean until recent times (Gélis 1976: 326; 1986: 44; Gitcheva 2002: 929);<sup>18</sup> in modern Greece the snake-catchers (*fidopiastes*) often provided such girdles in case of dystocia (Oikonomopoulos and Oikonomopoulou 2012: 696-697). Worthy of notice here is the salient resemblance between the snake-plaited girdle of the large TR figurine and that worn by the Egyptian childbirth god Bes in 1st millennium BC representations (Figs. 40-41).



Figs. 40, 41: Snake-girdles worn by the large TR figurine (c. 17th c. BC) and Bes (4th c. BC)

<sup>16</sup> Nikos Kakogiannakis, pers. comm. 10-10-2014.

<sup>17</sup> It seems no coincidence that many birth stories current in antiquity were connected with snakes. See Willetts 1962: 79, n. 103.

<sup>18</sup> The amuletic use of snakeskin girdles to facilitate delivery is documented also among indigenous peoples in North America (Larsen 1957: 509).

Evans regarded the TR figurines as ‘snake charmers’ of a religious character (1921: 506-7). Foster viewed them as participants in a snake-handling cult (1979: 72). Warren – who saw no evidence for a medical role of the serpent – thought they might represent a snake-handling sect; a custom, he noted, found in some religious congregations of the Southern United States (1970: 375). However, if we are looking for potential parallels there are ancient Mediterranean traditions of snake-handlers like the Cypriot Ophiogenes, the Lybian Psylli, or the aforementioned Marsi from central Italy who venerated the healing goddess Angitia; iatromantic practitioners skilled in snake-based drugs (e.g. antidotes, *theriaca*) and herbal remedies, who were reputedly immune to ophidic venom – through mithridatism – able to cure snake-bites and to charm serpents.<sup>19</sup> Analogous snake-handling therapists (*serpari*, *cirauli*, *sanpaolari*) practised in Italy until fairly recent times (Montinaro 1996, Park 2001). Pilgrims wishing for good health still flock nowadays to Cocullo, in the land of the ancient Marsi, to attend the May feast of San Domenico – the Christian healer saint superseding Angitia – and literally cover his effigy with (harmless) live serpents caught by the local *serpari* (Figs. 42-43); small gilded keys, fish, skulls, and bunches of badger’s hair were among the apotropaic amulets associated with this ritual at the turn of the past century (Harrison 1907: 189).



Figs. 42, 43: The Feast of the *Serpari* at Cocullo nowadays, and at the turn of the 20th c.

<sup>19</sup> On these ancient practitioners, see Leaf 1923: 85; Ogden 2013: 210-213; Dench 1995: 24, 99, 156-174; Montinaro 1996.

There are no poisonous serpents in Crete (Weingarten 2015: 192) that could possibly account for the existence of a Minoan healing tradition linked to the cure of snake-bites. But the TR figurines bear a striking resemblance to the snake-handling Beset type figures commonly featuring on contemporary Middle Kingdom implements that were used in Egyptian midwifery cult and practice, such as birth bricks and wands (usually termed magical/apotropaic wands/knives) (Fig. 44).<sup>20</sup>



Fig. 44: Beset statuettes, and depictions of an analogous snake-handling goddess on the birth brick from Abydos and several birth wands. Middle Kingdom Egypt, c. 2000-1700 BC

<sup>20</sup> Weingarten (2015: 183, fig. 2a) corrects some inventory numbers and adds those missing in this illustration published by Wegner (2009: 466, fig. 10).



Of utmost interest in this discussion is a snake-handling figurine of Beset (Fig. 45), protectress of childbirth, belonging to a unique Middle Kingdom assemblage (18th c. BC) from the Ramesseum (Luxor) (Quibell 1898: 40, Pl. 3), which shortly predates the TR and is contemporary with the adoption of the Egyptian birth goddess Taweret into Minoan iconography (Weingarten 2015) (see Chapter 9). The Beset figurine, carved in wood, holds two bronze serpents; her arms are articulated, emphasising the deity's capacity as a snake wrangler.



Fig. 45: Articulated snake-handling statuette of Beset. Ramesseum deposit, Middle Kingdom Egypt, 18th c. BC

Along with the Beset figurine, the Ramesseum deposit comprised ritual-medical papyrii, hand-shaped ivory clappers, birth wands, a segmented rod, a snake-headed rod, nude female figurines including a 'paddle doll', and figurines of monkeys (Fig. 46). This ritual assemblage is often interpreted as a 'magician's kit' (Bosse-Griffiths 1977: 103; Dasen 1993: 69; Wegner 2009: 482; Teeter 2011: 166-167; Weingarten 2015: 185); some scholars suggesting that it may be the professional outfit of a medical practitioner

(Gardiner 1955: 1), a female healer (Weingarten 2015: 184),<sup>21</sup> or the town physician or midwife who might have assumed the role of Bes[et] to perform ritual practices (Dasen 1993: 69). It may be argued that the Ramesseum deposit was most likely the equipment of a wise-woman for the following reasons:

1) The ritual-medical texts from the deposit include the Mother and Child papyrus, which mentions an incantation to “release a child from the belly of a woman”, procedures to protect the newborn child, and the first recorded account of an obstetrical fistula (Nunn 1996: 194);<sup>22</sup> occurring in the Ramesseum papyri is also a reference to mastitis (Aufrère 2010: 12). A contemporary house at Kahun yielded a gynaecological papyrus, a Beset figurine and mask, and hand-shaped ivory clappers like those in the Ramesseum kit (Fig. 46 n° 17) (Bosse-Griffiths 1977: 103-104; Dasen 1993: 70; Wegner 2009: 482-483; Weingarten 2015: 187 n. 6).

2) The wooden statuette of Beset recalls the snake-handling goddesses featuring on the Middle Kingdom birth brick from Abydos and contemporary birth wands (Fig. 44) (Wegner 2009: 466-468, fig. 10). Along with images of her male counterpart Bes, snakes thought to be guardians of fertility are common iconographic motifs on New Kingdom models of ‘women’s beds’, which appear to have been purchased with birth amulets (Pinch 1983: 406; Graves-Brown 2010: 64).

3) Birth wands (Fig. 46 n° 1-3) – some bearing the inscription “protection by day and protection by night” – segmented rods (Figs. 17; 46 n° 18) – conceptually and functionally linked to the birth bricks – and snake-headed rods (Fig. 46. n° 4) belong to the Middle Kingdom professional equipment used in childbirth and the postpartum (Wegner 2009: 473-474, 480-482, 484 n. 107). Snake-headed rods and birth wands are handled by the female figures from Bebi’s tomb at Elkab traditionally labelled ‘nurses’ (Chapter 4, fig. 2), that we have interpreted as divine midwives propitiating the rebirth of the dead; Weingarten suggests they represent female healers (2015: 184-185).

4) Nude female figurines including ‘paddle dolls’ (Fig. 46 n° 9-11), which former scholarship largely interpreted as ‘concubines’, are now regarded as devices used in apotropaic-medical rites intended, among others, to propitiate conception-birth, cure ailments and ensure the rebirth of the dead (Waraksa 2008; Teeter 2011: 90); like the birth

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<sup>21</sup> Female healers are attested in early Egyptian sources. Meritptah is called ‘Chief of Physicians’ in her son’s tomb at Saqqara (2nd-3rd Dynasty). A tomb at Giza (5th-6th Dynasty) produced the stela of Peseshet, a woman who bore the title ‘Overseer of the female physicians’ (Ghalioungui 1975: 161, 163; Weingarten 2015: 185 n. 3; Nunn 1996: 124-125).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Weingarten 2015: 185 n. 5.

wands, the ‘paddle dolls’ often display the image of Taweret, protectress of parturition (Chapter 4, figs. 3-4).

5) Lastly, monkeys (Fig. 46 n° 6, 14) had strong connotations with fertility/ reproduction in Egypt. In Minoan iconography they occur with crocuses, a major gynaecological plant; notably in the Xeste 3 frescoes thought to depict female maturation rites (see Chapter 9).

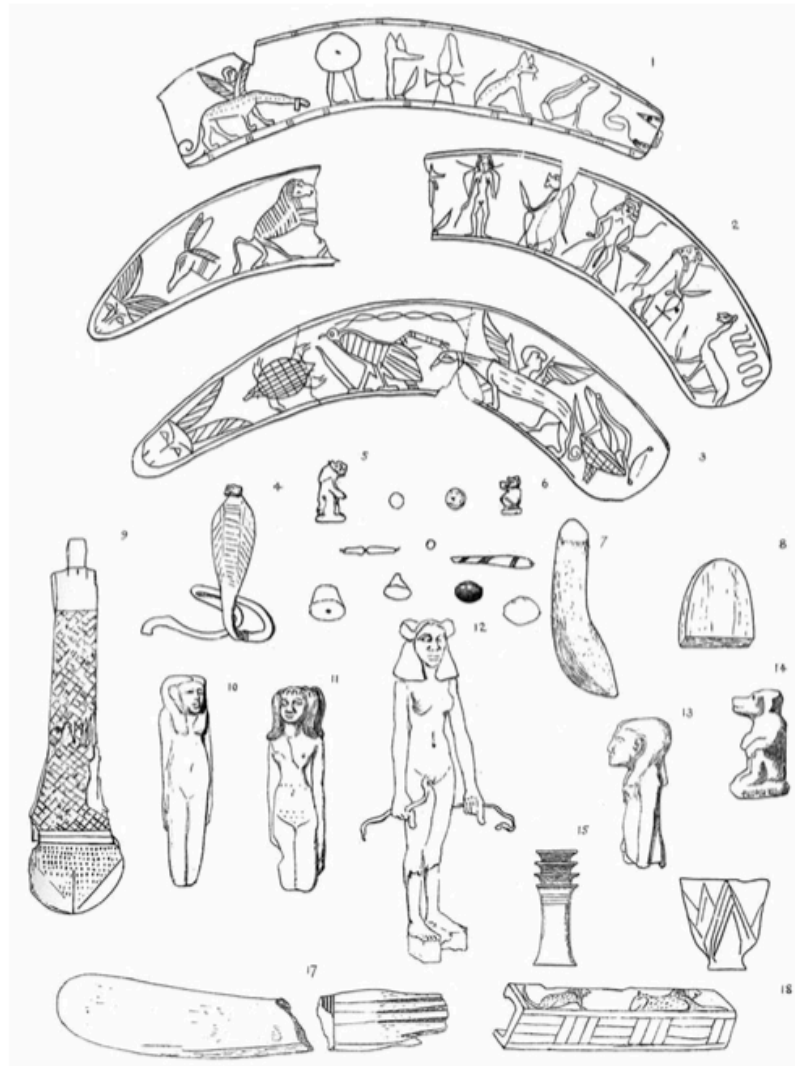


Fig. 46: Artefacts contained in the deposit from the Ramesseum

The snake-handling figurines from the TR may therefore be closer to the domain of female therapeutic knowledge and *techne*, than to that of nature and biological motherhood as is commonly argued. Rather than symbolizing ‘nature itself’,<sup>23</sup> their fully developed

<sup>23</sup> As reads the label of the TR figurines at the Heraklion Museum.

bare breasts could be an indicator of age; of a stage of maturity, not just biological but experiential, that the Minoans likely reached not long past puberty. Osteological research indicates that life expectancy in the Bronze Age was not even half that of modern Cretans (McGeorge 2008: 118),<sup>24</sup> due to the endangering hazards of pregnancy and childbirth, many women died during the stage of peak reproductive activity between the ages of 20-25 years, having an average life span shorter than males (McGeorge 1987: 408; 1988: 48; 2008: 118; Hallager and McGeorge 1992: 38).<sup>25</sup> Such reproductive hazards gave rise to the cult of Eileithyia on the island (McGeorge 2012: 293), a cult spreading throughout the Aegean and mainland Greece, where the goddess was associated with snake worship. On Delos she received silver votive snakes. The snake-bracelets from the Acropolis sanctuary of Stymphalos were probably offerings to Eileithyia for safe childbirth, and the many specimens found at Olympia have also been related to her cult (see Chapter 7). These jewels recall the winding bracelets on the arms and hand detached from missing TR figurines (Fig. 47).<sup>26</sup>



Fig. 47: Detached faience arms – one with a coiled snake – and hand with wavy bracelets from the TR

<sup>24</sup> Life expectancy on Crete is presently about 80 years: <http://www.patris.gr/articles/240450>

<sup>25</sup> At palatial Knossos the estimated mean age at death of male adults was 35 years, and that of females about 28; at LM III Chania, 34 years versus 25; at LM III Armenoi, 30 years versus 27. These gender differences in life expectancy are undoubtedly linked to reproductive mortality, a dramatic instance of which is the burial of a teenage with a late term embryo *in utero* from LM III Chania. Teenage pregnancies, common in prehistory, are particularly risky because young women have immature pelvises and a higher incidence of anemia and toxemia entailing higher obstetric morbidity (Hallager and McGeorge 1992: 16, 37-38; McGeorge 2008: 118-119).

<sup>26</sup> See Panagiotaki 1999: 162 n° 213-215.

When Evans addressed the sacral value of the snake-girdle worn by the large TR figurine, he evoked “the snake form of Nekhbet, the Egyptian Eileithyia”, reminding that Eileithyia’s cult at Amnisos was most ancestral in the Knossian area (1902-1903: 85). He also paralleled the snake rising over the TR figurine’s polos with the uraeus crowning the head of Hathor, and with the snake goddess Wadjet (Evans 1921: 59), Nekhbet’s counterpart in the Nile Delta (Evans 1902-1903: 84; Hart 2005: 112). Wadjet, whom the Greeks identified with the midwife goddess Leto, was like Eileithyia associated with the weasel/ichneumon (see Chapter 7).<sup>27</sup>

#### 8. 4. 2. Models of robes, girdles, and depictions of plants

The TR contained faience models of girdles and dresses decorated with crocus flowers (Fig. 48), faience inlays of crocuses, models of other flowers/fruits that have been identified as lily, lotus, pomegranate, and possibly plum (Figs. 59-60); as well as a faience vessel with a spray of rose leaves (Fig. 61) (Evans 1921: 499-500, 506; Panagiotaki 1999: 75-77, 91, 101-103, 159).

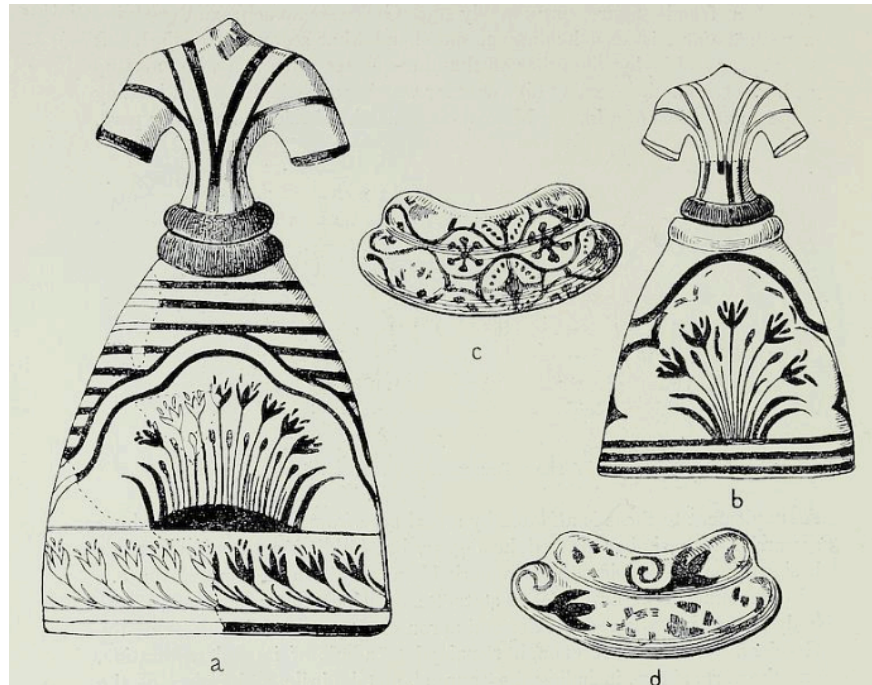


Fig. 48: Drawing of models of robes and a girdle from the TR ornated with crocus flowers; another girdle displays asterisks, an astral symbol

<sup>27</sup> Mummified ichneumons were placed in hollow statuettes of Wadjet (Bothmer 1949, James 1982), who was also closely connected with another mustelid, the otter (James 1982: 160).

A marker of reproductive maturity, the girdle has been intimately bonded with female sexuality and childbirth since antiquity. This garment had a therapeutic/apotropaic dimension when endowed with sacral value, or associated with a healing agent, as was the case of the Renaissance girdles attached to weasel heads and pelts deemed to protect pregnancy and childbirth (see Chapter 7). Medieval prayer rolls served as birth girdles (Fig. 49) (Musacchio 2001: 185; Jones and Olsan 2015: 424-427); and so did the belts of Christian virgins and saints ‘deliverers’ of women in travail (Fig. 50) (Miller 1995: 259), which were often placed on the parturients’ belly to ease difficult birth (Gélis 1986: 44). In Greece Agia Zoni (‘Saint Girdle’) is said to bestow strength on children (Fig. 51) (Handaka 2006: 104), and the girdle of the Theotokos (‘God-Bearer’) believed to foster conception-birth and miraculously cure common maladies.<sup>28</sup> Cretan *mastorisses* (‘skilled ones’=midwives) still practising in the 1960s used to borrow the belt of the priest to incense it over women in hard labour (Karatarakis 1962: 36).



Fig. 49: Prayer roll employed as a birth girdle in Medieval England



Fig. 50: Display of the Sacred Girdle (*Sacra Cintola*) of the Madonna del Prato, which is thought to secure safe delivery

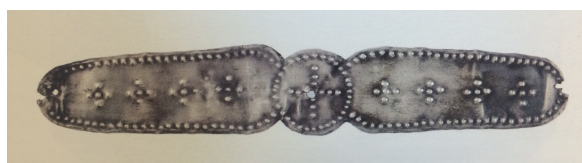


Fig. 51: *Tama* of a girdle possibly related to Agia Zoni

<sup>28</sup> See <http://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2012/08/8-miracles-of-holy-belt-of-theotokos.html>

The girdle was an attribute of the Sumerian midwife goddess Nintu (see Chapter 4). In Egypt the amulet depicting the girdle of the healing goddess Isis (*tyet*) reputedly staunched obstetrical haemorrhage (Fig. 52) (Nunn 1996: 110). Commonly made of red stones or faience,<sup>29</sup> plausibly depicting a looped and loosely tied cloth, and closely connected with women (Quirke 2015: 58), the *tyet* “may evoke general use of cloth at menstruation, or specific bandaging in extremes, above all at birth” (Quirke 2015: 60, citing Westendorf 1965); *tyet* amulets are found in tombs (Quirke 2015: 58), like other birth-related artefacts. When discussing the religious significance of the Minoan sacral knot, which appears on sealings and other media (Fig. 53), Evans drew parallels with the *tyet* of Isis and the *nodus Herculeus* (1921: 430-435).

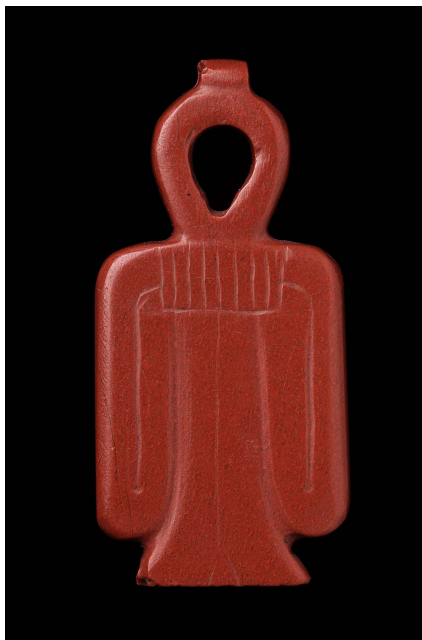


Fig. 52: *Tyet* amulet made of red faience from a queenly tomb. Sudan, 8th c. BC

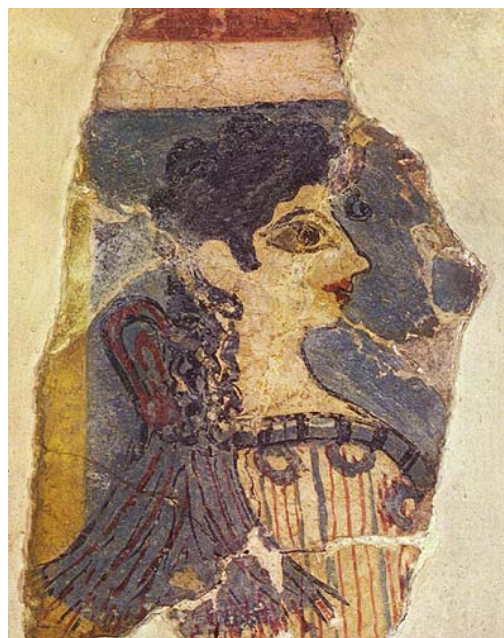


Fig. 53: Fresco depicting a Minoan woman with a sacral knot. Knossos, 15th-14th c. BC

In the Roman tradition, the groom untied the *nodus Herculeus* on the bride’s girdle, a ritual symbolizing consummation – connected with Juno *Cinxia* (< *cingulum*, ‘girdle’) – because the beginning of marriage was “the unloosening of the belt” (Hersch 2010: 109-112);<sup>30</sup> a rite paralleled in ancient Greece, where the girdle (*zone*) was also a

<sup>29</sup> Red stones were believed to have styptic properties (Ritner 1984: 213).

<sup>30</sup> Fest. 55L s.v. *Cinxiae Iunonis*.

metaphorically charged indicator of age and sexual status for females. Callimachus (Fr. 620 A) refers to a pre-pubescent girl as *azostos* ('without a belt'). Tying on the *zone* was an act signifying a girl's readiness for marriage (Lee 2015: 135), and loosening it a gesture symbolic of an easy delivery (Baur 1902: 67). When Evadne, assisted by Eileithyia and the Moirai, was about to bear her son Iamos, she laid down her crimson girdle (Pi. O. 6.39). Eileithyia is called *Lysizonos* (Theoc. *Id.* 17.60-63), 'Girdle-Loosener', a common epithet of Classical divine midwives.<sup>31</sup> It was to such deities that women who 'loosened the girdle for the first time' (primiparae) customarily dedicated their belts,<sup>32</sup> robes, other clothes, and jewels in gratitude for surviving parturition (Chapter 6, fig. 25) (Rouse 1902: 252; Baur 1902: 67).

Jewels were offered to Eileithyia on Delos (Homolle 1981: 156). The clothes pins consecrated to her at Sparta suggest the dedication of associated garments, like those given to Artemis at Brauron (Kilian 1978: 220-221). Eileithyia's cave at Tsoutsouros yielded jewellery that used to be sown or pinned to clothes (Chapter 6, fig. 23). It has been argued that the dedication of the peplos to Athena<sup>33</sup> and the offerings of clothes and jewellery to Eileithyia in historical times were not just the same kind of ritual, but likely also continuities of Bronze Age practice (Warren 1988: 22); as Minoan iconography attests to the dedication of robes to, and the robing of, goddesses/priestesses (Figs. 54-56) (Evans 1921: 435, figs. 312 a, b; Demargne 1948: 228, figs. 3-5; Warren 1988: 20-23, fig. 11 a-c).



Figs. 54-56: Seal and sealings from Knossos, Hagia Triada and Zakro illustrating the dedication of ceremonial robes. MM III-LMI

<sup>31</sup> See Aubert 1989: 444.

<sup>32</sup> Sch. A. R. 33.13-14.

<sup>33</sup> The peplos of Athena, consecrated to her on the occasion of the Panathenaic festival, is thought to be represented on the Parthenon Frieze.



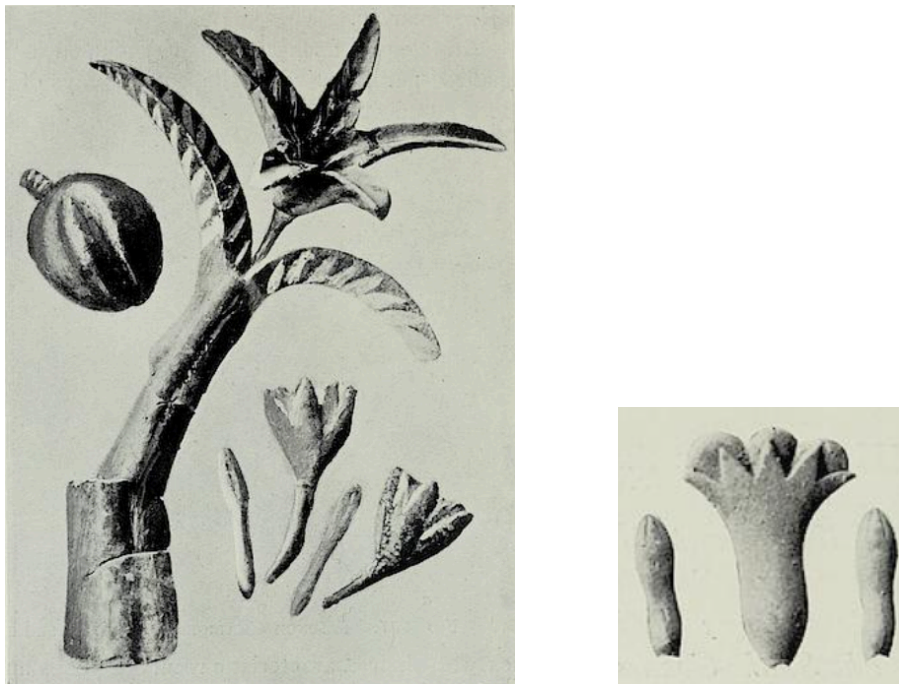
At the peak sanctuary of Vrysinas, where the figurines of female votaries outnumber those of males (c. 70%), women are depicted wearing the customary girdle but some display it loose (Figs. 57-58), suggesting the performance of initiation rituals,<sup>34</sup> perhaps into motherhood.



Figs. 57, 58: Clay figurines of female votaries from the peak sanctuary of Vrysinas wearing, respectively, a tied and a loose girdle. MM III-LM IA

The crocuses decorating the TR votive dresses and one of the girdle models (Fig. 48), as well as two TR faience inlays representing crocuses (Fig. 59), are relevant in this discussion because saffron is a powerful oxytocic (Javadi et al. 2013) featuring as a prominent gynaecological drug in Hippocratic and later medical texts (Andò 2001: 299; Ferrence and Bendersky 2004: 207-210; Day 2011: 368). The recognition that it was used in antiquity to facilitate parturition and regulate the menses was instrumental to the interpretation of the Xeste 3 female frescoes as scenes of initiation to menarche/womanhood/motherhood; the many healing properties of saffron prompting the suggestion that the Xeste 3 goddess is a medical deity (see Chapter 9). In later Greece girls undergoing maturation rituals at the sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron wore the *krokotos*, the ‘saffron robe’ dyed with crocus, a plant relieving menstrual pains, thus having special significance in such rites (Lee 2015: 200).

<sup>34</sup> Iris Tzachili, pers. comm. 22-2-2016.



Figs. 59, 60: Models of a possible plum, a lily, saffron flowers and pomegranate buds from the TR



Fig. 61: Small faience vessels with plant decoration from the TR; that to the left (a) has a rose-leaf spray in relief

Other plants depicted in the TR, such as the lily, lotus, pomegranate, rose and possible plum (Figs. 59-60), had, like the crocus, a bearing on ancient midwifery practice. Lilies have mostly gynaecological applications in the Hippocratic Corpus, and so do the plants named *lotos* (Andò 2001: 235-236, 291); on the LM III larnakes (clay coffins) the lily likely symbolizes regeneration (Watrous 1991: 295), and in Egypt the lotus, associated

with Hathor, was symbolic of rebirth (Panagiotaki 1999: 76). The pomegranate, an attribute of Eileithyia and cognate goddesses (see Chapter 7), was used in antiquity to expel the foetus and the placenta, treat uterine conditions, and as a contraceptive (Riddle 1991: 11; 1992: 25-26, 93-94; Nixon 1995: 86). In the Hippocratic Corpus the rose is used exclusively in gynaecological treatments (Andò 2001: 242). As for the likely plum – possibly represented also in the Kako Plai deposit that Demargne related to Eileithyia's cult (Chapter 6, fig. 51) – it is a fruit rich in serotonin, an abortion active principle.<sup>35</sup> Tablets containing gum of *Prunus spinosa* were prescribed in Pliny's time for menorrhagia, uterine prolapse and ulcerations of the generative organs (*HN* 24. 67);<sup>36</sup> in Greek ethnomedicine the fruit is used as an emmenagogue (Vokou et al. 1993: 191), the flowers for women's leukorrhea, and the bark as an antipyretic (Alibertis 2010: 221).

These plants represented in the TR may thus belong to the pharmacopoeia of Minoan wise-women. Significantly, crocuses, lilies and roses also feature on the Xeste 3 wall paintings; and there are other parallels between this fresco assemblage and the contemporary TR deposit (see Chapter 9).

#### 8. 4. 3. Shells, marine iconography and fish bones

The TR included thousands of seashells, many of them painted; faience models of argonauts, nautilus and flying fish (Fig. 62); a clay sealing depicting two triton shells (Fig. 63); and fish bones of unidentified species except for the shark vertebrae which, together with the weasel skull, Evans first believed to be the remains of a snake (Fig. 35) (Evans 1921: 517-522; Panagiotaki 1999: 78-81, 118-119, 128-129, 164 n° 230). The fish bones have been interpreted as possible offerings to ensure or thank for a good catch. As for the seashells and marine objects, they are thought to represent both fertility and the sea (Panagiotaki 1999: 80, 119, 130); it has been suggested that the thousands of bivalve shells in the assemblage were dedications made by a large number of Knossian worshippers (Hatzaki 2009: 26-27).

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<sup>35</sup> See <http://www.botanical-online.com/english/abortiveplants.htm>

<sup>36</sup> Pliny refers to the 'Galatian acacia', identified by Linnaeus and Fée as *Prunus Spinosa*: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0137:book=24:chapter=67&highlight=prunus>



Fig. 62: Faience models of argonauts and flying fish, and some of the many seashells from the TR



Fig. 63: Clay sealing of two triton shells from the TR

Fish and seashells including tritons were part of the Cretan diet since the Neolithic (Evans 1964: 238), fulfilling as well a symbolic role in the religious beliefs and ceremonies of the Cretan people throughout prehistory. A Neolithic ritual deposit from Phaistos yielded the earliest attested association of triton shells with an anthropomorphic image, the figurine of a periparturient female. An analogous association came to light in a Postpalatial domestic shrine at Kephala Khondrou: a rhyton in the shape of a parturient female and a triton shell (see Chapter 9). Used as ceremonial rhyta and trumpets (Reese 1987: 211;

Apostolakou et al. 2014: 329-330),<sup>37</sup> tritons constantly occur in Minoan sanctuaries and funerary contexts (Reese 1987, 1990; Soles 1992: 231-232). Octopuses, argonauts and fish are, along with lilies, popular motifs on the LM III larnakes (Fig. 64) (Watrous 1991). And marine animals (e.g. octopus, cuttlefish, tunny-fish) also frequently feature on the Minoan talismanic seals (Fig. 65) (Kenna 1960: 68), seemingly serving as amulets since they show no wear traces (Morris and Peatfield 1990: 37).

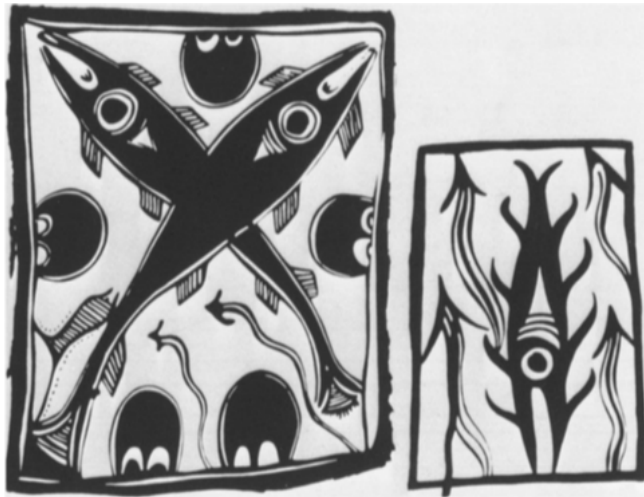


Fig. 64: Fish and octopus motifs on a LM III larnax from Adele in the Rethymno prefecture

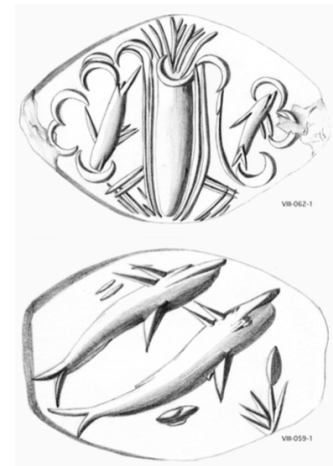


Fig. 65: Cuttlefish and fish motifs on two Minoan talismanic seals

The archaeological data suggest that in the East shells were dedicated to female rather than male deities (Panagiotaki 1999: 130). This is relevant in view of the cross-cultural symbolic connection of shells with female fertility, pregnancy and birth. The Chalcolithic birth deposit from Kissonerga-Mosphilia in Cyprus included a triton shell (Chapter 2, fig. 24). Shells were also involved in Mesopotamian birth rituals; one called *iškilla* symbolized the pregnant woman. The Sumerian ideogram for pregnancy is the sign ‘inside the body’ with the sign ‘water’ inscribed in it; the combination sign for ‘shell’ is identical: a body with water in it (Fig. 66) (Stol 2000: 51-52). At Mari, conch shells and objects made from seashells were found in votive deposits at the Temple of Ninhursag (Sanavia and Weingarten 2016: 337-338), identified with the midwife goddess Nintu (see Chapter 4).

<sup>37</sup> On a lentoid from the Idean cave a female blows a triton trumpet before an altar (Evans 1921: 222 fig. 167).

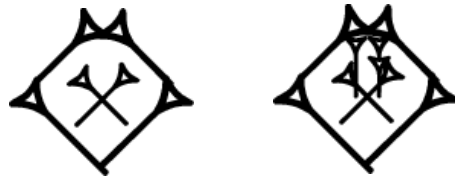


Fig. 66: Sumerian sign ša<sub>3</sub> (inner body, heart); and peš<sub>4</sub>, composed by ša<sub>3</sub> + a (water), meaning both ‘pregnancy’ and ‘shell/pebble’

In Egypt the nautilus, a symbol of fertility, was worn by pregnant women for protection (Karetsou et al. 2001: 97). Cowrie shell girdles, associated with notions of birth and rebirth, seemingly fulfilled the same prophylactic function in pregnancy and childbirth (Figs. 67-68) (Golani 2014; Quirke 2015: 60). At times such girdles included images of fish (Fig. 68); the tilapia fish epitomized (re)birth (Pinch 1982: 149 n. 10). Women in Egypt and eastern Africa still wear aprons with cowrie shells to protect the generative organs from miscarriage and sterility (Golani 2014: 76). In Classical antiquity the cowrie (Latin *matriculus*) was among the shells symbolizing the vagina/womb (Stol 2000: 52; Golani 2014; Hildburgh 1942: 185).



Fig. 67: Female figurine wearing a cowrie girdle. Middle Kingdom Egypt



Fig. 68: Amuletic girdle with jewelled cowrie shells, fish and lotus flower. Middle Kingdom Egypt

Triton shells, so common in Minoan sanctuaries, tombs and domestic contexts, play no role in later Greek religion (Reese 1990: 6). However, the Nymphs, ancestrally associated with water, growth and female transitions, received shell offerings, as attested by written sources (Larson 2001: 219), and by archaeological evidence at their sanctuary on the Athenian Hill of the Nymphs (Fig. 69) and at Iraklitsa Kavala (Dourou 2013: 199, n. 63); such shells have traditionally been interpreted as dedications made by sailors and fishermen,<sup>38</sup> like the boat models from Eileithyia's cave at Tsoutsouros before the ship hosting the embryo figurine was restored (see Chapter 6).

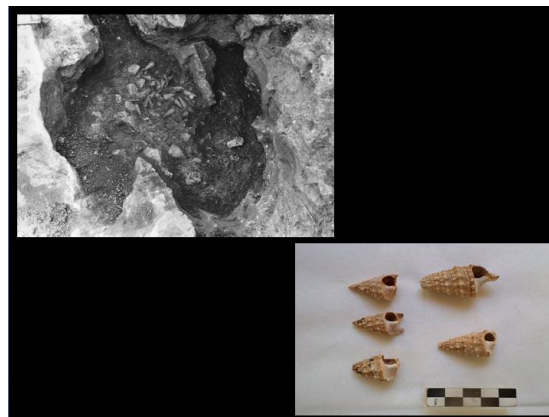


Fig. 69: Shell deposit found in a rock cavity at the sanctuary on the Hill of the Nymphs (Athens)

In modern Greece the first amulet that the *mammi* (midwife) made for the mother-to-be contained, among other reputed oxytocics, a small seashell and a snake's head (Oikonomopoulos and Oikonomopoulou 2012: 675). Seashells, which feature as measurement units for pharmacological compounds in the Hippocratic treatises (Andò 2001: 266; Von Staden 2008: 191, 193), were a popular medicinal ingredient in Near Eastern, Classical, and later gynaecological recipes (Steinert 2012; Lev 2003: 110). Dioscorides recommends pounded ostracites for menorrhagia (*Mat. med.* 5. 165);<sup>39</sup> Pliny, calcinated murex shells mixed with honey as an effective cure for breast affections (*HN* 32. 46); Soranus, pounded triton shell for cravings during pregnancy (Temkin 1991: 242). To treat pregnancy bleeding, Hippocratic and later medical authors (Cyranides, Alexander) prescribe pessaries or healing pads including another 'shell', the (pounded) bone of the

<sup>38</sup> Maria Dourou, pers. comm. 4-5-2017.

<sup>39</sup> Ostracites are fossilized oyster shells. Pounded oyster shells occur as an ingredient in traditional Chinese remedies for menstrual/uterine haemorrhage (Hou and Jin 2005: 188, 590).

cuttlefish (Voultsiadou 2010: 245),<sup>40</sup> a bone still administered orally by Cretan midwives in the 1960s as an “excellent remedy” for postpartum haemorrhage (Karatarakis 1962: 24).<sup>41</sup> Like seashells, the cuttlebone contains mainly calcium carbonate (Ivankovic et al. 2009: 1040), a substance improving gestational and birth outcomes when taken as a supplement during pregnancy (De-Regil 2013).

According to Athenaeus (8. 346 b-c), a painting of Athena’s birth by Cleanthes portrayed Poseidon offering a tunny fish to the parturient Zeus (Shapiro 1989), prompting Roulez to wonder whether it was intended to ease delivery (1861: 302); the silurus and another fish that the Greeks called *garos* were used in fumigation to respectively facilitate parturition and expel the afterbirth (Plin. *HN* 32. 46; 31. 43). A pomegranate and a mullet – in Greek folklore a fish deemed to foster conception (Papamichael 1975: 43) – feature as attributes of a goddess depicted as an Eileithyia on a 5th c. BC altar (Marshall 1910: 250). Eileithyia, who delivers “most part of the fishes from the heavy travail of spawning” (Opp. *H.* 1. 476), has definite connections with the marine world (Fig. 70) (Olmos 1986: 699). Painted seashells, possibly Minoan, and a later fish-shaped flask are reported from her sanctuary at Tsoutsouros (see Chapter 6).



Fig. 70: Eileithyia offers a dolphin to the father of the Nereids, the sea Nymphs. Attic red-figure skyphos, c. 440 BC

<sup>40</sup> During the Amfidromia, the ancient Greek ceremony incorporating the newborn into the family in which the midwife played a central role (Foley 1994: 50-51), it was customary to offer cuttlefish and octopus to the newly delivered mother (Dasen 2002: 10, n. 50); the high iron content in cephalopods (Bello 2017: 180) may explain this practice, as blood loss in childbirth often causes postpartum anemia. Hippocratic and later medical authors (Athenaeus, Aetius, Paulus, Alexander, Oribasius) prescribe eating them to expel the lochia, treat uterovaginal prolapse, menorrhagia and fertility issues (Dasen 2002: 10, n. 49; Voultsiadou 2010: 242-243, 245). In the Classical and Byzantine medical traditions the octopus is a recurring image for the womb, both in textual sources and on the uterine gems (Dasen 2002: 4, 8-9; 2011: 69).

<sup>41</sup> The cuttlebone occurs also in Chinese remedies for metrorrhagia (Hou and Jin 2005: 188, 193).



#### 8. 4. 4. Iconography of nursing animals

The TR yielded several faience plaques of female animals (cows, goats/agrimis) suckling their young (Fig. 71) (Evans 1921: 510-512; Panagiotaki 1999: 81-87), and the clay seal impression of a she-goat and a kid that Evans regarded as a ‘parturition scene’ (Fig. 72) (1921: 695, 696 fig. 518 d).<sup>42</sup>

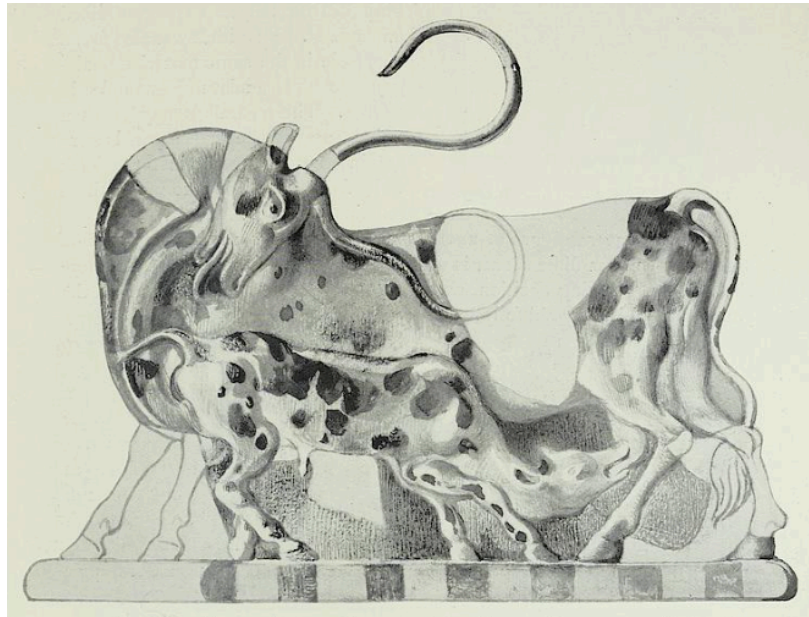


Fig. 71: Drawing of a faience plaque from the TR depicting a cow suckling a calf

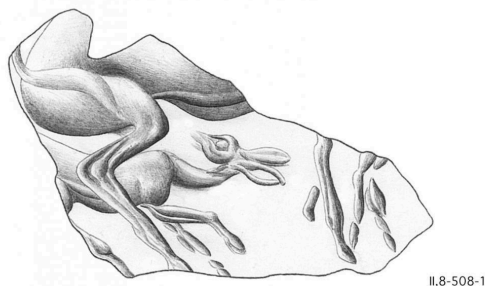


Fig. 72: Seal impression of a goatling about to suckle included in the TR

<sup>42</sup> See Panagiotaki 1993: 87; 1999: 105.

Panagiotaki sees the maternal/nurturing/kourotrophic aspect of the TR figurines reflected in the faience plaques with animals suckling their young (1999: 273). This iconographic motif, likely resonating notions of sustenance, fecundity, comfort, security and assistance in times of distress, had a broad distribution across Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt (Zevit 2001: 386); in the Near East it was associated with rituals aiming to prevent child mortality (Willett 2002: 36). The Sumerian Ninhursag/Nintu, who creates humans from clay through her midwifery skills (see Chapter 4), occurs portrayed as a cow suckling a calf (Cooper 1978: 16; Zevit 2001: 386). And so does Hathor (Evans 1921: 512-513; Zevit 2001: 386), one of the Egyptian deities most frequently invoked for aid in the twin crises of birth and rebirth. Called ‘Mistress of Birth’, ‘The One Who Saves Pregnant Women’ (Pinch 1982: 147-148), Hathor had healing capacity. The sick received treatment at her temple at Dendera (Hart 2005: 64). At Deir el-Bahari, where the most common amulet types had associations with birth and rebirth (e.g. Taweret, the duck, frog and tilapia fish), Hathor was offered anatomical votives (eyes, ears and phalli), and the so-called ‘fertility figurines’ (Pinch 1982: 143-147, 149 n. 10) that recent scholarship relates to ‘magico-medical’ rites transcending the domain of women and fertility (Waraksa 2008: 3).

#### **8. 4. 5. Deer antlers**

Three antlers of deer, an animal not native to Crete, were found in the TR (Fig. 73) (Panagiotaki 1999: 118, 172; Hatzaki 2009: 22). They have been interpreted as reflecting “an aspect of the natural world, or as talismans to ensure success in the hunt” (Panagiotaki 1999: 118). When considering the “shared peaceful atmosphere” of the animal plaques and sealings in the TR assemblage (Panagiotaki 1999: 87), it may however be pertinent to recall that hunting held a rather residual place in Minoan ideology (Krzyszowska 2014); the chase only rises to prominence in later Mycenaean imagery (Immerwahr 1990: 109), as an activity legitimizing (male) power and authority (Harris 2014: 53-54) closely connected with ruler iconography, which is notoriously absent in the Minoan repertoire (Krzyszowska 2014: 346). The low incidence of deer remains in Bronze Age archaeozoological assemblages on Crete is taken as indicative of the animal’s little economic value; deer must therefore have been imported into the island for some other reasons, possibly including its symbolism (Jarman 1996: 219; Harris 2014: 50; Harris and Hamilakis 2014: 99-102).



Fig. 73: Deer antlers included in the TR

This brings to the fore a ritual assemblage from Palakaistro, contemporary with the LM II-III depositions of puppies and mustelids; a LM III shrine yielded the head of a goddess figurine, a deer antler, a deposit of seashells, pebbles and a stalactite (Cunningham and Sackett 2009: 93-95). To be noted too is a series of LM I seal impressions from Zakro representing antlered deer heads associated with upraised arms and female breasts (Figs. 74-75) (Weingarten 2009: 144); from the same workshop is a contemporary group of seals, possibly apotropaic in purpose, that depict a squatting creature with splayed legs likely alluding to childbirth (Weingarten 2009: 142-143, 145) (see Chapter 9).



Figs. 74, 75: Hybrid deer-female being with breasts and upraised arms.  
Seal impressions, Zakro, LM I

In the Greek world the deer was emblematic of Artemis, to whom Eileithyia was often assimilated. Artemis displays the deer attribute at Brauron (Fig. 76), where girls underwent maturation rituals. At Sparta stag figurines were offered to Artemis Orthia (Fig. 77) (Pinney 1925), whose sanctuary also harboured Eileithyia's cult (Kilian 1978: 222; Calame 1997: 167, n. 238). As aforementioned, the association of deer (bones, antlers) and mustelid remains is documented at the Acropolis sanctuary of Stymphalos,<sup>43</sup> where Eileithyia was worshipped. The Etruscan Uni, identified with Eileithyia, and the Roman Mater Matuta and Fortuna, themselves presiding over childbirth/motherhood, commonly received dedications of mustelids and deer, antlers included.<sup>44</sup>



Fig. 76: Votive clay plaque of Artemis with a young deer. Brauron, 5th c. BC



Fig. 77: Lead deer figurine offered to Artemis Orthia. Sparta, 7th c. BC

It is therefore noteworthy that in the Hippocratic treatises the antlers, marrow and suet of deer are exclusively employed to treat female conditions (Andò 2001: 267, 294). The animal's suet and marrow recur in pessaries for uterine inflammations, ulcerations and moles, for promoting menstruation, conception and lochial discharge (Von Staden 2008: 185-186, 200-201; Temkin 1991: 222). Deer antlers, roasted/burned and administered

<sup>43</sup> See Ruscillo 2014: 251

<sup>44</sup> See Bonghi Jovino 2005; Bruni 2005: 21.

orally or in fumigations, were throughout antiquity a popular remedy to regulate menstruation (Hipp. *Morb. mul.* 2. 192, 195, 199; Diosc. *Mat. med.* 2. 63; Plin. *HN* 28. 77. 19). Pliny, who records several deer-based gynaecological recipes, mentions certain small stones found in the heart or uterus of these animals deemed very useful for pregnant and labouring women (*HN* 28. 77. 19).

According to Von Staden, “possibly because of the association of the deer with the cult of Artemis, the goddess of birth and of female transitions, and with Eros, substances derived from deer played a conspicuous role in the Hippocratic treatment of uterine disorders” (2008: 186). Inverting the causal bond, it may instead be proposed that the deer was an attribute of Artemis *and* other midwife goddesses because the animal belonged to the pharmacopoeia of their human prototypes, the wise-women.

#### 8. 4. 6. Arrow plumes

The TR included two arrow plumes carved in bone (Fig. 78). Evans thought they might be “dedications to the Minoan Goddess in her quality of Lady of the Chase” – later impersonated as Diktyнна/Britomartis, identified with Artemis – whom the archaeologist saw portrayed on a cornelian seal that represents a female with large bare breasts in the act of drawing a bow (Fig. 79). He suggested that the notched motif on the TR arrow plumes had a wider religious association in Minoan art because it occurs as an ornament on skirts of the deity; and applied to the wings of griffins and sphinxes, sometimes coupled with asterisks, a stellar symbol (1921: 548-550).



Fig. 78: Bone arrow plumes from the TR

Arrows function symbolically on multiple levels and are not defined only by their cynegetic (or martial) associations. Among the epithets of Artemis is *hekatē*, ‘far-shooting’, a meaning sometimes proposed for the name of Hekate (Berg 1974: 135 n. 32, 136 n. 37), herself a midwife goddess. The Eileithyiai are portrayed with quiver and torches on Argive coins (Fig. 80) (Farnell 1896: 609; Baur 1902: 23), leading Baur to argue that “arrows are suitable attributes for Eileithyia because labour-pains burn like the wounds caused by such weapons” (1902: 23). This is vividly illustrated in the *Iliad* (11. 264-272), in the passage comparing the staggering pain of an open war wound to the throes of birth: “... just as when the sharp arrow strikes a woman in labour, the piercing dart that the Eileithyiai who bring the pains of childbirth let loose, the daughters of Hera who control the sharp pains.”<sup>45</sup>

As attributes of Eileithyia then, the arrows are to be understood as symbolic representations of her *oxytocic power*, her capacity to bring life into existence; since the divine midwife *triggers* and *controls* the birth pangs (i.e. darts) symptomatic of uterine contractions, without which labour and delivery cannot proceed. The fact that in Homeric epics, the earliest surviving Greek literature, the piercing blow of arrows is an established image for contraction pains suggests that this metaphor may belong to an earlier, Bronze Age oral tradition.



Fig. 79: Cornelian seal of a bare-breasted female drawing a bow, possibly a goddess. LM I-II



Fig. 80: Eileithyia in her double form with quiver and torches, on a coin from the Greek polis of Argos

<sup>45</sup> Translated by Bettini 2013: 65.

#### **8. 4. 7. Astral iconography**

The TR yielded depictions of asterisks/stars on one of the faience girdles (Fig. 48), and a rock crystal disc with petal-shaped rays portraying the sun. The cross, probably originating in the East as an astral symbol, is represented in the assemblage by a marble specimen and by cruciform symbols on some of the clay sealings (Evans 1921: 514-517; Panagiotaki 1999: 122). Some images of Hathor show her in the shape of a cow covered with crosses or asterisks symbolizing the starry sky (Evans 1921: 513). Astral imagery is often connected to ancient deities presiding over the (re)birth cycle (see Chapter 4).

#### **8. 4. 8. Charred grain**

Lastly, carbonized cereal was found in some abundance in the TR (Evans 1902-3: 41, 1921: 497; Panagiotaki 1999: 122). In later Greece grain was customarily dedicated to deities protecting the crop/vegetation cycle (e.g. Demeter, Artemis, Athena, Apollo) (Rouse 1902: 45, 66, 383). On Delos, where Eileithyia's was one of the oldest cults, the goddess received in offering silver barley grains, together with the aforementioned silver votive snakes (Homolle 1891: 156).

### **8. 5. Evidence for a Minoan midwifery complex**

In *association with* the weasel skull, these TR materials strongly suggest that the Knossian assemblage was related to the worship of a supernatural midwife, whether conceived as a primeval ancestress/spirit or as a goddess closer to a theistic model.<sup>46</sup> Eileithyia, native to the neighbouring Amnisos cave, is the most feasible candidate. On the one hand, she is the only medical deity mentioned on the Linear B tablets from Knossos (Warren 1970: 375); an archaic healing deity, not one specialized in the patronage of human therapeutics like later medical divinities (e.g. Asklepios), but one belonging to a cosmology in which health and healing appear to be intertwined with broad notions of 'fertility' encompassing the creation/reproduction (birth-rebirth) and sustenance/welfare/continuity of all living beings. On the other hand, in historical times Eileithyia is the only

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<sup>46</sup> As Peatfield reminds, it may be ill-advised to project the Classical conception of divinity into Minoan Crete (2001).

therapeutic deity to display the attributes of the snake, pomegranate and possibly deer<sup>47</sup> *together with* the weasel (and the dog).

In ancient Mesopotamia midwives performed as priestesses in the cult of Nintu (Stol 2000: 76; Westenholz 2013: 248), usually interpreted as the Sumerian ‘mother goddess’ despite the fact that she created humankind from clay through her midwifery skills, not biological motherhood. Midwife-priestesses called *nu.gig/qadištu* (‘sacred woman’)<sup>48</sup> officiated in the cult of Ninisina/Gula, “the midwife of the mothers of the land, the great physician of (hu)mankind” (Stol 2000: 79, 112, 116) associated with dogs/puppies and gynaecological plants (see Chapters 4, 7); in the temples of Ninisina and Inanna, both bearing the title *nu.gig*, there was a special room related to birthing (Bergmann 2008: 38 n. 80). As argued earlier, the Ramesseum kit including the statuette of the snake-handling birth goddess Beset, most likely belonged to a midwife, who in her practice may have impersonated Beset’s healing and protective power. The title ‘servant of Heket’ – the Egyptian frog goddess hastening labour – may refer to midwives (Hart 2005: 67). At Cusae, where the Seven Hathors were worshipped, seven old women involved in the divination of fate performed as cult attendants (Meeks 1971: 41; Pinch 1994: 56), perhaps personifying the sevenfold midwife goddess. Wise-women held a prominent place in the therapeutic arts of Hatti, which accords with the preponderance of goddesses among Hittite healing deities (Beckman 1993: 36; 2016: 51). Textual sources indicate that Hurro-Hittite wise-women employed puppies and piglets in rituals intended to purify, promote conception and avert death (Collins 2006: 173-174). Linked to midwifery was the relevant figure of the ‘Old Woman’, the <sup>MUNUS</sup>ŠU.GI (Beckman 1993: 37; 2016: 51; Marcuson 2016: 410-413), a practitioner among others in charge of performing the snake and bird oracles by which the deities were thought to communicate with their human subjects (Beckman 2016: 51, 53).

The snake-handling figurines from the TR, presently interpreted as images of a deity (Goodison and Morris 1998: 125), deities or priestesses (Panagiotaki 1999: 74-75), may well portray similar wise-women serving/embodying their supernatural counterpart Eileithyia; therapists practically and symbolically fostering the continuity of the life cycle (birth-rebirth/renewal), whose sacred pharmacopoeia seems partially represented in the Knossian assemblage: the crocus, lily, pomegranate, rose, lotus, weasel, snake, possible

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<sup>47</sup> As suggested by the deer remains from the Acropolis sanctuary of Stymphalos.

<sup>48</sup> “The term *nu.gig* (Akkadian *qadištu*) has been translated ‘hierodule’, ‘cult/sacred prostitute’, ‘harlot’ and the like in spite of the fact that these women were often connected with childbirth and midwifery and that there is no evidence that they were prostitutes” (Karahashi 2017: 160).



plum, and deer. The largest TR figurine has disproportionately large ears, perhaps signifying far hearing, as Evans suggested (Panagiotaki 1993: 54). In later antiquity omens were not only ‘seen’ but ‘heard’ (Dillon 2017: 154, 198-200, 268, 307), and serpents endowed with the prophetic gift. The TR figurines could thus have a bearing on divination, a prototypical shamanic function of the wise-woman.<sup>49</sup>

As we may recall, in the myth of Sosipolis Eileithyia is skilled in divination through dreams; and her priestess at Olympia fed the snake (Sosipolis) dwelling in her sanctuary on honey cakes. The handling and feeding of sacred serpents associated with therapeutic-oracular deities was typically a female cult activity, often involving the offering of honeyed food (cakes) to the reptiles (see Chapter 7). Evans connected this dedicatory practice, and the modern survivals of domestic snake worship, to a set of honeycomb-shaped ritual vessels with serpents feeding on them (Fig. 81), which were found in a house beside the Knossian palace (1935: 154-158).



Fig. 81: Clay vessels in the shape of honeycombs with snakes feeding on them. Knossos, MM IIIB-LM II

According to Greek folklore, the healing god Asklepios was a snake-catcher (*fidopiastis*). Tradition says that when a woman was in hard labour he would ease delivery by attaching a snakeskin girdle to her belly; or by placing on it a live serpent, which henceforth remained in the house as the home snake (*spitofido*), a domestic protector never found in the dwellings of childless couples (Oikonomopoulos and Oikonomopoulou 2012:

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<sup>49</sup> Drawing from the analysis of ‘ecstatic’ scenes on seal rings and the bodily gestures of peak sanctuary figurines, Morris and Peatfield consistently argue that Minoan religion incorporated shamanic elements (2006).

696). Some scholars see the healing serpent of Asklepios as originating in the cult of house snakes and related deities (Ogden 2013: 343), first attested in the Aegean in Minoan Crete (Schouten 1967: 35-36), where the ophid is an exclusive attribute of female figures. The common assumption that in the Bronze Age the snake was a fertility and chthonic symbol (implicitly) lacking healing and mantic attributions may then be biased by the modernist conflation of women's social role with their biological capacity for childbearing; the construct that underpins mainstream interpretations of the TR figurines as relating to maternity-fertility-nature because of their bare breasts. This anatomical part capturing so much attention has eclipsed the *cultural* capacity of the figurines as snake-handlers, a type of ritual practitioner recurrently associated with historical iatromantic traditions in the Mediterranean.

On the grounds that the Cretan-born Eileithyia is the only deity later bearing the weasel, dog and tortoise as therapeutic attributes, we have argued for her cult at Petsophas, the peak sanctuary of Palaikastro yielding models of all three animals *and* gynaeco-obstetrical votives. At Palaikastro, the MM II weasel iconography and the LM II-III puppy and marten sacrifice in wells – one incorporating a natural cavern formed by an aquifer (Thorne 2007: 11) – are too likely to have a bearing on Eileithyia's worship. And perhaps also the LM III shrine assemblage from the site including the head of a goddess figurine, a deer antler, a deposit of seashells, pebbles and a stalactite; according to Gesell, concretions could be offerings to the ancestral cave deity Eileithyia (Gesell 1985: 64), who is connected with water (hence possibly with water-worn pebbles), and seashells (at Tsoutsouros). As for the occurrence of puppy figurines, snake models and gynaeco-obstetrical votives at Jouktas, they suggest that the goddess was venerated at the peak sanctuary of Knossos.

The concerns of peasantry embodied by peak sanctuary worship, namely the “fertility of the earth and flocks, the health and continuity of their human communities” (Morris and Peatfield 2001: 108), are consistent with the cult of Eileithyia's Minoan prototype. Cattle, goats, sheep, swine and birds are represented at Petsophas – and other peak sanctuaries (Jones 1999: 45-46). At Tsoutsouros, where in Archaic times the Kouretes were seemingly associated with the older Eileithyia, figurines of domestic animals occurred in all levels of the cave, indicating that the goddess protected both human and animal prosperity/reproduction (see Chapter 6). The Messenians had a temple erected to Eileithyia, and nearby a hall of the Kouretes, where they made burnt offerings of every kind of living creature, including cattle, goats and birds (Paus. 4. 31. 9). An inventory from

Delos records the customary sacrifice of sheep (ewes) to Eileithyia, a most ancient deity on the island also receiving in offering silver barley grains and snakes (Homolle 1890: 506; 1891: 156). In her primal form then, the midwife goddess appears to have fostered the (re)birth and welfare of humans, animals and crops alike; as is suggested by the charred grain and the depictions of suckling animals from the Knossian Repositories. Such considerations lend support to Nilsson's "well founded supposition that Eileithyia once had a fuller significance", and that one of her functions, "protecting women in childbed and bringing forth their offspring, ... had a more profound significance and a deeper foundation in Minoan belief" (1950: 523).

Peatfield argues that the peak sanctuaries developed from the Early Minoan/Prepalatial cult, centered in tomb complexes (see Chapter 9). And that the palatial elite centralized and appropriated the popular cult already established on the peak sanctuaries, so as to preserve its hierarchical position by adopting the social prestige linked to the goddess worshipped on these mountain shrines (1987; 1990: 126-130).<sup>50</sup> While this has been somewhat countered recently,<sup>51</sup> the weasel skull in the Knossian Repositories (MM IIIB-LM IA), postdating the weasel figurines from Petsophas and Palaikastro (MM I-II), could perhaps be an instance reflecting the palatial appropriation of the vernacular healing cult. These weasel figurines, along with the tortoise models from Petsophas, the evidence for joint puppy and mustelid sacrifice from Palaikastro and the puppy figurines from Jouktas, suggest in any case close Cretan connections with a most ancient Near Eastern therapeutic tradition; a tradition first illustrated by the female shamanic burial from Hilazon Tachtit (*c.* 10.000 BC, Levant/Israel) including two marten skulls and 89 tortoise shells, and by the possible shamanic grave containing the remains of a woman, a weasel and a puppy from Çatalhöyük (*c.* 7500-5700 BC, Anatolia), a site yielding plaster representations of breasts with embedded weasel skulls and birth-related iconography (see Chapters 2-3). Puppies were linked to the worship of the foremost healing deity in Mesopotamia, the divine midwife=physician Ninisina/Gula. And to that of Hekate, displaying like Leto the weasel as a sacred animal; two deities also patterned on the wise-woman whose cults originated respectively in Caria and Lycia (southwestern Anatolia).

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<sup>50</sup> In Peatfield's words, "all the 25 known peak sanctuaries have archaeological material from the Protopalatial period, but only eight have material from the Neopalatial period, suggesting that the others fell out of use. These eight remaining Neopalatial peak sanctuaries are associated with palace and urban centers that dominated the economic infrastructure of the Neopalatial phase"; pointing to the elite's attempt to control Minoan religion, "as an ideological counterpart to the economic control" (2013: 433).

<sup>51</sup> It has been observed that Neopalatial surviving peak sanctuaries do not map neatly onto palaces, except for Jouktas and Knossos (Adams 2017, cited in Morris et al. 2018: 51).

The Knossian Repositories constitute a pivotal assemblage, as the snake handling figurines appear to have Early Minoan forerunners (see Chapter 9), and it is believed that the Postpalatial GUA ('Goddess with Upraised Arms') figures are connected with the earlier palatial cult represented for instance by the TR snake goddesses (Prent 2005: 196). Gesell thought that the Snake Goddess belonged to an aspect of Minoan worship unrelated with birth because none of the Minoan and Post-Minoan periparturient figurines and vessels (see Chapter 9), that she identified as dedications to Eileithyia, were found in association with a snake goddess representation (1985: 64-65). But as repeatedly shown so far, many ritual artefacts and ecofacts having a bearing on the reproductive process, female transitions and interlaced metaphors of rebirth/regeneration *do not* explicitly allude to pregnancy-parturition; in prehistoric contexts, where no guidance can be sought from written sources, such non-explicit materials may only be gleaned at through comparative approaches, as has been the case with the Xeste 3 frescoes from Thera (see Chapter 9).

Our comparative study of Minoan votive mustelids and related finds points to the existence of a midwifery complex embedded in palatial religion, a therapeutic system associated with the cult of an archetypal wise-woman and her agents/*pharmaka* of (re)birth; plants (e.g. crocus, lily, pomegranate, rose), animals (e.g. snake, weasel, dog/puppy) and minerals (shells) practically and/or symbolically propitiating the regeneration-continuity of the life cycle. Other Cretan prehistoric materials that might be linked to this religious therapeutic complex call now for attention.

## Chapter 9

### **Within the Cretan universe of (re)birth Neolithic to Post-Minoan materials**

According to the methodological template devised in Chapter 4, representations of females explicitly alluding to the reproductive process, multiple deities/daemons and plants with a long history of use in the treatment of women's conditions are three categories of materials liable to belong to archaic midwifery complexes. In this chapter we thus address the Cretan prehistoric record diachronically to trace images that portray periparturient females, including figurines – other than those reviewed hitherto – and anthropomorphic vessels. We then look at the indigenous reinterpretation of the Egyptian birth goddess Taweret, the so-called Minoan Genius, whose capacity to reduplicate has received little scholarly attention. Lastly, we examine a number of ritual plants associated with females in Aegean Bronze Age iconography, which play a role in ancient transition/rebirth rites and have relevant or exclusive gynaeco-obstetrical applications in the Hippocratic treatises (5th-4th c. BC), the oldest corpus of medical writings in the West.

## **9. 1. Pregnant, periparturient and related imagery**

### **9. 1. 1. Neolithic materials (c. 7000-3000 BC)**

The first permanent settlers in Crete<sup>1</sup> were early migrant farmers arriving on the island with domesticated plants and animals (cereals, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs)<sup>2</sup> around 7000 BC, possibly from the neighbouring Anatolia (Evans 1968: 274; Broodbank and Strasser 1991). These first agrarian settlers established in the fertile coastal plains formed, together with subsequent incomers, the basis of the Minoan culture that emerged in the Early Bronze Age/Early Minoan period (c. 3000-2000 BC) (Broodbank and Strasser 1991; Nowicki 2008, 2014).

Like their counterparts in the broader Mediterranean and beyond (see Chapter 2), the Neolithic inhabitants of Crete fashioned figurines. Human and animal examples have been found at Knossos and a few other sites including grottoes (e.g. Phaistos, Ierapetra, Gerani cave, Peletika cave) (Evans 1921: 44-54; Evans 1964; Ucko 1968: 203-250; Tzedakis 1970; Orfanidis 1998; Gavrilaki 2017). Made mostly of clay and also stone, the anthropomorphic figurines include some distinctly male specimens, but the majority of

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<sup>1</sup> Mesolithic chipped stone assemblages including obsidian from Milos recently found at Plakias and Livari, in the southwestern and northeastern coast of Crete, attest to pre-Neolithic seafaring and Aegean maritime networks, but provide no evidence for the regular exploitation of those coastal areas by foraging groups (Strasser et al. 2010, Runnels et al. 2014, Carter et al. 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Ceramic vessels make their appearance on the island somewhat later, c. 6500 BC (Tomkins and Day 2001).

those that can be gendered represent females (Evans 1921: 45-49; Nilsson 1950: 289; Ucko 1968: 323, 335; Willetts 1977: 119; Mina 2008a). The application of pigment is restricted to female figurines and often used to emphasize the pubis, abdomen and/or breasts, probably symbolic references to pregnancy and the broader reproductive process, which may in turn have served as a metaphor for the life cycle; the link between females and decoration attesting to the central role played by women's bodies in the metaphysical ordering of the cosmos (Mina 2008a: 126-127). Noteworthy in the Cretan repertoire is the absence of kourotrophic representations (Ucko 1968: 434), namely the conspicuous indifference to the social role of women as mothers; images of nursing females appear only much later on the island, in the 1st millennium BC (see Chapter 6).

The commonest anthropomorphic figurines from Neolithic Crete portray a womanly form with the arms often raised to the breasts, squatting with the legs bent under the body, or crouching/sitting with the knees drawn up, postures regarded as variations of the squatting position (Figs. 1-6, 12) (Evans 1921: 45, 47, 49; Willetts 1962: 58, 1977: 119; Ucko 1968: 321, 323, 336). Some of these figurines are pierced for suspension, suggesting their use as amulets (Figs. 4-5); a squatting pendant from Knossos has the arms upraised (Fig. 4), in later Greece the auspicious gesture of birth emblematic of Eileithyia.

Squatting figurines frequently occur in the Neolithic record of Anatolia and mainland Greece (Evans 1921: 45), and are the prevalent anthropomorphic representations in Chalcolithic Cyprus. Recent scholarship tends to interpret the Cypriot specimens as images involved in (re)birth rituals, which are best illustrated by the deposit from Kissonerga-Mosphilia including figurines of crouching/sitting females – one with an infant's head emerging between her thighs – and a complete triton shell (Chapter 2, figs. 22-24). Hutchinson associated the squatting figurines from Neolithic Crete with parturition and tentatively related them to Eileithyia's cult (1938: 55, 57). Willetts also argued that the squatting/sitting Cretan examples likely depict the position traditionally adopted in childbirth (1962: 58). He saw a "relatively firm" connection between Eileithyia, an earlier Minoan goddess, and a still earlier Neolithic prototype (1958: 221), but did not relate the latter to the crouching figurines; he simply assumed the continuity of Eileithyia's cult since Neolithic times aducing that her role as helper of women in labour, patterned on the human midwife, is an unchanging function (1958: 221).



Fig. 1: Clay squatting figurine with arms at the breasts and zig-zag pattern. Neolithic Knossos, c. 5300-4000 BC



Fig. 2: Clay squatting figurine with arms at the breasts and dotted decoration. Neolithic Knossos, c. 5000-3000 BC



Fig. 3: Clay crouching figurine with arms at the breasts. Neolithic Knossos, 5300-4500 BC



Fig. 4: Marble squatting figurine pendant with upraised arms. Neolithic Knossos, 6500-5800 BC

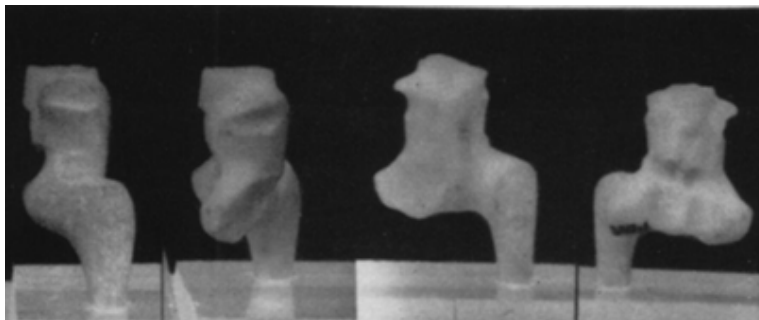


Fig. 5: Stone squatting figurine pendant with splayed legs. Neolithic Knossos



Knossos, founded in the Early Neolithic, produced the largest number of figurines (Figs. 1-5) (Evans 1921: 46, fig. 12; Ucko 1968: 203-245), but scant evidence for their use.<sup>3</sup> Some light on this issue comes from Phaistos, a Final Neolithic site yielding two ritual deposits which deserve attention for their uniqueness in the island's Neolithic record, and because they include types of objects that recur in later Minoan cult assemblages. A deposit retrieved beneath the Phaistian palace (Room 28) comprised a pregnant figurine in the crouching-sitting position with an emphasized pubic triangle (Fig. 6); a big lump of meteoric iron (*c.* 0, 5 kg.) (Fig. 7); many *pectunculus* shells (Fig. 8) and fragments of triton shells painted with red ochre; miniature vessels, some pierced for suspension (Figs. 9-10); vases with red ochre encrustations; and a group of astragaloi that might have been used for divination<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 11) (Mosso 1907a: 375-376; 1907b: 11-12; 1908: 147-159; Pernier 1935: 76, 105- 106; Nilsson 1950: 290; Vagnetti 1975: 88, 95; Todaro and Di Tonto 2008: 186-187, 190; Fiandra and Mangani 2009: Figs. 9, 31-32; Todaro 2012: 19).

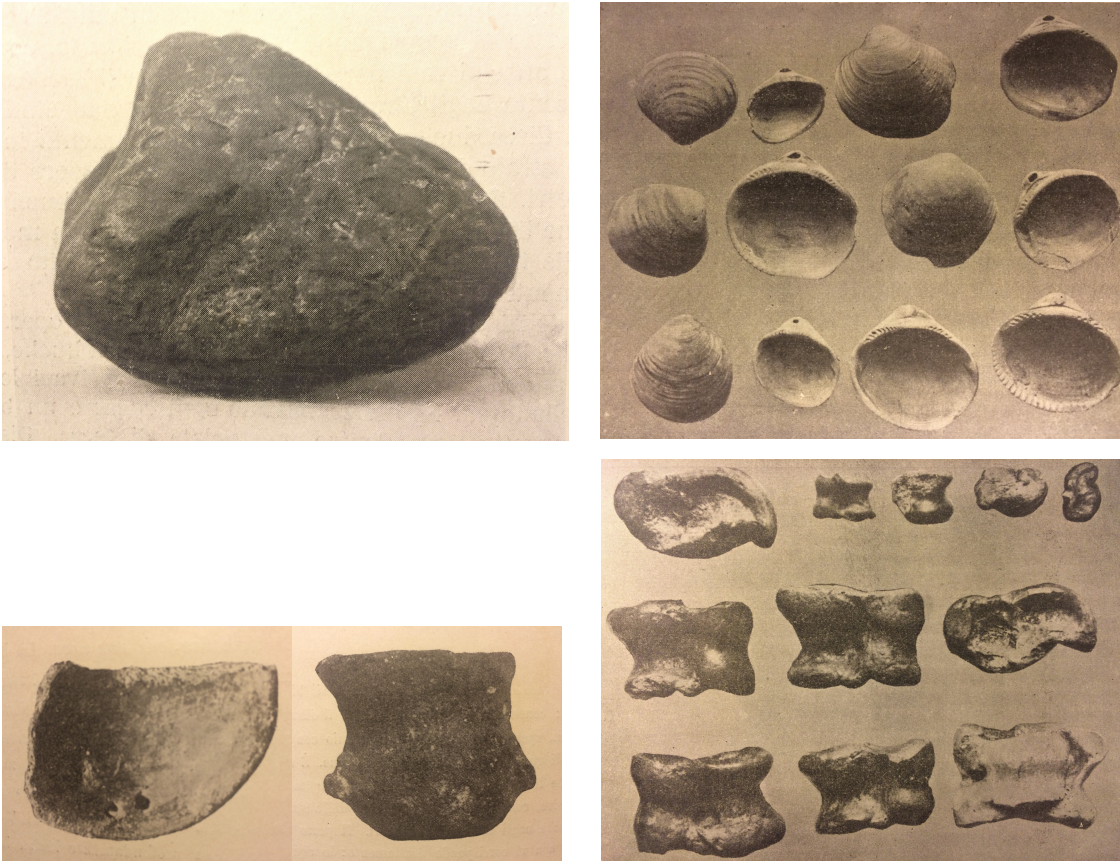


Fig. 6: Clay pregnant figurine in the sitting/crouching position with large incised pubic triangle. Deposit beneath the Phaistian Palace (Room 28). Final Neolithic period, 4500-3000 BC

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<sup>3</sup> Two possible ritual depositions are reported from Knossos: an Early Neolithic pit containing vessels, a squatting stone pendant (Fig. 5) and a marble male figurine, both with missing head and left leg (Tomkins 2006: 189-190, 2017: 98); and a Middle Neolithic female figurine with the same pattern of likely deliberate breakage (missing head and left leg), stained with yellow ochre, found alongside a sherd used as a receptacle for that pigment (Tomkins 2017: 98).

<sup>4</sup> Mosso wondered whether the astragaloi served as a game or for divinatory purposes (1908: 149), the latter a more likely proposition in a ritual context.



Figs. 7-11: Large lump of magnetic iron, *pectunculus* shells, miniature vessels – one with suspension holes – and astragali. Deposit beneath the Phaistian Palace (Room 28). Final Neolithic period, 4500-3000 BC

“This association of objects”, wrote Pendlebury, “puts one in mind of the later shrines with their figurines of the goddess and their votive sea shells” (1963: 39). Mosso, the excavator, associated the meteoric iron stone with the cult of baetyls (1907b: 158-160), which in historical times were deemed to be of meteoric origin, namely sky-fallen (Evans 1901: 118-119; Warren 1990: 205; Blakely 2007: 9-10). The ritual deposit was found in an area producing a reworked rock cavity possibly used to collect rainwater, hearths, and abundant debris of pouring and drinking vessels alongside many bones of domestic animals; materials suggesting that this spot on the Phaistian hilltop was an open air ceremonial space used for communal feasting (Todaro and Di Tonto 2008: 184-187; Todaro 2012: 18).

Beneath the Central Court of the palace of Phaistos came to light a fragmentary figurine stylistically paralleling that featuring in the cult assemblage unearthed below Room 28 (Vagnetti 1975: 22, 90). It depicts a crouching/sitting female with an incised vulva (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12: Restored base of a clay squatting figurine with incised vulva found beneath the Central Court at Phaistos. Final Neolithic period, 4500-3000 BC

Not far from this squatting image, in the same stratum beneath the Central Court (Vagnetti 1975: 21-22) and located near a plastered cavity possibly used as a water cistern, lay a cult assemblage similar to that retrieved under Room 28. It comprised miniature vessels, seashells, a complete triton shell painted with red ochre broken at one end (Fig. 13), perhaps to be employed as a rhyton; drinking/pouring vessels including a sieving pot probably used to filter some beverage (Fig. 14); vases possibly employed as ochre containers, as their inner surfaces were completely encrusted with this pigment; a dozen astragaloï found near nine small holes carved into the bedrock; and many animal bones pointing again to ritual feasting (Todaro and Di Tonto 2008: 189-190; Todaro 2012: 16, 19-20).

A dwelling located on the periphery of this second ceremonial focus produced the skull and selected bones of an adult painted with red ochre, placed on a floor lined with that same pigment; a rare funerary treatment pointing to the practice of ancestor worship at Phaistos (Todaro 2012: 22-25).<sup>5</sup> In the cross-cultural record red ochre – and red more broadly – is often connected with notions relating to blood, reproduction, birth and death (Wreschner et al. 1980: 633; Fox 1995: 220, 224; Mina 2008b: 226).

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<sup>5</sup> Other instances of manipulated skulls are documented at Neolithic Phaistos (Todaro 2012).



Figs. 13, 14: Triton shell with red ochre paint and sieving pot from the deposit retrieved beneath the Central Court of the Phaistian palace. Final Neolithic period, 4500-3000 BC

Ucko, who challenged early interpretations of the Cretan Neolithic figurines as images of goddesses, proposed that they could have served as children's dolls, teaching aids in initiation rituals, and vehicles for sympathetic magic in ceremonies to ensure conception, childbirth or the good health of offspring (1968: 434-437). Willetts believed that they may first have been employed in rituals related to menstruation and parturition, and then extended to every crisis demanding "the infusion of reproductive energy, the renewal of life" (e.g. other initiation rites, disease, death) (1962: 57). More recently, Mina has suggested that the figurines could have been involved in rituals marking personal transitions (e.g. coming of age, childbirth), ceremonies related to seasonal and productive cycles, or production and consumption practices (2008a: 130); the predominance of female figurines implying a strong concern with women's bodies and associated aspects such as pregnancy, birth and menstruation, that mirror cyclical phenomena in nature and may therefore have served as a common metaphor for the social and natural world (Mina 2008b: 225).

The fact that the prevailing Cretan figurines are variants of the squatting type points to the relevance of the birth icon in early indigenous beliefs. At Phaistos the functions of the periparturient image seem to have transcended the sphere of female concerns, since the

deposit containing the crouching/sitting figurine was located in an area that produced evidence for communal feasting. The cult assemblage found beneath the Central Court – not far from the other squatting figurine – comprised a very similar set of ritual paraphernalia and was itself associated with feasting episodes. It would appear then that codified ceremonies bespeaking of a structured belief system were performed at Final Neolithic Phaistos, and that the birth icon held a place in such rites. The presence of red ochre in both deposits, and the use of this pigment in the burial hosting a manipulated skull suggestive of ancestor worship, point to the existence of an integrated religious system spiritually bonding the living with the dead.<sup>6</sup>

The painfully scarce evidence for articulated religious practices at other Neolithic sites leaves unanswered the question as to whether the first permanent settlers of Crete shared a similar system of beliefs. On this issue one cannot advance beyond speculation, but a few observations may nevertheless be drawn from the materials reviewed so far. Some features/elements characteristic of Minoan religion are foreshadowed at Neolithic Phaistos, such as ancestor worship (Todaro 2012), communal feasting, the dedication of miniature vessels, the attribution of transcendent power to certain stones, the ritual use of seashells/tritons<sup>7</sup> and the symbolic connection of the latter with females. The deposit found beneath Room 28, including the periparturient figurine, bivalve shells, triton fragments, the lump of meteoric iron and miniature pots, was associated with a probable cistern, like the Central Court assemblage; a link eliciting the important ritual role played by water/liquids in Bronze Age Crete. As meagre as they are, these data from the island's earliest record suggest that Minoan religion might have developed from a common symbolic stock.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In his survey of the Prepalatial vessel figurines, Warren writes that “clear evidence for Cretan Neolithic religion is yet to be obtained” (1973: 138), but makes no reference to the Phaistian deposits.

<sup>7</sup> A triton shell with an open apex and red ochre from Neolithic Knossos (Reese 1987: 207) is paralleled at Phaistos by the well preserved example in the Central Court deposit.

<sup>8</sup> The interconnection between Cretan Neolithic communities is in any case ascertained. During its initial phase, Knossos was too small a settlement to have thrived without regular interaction with a larger, external demographic group (Tomkins 2008: 31); the study of the site's earliest pottery (*c.* 6500 BC) indicates that this commodity was already part of an extensive exchange network reaching as far as the Mirabello Bay (Tomkins and Day 2001).

### 9. 1. 2. Prepalatial materials (c. 3000-2000 BC)

The Prepalatial period witnesses a general trend towards social complexity (i.e. settlement expansion, introduction of polyculture, increased foreign contacts, craft specialization, emergent social hierarchy) (Watrous and Hadzi-Vallianou 2004a, 2004b). Reflecting this phenomenon is the institutionalization of communal feasting, which has been related to the construction of standardised paved Central Courts (at Knossos, Malia, Vasiliki, Myrtos), some equipped with storage systems; these Courts, interpreted as ceremonial centres, are thought to be at the origin of the monumental complexes emerging in the 2nd millennium BC, the so-called ‘palaces’ – though neither iconographic nor other data support the existence of Minoan royalty (Driessen 2002, 2003, 2007).

The evidence for Prepalatial cult practices comes mainly from the funerary complexes used by many successive generations; house-tombs in the north, and in south-central Crete tholos tombs (Branigan 1970, 1993; Soles 1992), vaulted chambers accessed by corridors which, as suggested by Goodison, could evoke “not only the cave but the internal female anatomy with round womb and narrow birth canal” (1989: 22). These collective secondary burials, where the careful retention of skulls may represent a form of ancestor worship, often have courtyards, paved areas, altars, and remains of eating and drinking vessels that point to the performance of extended rituals (Branigan 1970, 1993; Goodison 1989: 27-29; Soles 1992; Hamilakis 1998).

Marble/stone Cycladic figurines of nude females with emphasized pubic triangle and folded arms (Fig. 15),<sup>9</sup> as well as Cretan derivatives, are among the images found in EM tombs (Branigan 1971, Betancourt 2009, Stampolidis and Sotirakopoulou 2017).<sup>10</sup> It has variously been proposed that they represent dolls, divine nurses, psychopomps, protective goddesses (Betancourt 2009: 174), mourners, images used in ancestor rituals, or in times of danger, bereavement, sickness, childbirth and other crises (Goodison 1989: 6, quoting Thomson 1949; Hoffman 2002). Renfrew suggested that the large canonical Cycladic figures might portray a goddess associated with a life-supporting cult that would have aided the deceased and the living in rites of passage surrounding the two most critical transitions, birth and death (1991: 105). As for the Cycladic/Cycladizing figurines in the Cretan record, some scholars favour the view that they depict the indigenous goddess

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<sup>9</sup> Populations from the Cyclades and Anatolia arrive on Crete at the turn of the 3rd millennium BC (Betancourt 2003; Nowicki 2008, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> These figurines appear to have been used also by the living, as some are carefully mended (Goodison 1989: 6; Betancourt 2009: 174).

protecting both the living and the dead (Xanthoudides 1924: 23; Betancourt 2009; Kanta et al. 2017: 260), or that they represent ancestors (Mina 2003: 93). Explicitly belonging to the universe of (re)birth is an imported pregnant Cycladic figurine from a tomb at Koumasa (Fig. 15) (Mina 2003: 93-94; Renfrew 2017: 40; Kanta et al. 2017: 253-254, 264).<sup>11</sup> Also noteworthy are the Hagios Onouphrios type figurines with their characteristic splayed legs (Figs. 16-17) (Kanta et al. 2017: 246), which Branigan regards as deriving from the Neolithic squatting type (1971: 69, 75); one example from the burial cave of Hagios Charalambos displays possible postpartum creases (Fig. 17) (Mina 2003: 93-94; Kanta et al. 2017: 246-247, 261).

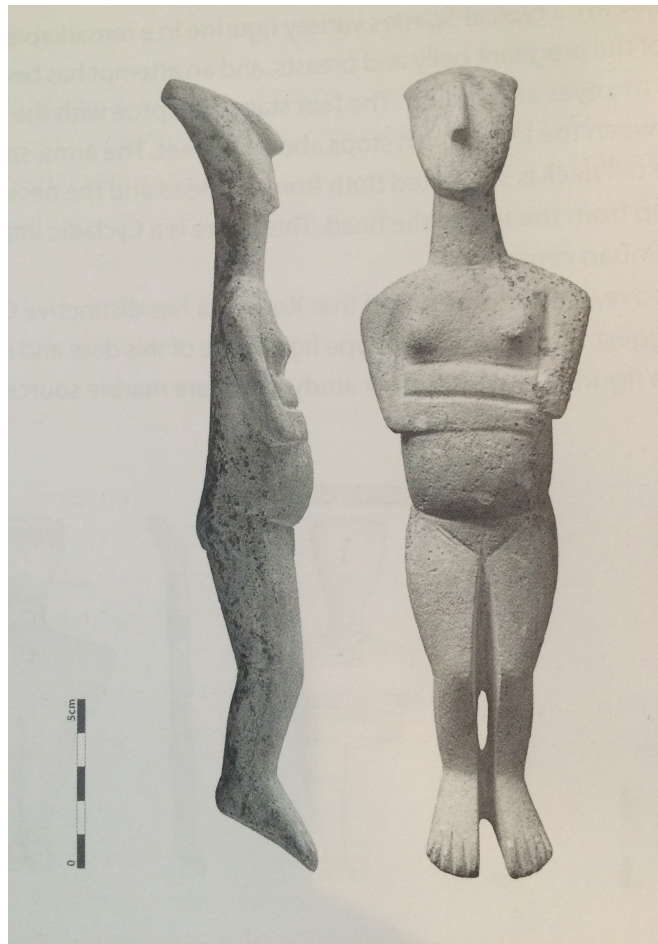
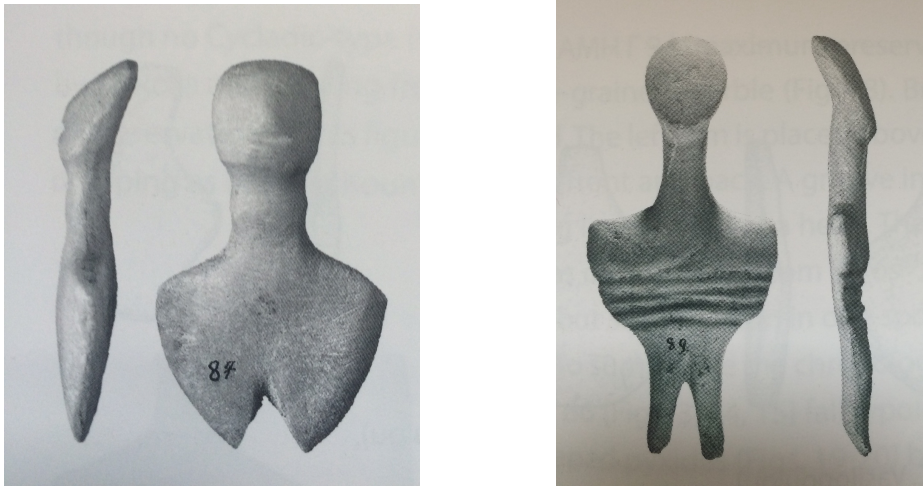


Fig. 15: Marble Cycladic figurine of a pregnant female from a tholos tomb at Koumasa. EM II

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<sup>11</sup> Visibly pregnant Cycladic figurines are rare occurrences. To our knowledge there is one specimen at the Archaeological Museum of Naxos, and another at the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens.



Figs. 16, 17: Splay-legged figurines of the Hagios Onouphrios type; to the right a specimen from Hagios Charalambos with likely postpartum grooves. EM I-II

The most remarkable EM anthropomorphic images are, however, female-shaped vessels found at various sites across Crete (Figs. 18-24), indicating an overall unity of Minoan religion in the Prepalatial period (Warren 1973; Peatfield 1987: 90; Morris and Peatfield 1990: 37) – as do elements/symbols characteristic of Minoan cult occurring in the EM record, such as double axes, horns of consecration, bull and bird figurines, rhyta (Branigan 1969; Koehl 2006: 280-28) and votive shells (e.g. tritons) (Reese 1987). The Prepalatial vessel figurines represent the female body as a container of religious significance (Goodison 1989: 42), and are related to the pouring of liquids, an aspect emphasized by the fact that they either hold a jug or have pierced breasts serving as spouts (Warren 1973: 142-143; 1988: 4; Branigan 1969: 34; Morris and Peatfield 1990: 37; Peatfield 1990: 125, 1995: 223).

Ritual action involving the manipulation of liquids is a structural element of Minoan religion (Peatfield 1995: 217). And so is snake cult. One of the vessel figurines found at Koumasa portrays a female with a jug and a dotted clay strip coiled about her arms, shoulders and neck (Fig. 18), which is regarded as the earliest appearance of the snake goddess (Evans 1935: 163; Branigan 1969: 34; Warren 1973: 140; Gesell 1985: 7, 35, 2010: 131; Kanta et al. 2017: 255; Rethemiotakis 2017: 576-577, 582); namely the forerunner of the snake-handling figurines from the Knossian Repositories, and the Postpalatial snake goddesses from Gournia, Prinias, Chania and Karphi (Warren 1973: 142; Gesell 2010). Koumasa yielded another Prepalatial vessel in the shape of a female with a clay band around her neck imitating a snake (Fig. 19). And Mochlos produced a



rhyton figurine with pierced breasts and a likely snake coiled around her head (Fig. 22) (Warren 1973: 139; Koehl 2006: 77 n° 33, 336; Kanta et al. 2017: 255; Rethemiotakis 2017: 577-578), which recalls the serpent crowning the polos of the largest figurine from the Knossian Repositories (Warren 1973: 140).



Fig. 18: The so-called snake goddess from Koumasa, a vessel figurine with a coiled serpent and a jug. EM II

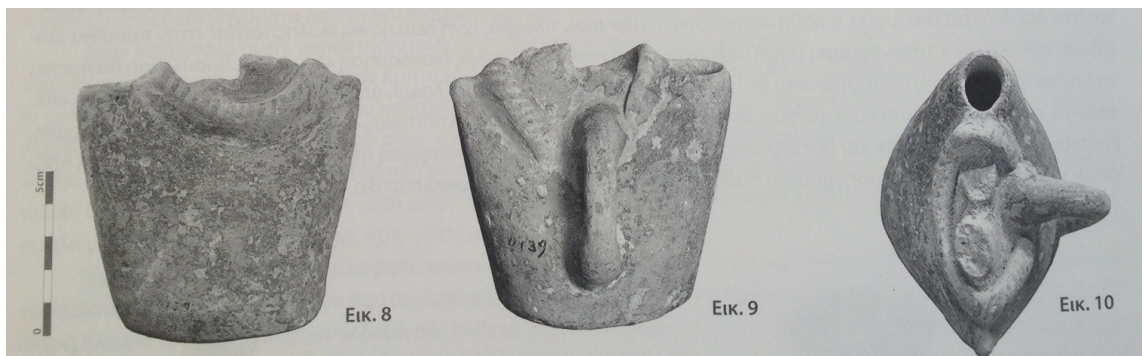


Fig. 19: Vessel figurine with a likely serpent coiled around the neck. Koumasa, EM II

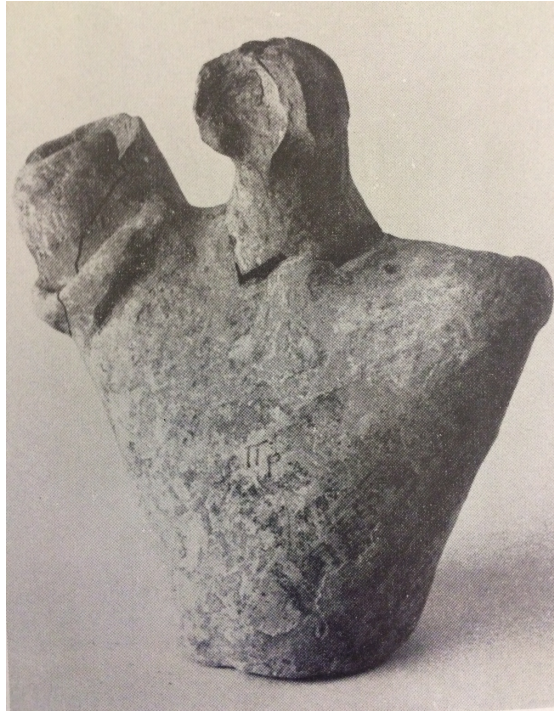


Fig. 20: Vessel figurine holding a jug.  
Koumasa, EM III



Fig. 21: Vessel figurine holding a jug with the  
arms at the breasts. Trapeza cave, EM III



Fig. 22: Rhyton figurine with a likely snake around the head and the hands under the pierced breasts. Mochlos, EM III



Fig. 23: Rhyton figurine with the hands incised under the pierced breasts. Malia, EM III



Fig. 24: Vessel figurine with emphasized pubic triangle and a jug.  
Myrtos Fournou Korifi, EM II

The Prepalatial anthropomorphic vessels, surveyed and interpreted by Warren as depictions of goddesses, were all found in tombs except that from EM II Myrtos Fournou Korifi (Fig. 24) (1973). This vessel displaying a jug and a painted pubic triangle, known as the ‘Goddess of Myrtos’, lay alongside eighteen vases in a shrine provided with a bench, a feature of Minoan religious architecture (Warren 1972: 86-87, 265) that survived into the Early Iron Age – as illustrated by the bench sanctuary of Pachlitzani Agriada, yielding a parturient figurine probably associated with Eileithyia’s cult (see Chapter 6). A room in the Myrtos’ shrine produced a human skull associated with a jug and a baking plate (Warren 1972: 83), finds more recently interpreted as evidence for ancestor worship (Driessen 2010, Soles 2010).<sup>12</sup> From the site is also a roughly anthropomorphic concretion (Warren 1972: 219; Gesell 1985: 7), which recalls cave cult. *To Kleisidi*, a neighbouring grotto containing EM II Myrtos pottery, harbours a tall central stalagmite, and a bench/altar that

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<sup>12</sup> Similar evidence for ancestor worship is the skull found next to a jug in a LM IB sanctuary at Mochlos, also yielding a presumed goddess figurine and a boat model (Soles 2010).

may have served a similar function as the wall surrounding the central stalagmite at the Amnisos cave traditionally identified as Eileithyia's sanctuary (Younger 1976) (see Chapter 6).

Warren postulated that the vessel figurine from Myrtos represents a protectress of the water supply (1972: 87). Both her attribute and pose, the jug held in her arm, are replicated by the Koumasa 'snake goddess' (Fig. 18), two other female vessels from Koumasa (Figs. 19-20), and the example with the hands at the breasts found at the Trapeza Cave (Fig. 21) (Warren 1973). Together with their emphasis on liquid pouring, most of the vessel figurines share a bell-shaped body suggestive of pregnancy (Alexiou 1956: 16; Gesell 1985: 64; Budin 2011: 275). Reflecting on Warren's interpretation of the Myrtos specimen as a guardian of the water supply, Gesell argued that her pregnant-like roundness and marked pubic triangle "imply a more general protectress of women and women's affairs" (1985: 64). Clearly associated with lactation, hence postparturient, are the rhyta from Mochlos and Malia displaying the hands under the pierced breasts (Figs. 22-23). These two libation vases imply the worship of a "fertility" or "birth goddess" (Warren 1973: 140, 143; Gesell 1985: 64) associated with the protection of the deceased, since both come from funerary contexts (Demargne 1932; Rethemiotakis 2017: 579-580); they elicit concerns about rebirth, like the rest of vessel figurines found in tombs – all save that from Myrtos.

These Prepalatial vases are mostly regarded as divine images (Warren 1973; Willetts 1977: 52; Soles 1992: 234). Early scholarship saw them as depictions of the Snake or Household Goddess (Soles 1992: 234), in Branigan's opinion the same deity worshipped at the peak sanctuaries at the turn of the 2nd millennium BC and subsequently incorporated to palatial religion (1969). For Warren, the vessel figurines represent "the Household Goddess and the Mistress of Animals and Nature or Fertility Goddess, who continued essentially into Greek religion as Artemis Eileithyia and Kourotrophos" (1973: 143). Following Driessen's argument for a Pre- and Protopalatial matrilineal and matrifocal society – based on an anthropological approach to settlement and funerary architecture (2012a, 2012b), Peatfield has recently proposed that a Prepalatial matrilineal ancestor cult could explain the vessel figurines; those from tombs, he suggests, may represent the ultimate maternal ancestresses of the lineages therein interred (2016: 8).

Noting that the Egyptian Taweret took the form of a vase (Figs. 39-40, 47-48), Goodison argues that in Aegean Bronze Age religious symbolism the vessel was metaphorically conceived as female, and envisaged as a womb representing both birth and

the rebirth of the deceased (1989: 42-43, 165). This is reflected, for instance, by the Minoan Prepalatial vessel figurines, Cycladic anthropomorphic vases, or the practice of burying the dead in pots/jars curled up in the foetal position (Goodison 1989: 42-43); the earliest evidence of this funerary custom in Crete is the Neolithic infant pithos burial from the Stravomity cave (Goodison 1989: 42), a sanctuary that has been related to Eileithyia's cult (see Chapter 6). The association of the vessel with the idea of rebirth/re-emergence from the womb is best illustrated by inverted pithos burials (Fig. 25), notably the over three hundred examples from Galania Kharakia (EM II-MM I) (Goodison 1989: 42-43). McGeorge sees this burial custom as “possibly the clearest and most unambiguous articulation of the Minoan's religious belief in rebirth and the hope for an afterlife” (2012: 291); since the head of the dead infant was placed downwards in the correct presentation for a foetus to be born, namely in the appropriate position to symbolically facilitate the child's rebirth (McGeorge 2012: 301-302; 2013: 12). As we may recall, the inverted jar is a common image for the womb in Classical medical texts and on the uterine gems (Chapter 4, fig. 44) (Ritner 1984; Dasen and Ducaté-Paarmann 2006: 240-241; Dasen 2013).

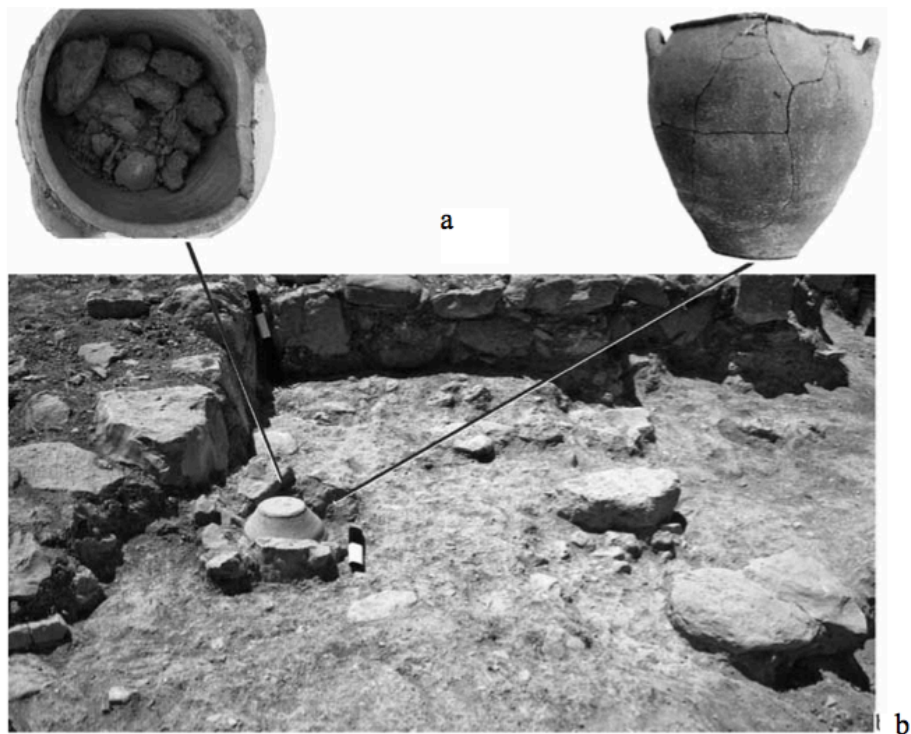


Fig. 25: Inverted pot burial containing skeletal remains of a baby.  
Petras, LM IA

### 9. 1. 3. Protopalatial materials (c. 1900-1700 BC)

The Protopalatial period witnesses the emergence of the first palatial complexes at Knossos, Malia, Phaistos and probably other sites like Petras; administrative centres of complex chiefdoms or nascent state-level societies, still relatively decentralized, which develop the first indigenous form of writing – the Cretan Hieroglyphic script – and are engaged in direct contact with Egypt, the Near East and Anatolia (Manning 2008: 110-112, 118-119). The peak sanctuaries harbouring a healing cult, already established at the turn of the 2nd millennium BC, flourish in this period. Among them are Petsophas and Jouktas, yielding Protopalatial gynaecological votives and other offerings that have a bearing on later midwifery cults (e.g. weasel and puppy figurines); materials, as we have argued, most likely related to Eileithyia's worship (see Chapters 7-8).

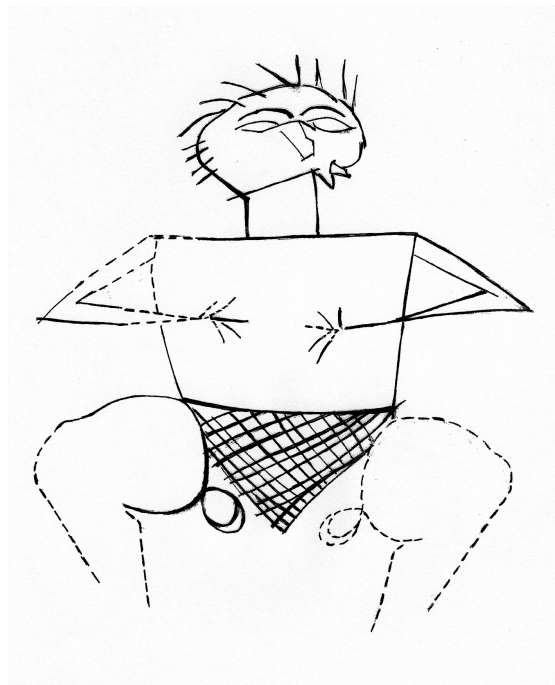
The religious association of the womanly form with pouring vessels, well documented in Prepalatial times, continues in the Protopalatial period. Incised on a MM II funerary jug from Malia is a female with the arms at the breasts, a large pubic triangle and widely splayed legs in the squatting position reminiscent of Neolithic figurines, who has been interpreted as a goddess of fertility/sexuality/childbirth (Figs. 26-27) (Demargne 1932: 308, 312; Rethemiotakis 2017: 579-583). Rethemiotakis regards this jug as a “vessel of eternal rebirth”, whose meaning lies at the intersection of the cycle of life (conception, pregnancy, parturition, lactation/growth) and the cycle of death, like the Prepalatial rhyton figurine with pierced breasts from Malia (2017: 579-583). Contemporary with the incised jug, and also from Malia (Quartier Mu), is a spouted vessel displaying the appliqué of a crouching parturient with the hands on the belly (Figs. 28-29) (Poursat 1980: 118-119, figs. 166-168; Karetsou et al. 2001: 58 n° 35).

Similar depictions of the squatting icon were fairly widespread in Protopalatial Crete, as is attested by a vessel protome and a horned figurine – possibly also a vase appliqué – from the palace of Phaistos (Figs. 30-31)<sup>13</sup> (Karetsou et al. 2001: 59, n° 36-37; Phillips 2008: I, 215, II n° 451-452); a contemporary – or slightly later – pendant from Knossos (Fig. 32) (Phillips 2008: I, 215, II n° 312); and two seals from Malia bearing the

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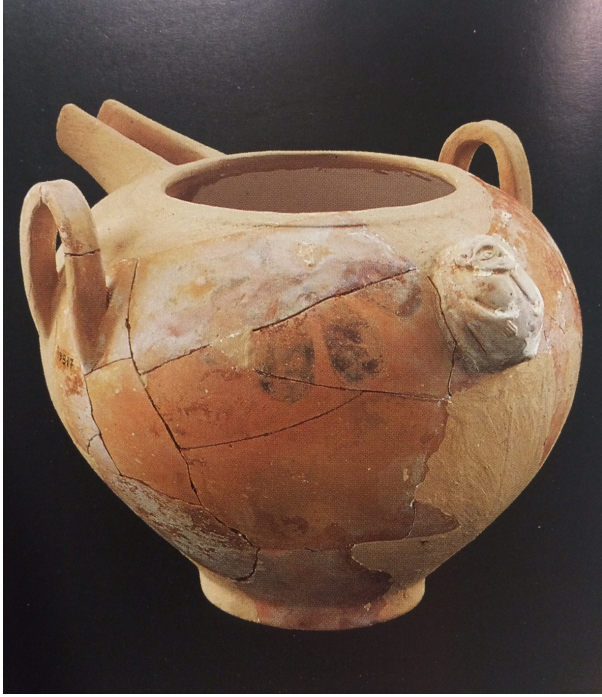
<sup>13</sup> It has often been assumed that the prototypes of the MM II spouted vessel from Malia, the protome and possible appliqué from Phaistos are the Egyptian stone vases known as *Gravidenflaschen* ('pregnant flasks'); but such vessels, confined to the 18th Dynasty, postdate the MM II finds by over two centuries (Karetsou et al. 2001: 59; Phillips 2008: I, 215-216).

image of a crouching female with upraised arms (Figs. 35-36) (Weingarten 2009: 143; 2015: 190-191, fig. 5).

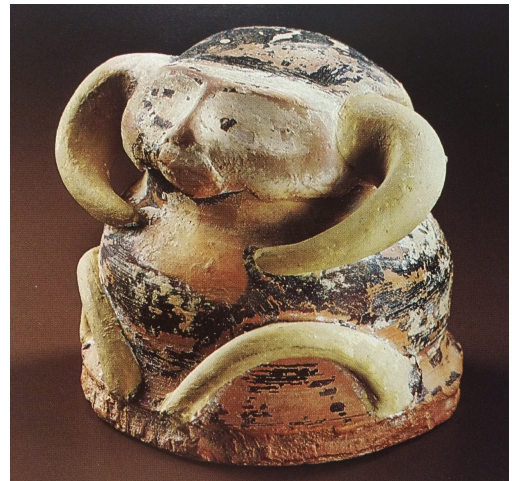


Figs. 26, 27: Jug displaying a squatting female with a large pubic triangle and the hands on the breasts, as drawn in detail. Malia, MM II





Figs. 28, 29: Spouted vessel bearing an applied squatting female with the arms at the breasts; and detail of the parturient appliqué. Malia, MM II



Figs. 30, 31: Squatting vessel protome and crouching horned figurine, possibly also a vessel appliqué. Phaistos, MM II

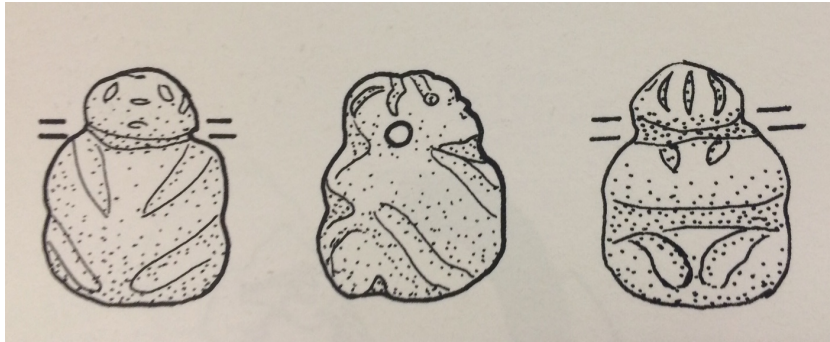


Fig. 32: Crystal rock pendant of a crouching female with the arms at the breasts. Knossos, MM II-LM I

All these artefacts are contemporary with the Minoan adoption of Taweret, addressed below. In MM II, when Crete is engaged in direct contact with Egypt, both Taweret and Beset – herself a goddess presiding over birth (see Chapter 8) – are imported into the island (Figs. 33-35); though only Taweret, subsequently transformed into the Minoan Genius, becomes a fixed feature of palatial iconography (Weingarten 1991, 2013, 2015). One of the aforementioned seals from Malia portrays a Minoanized crouching Beset with splayed legs and upraised arms (Fig. 35) (Weingarten 2015: 190-191, fig. 5).



Fig. 33: Earliest known depiction of Taweret on Crete. Scarab seal. Platanos, Tholos B, MM II



Fig. 34: Stone seal of Beset. Petras, House Tomb 2, MM IIB



Fig. 35: Minoanized squatting Beset with upraised arms. Steatite prism, House Pi at Malia, MM



Fig. 36: Crouching female with upraised arms. Seal, Stoneworking Atelier at Malia, MM IIB

As discussed above, the most common Neolithic figurines in Crete are those of the squatting type, some displaying an emphasized pubic triangle or vulva. The Prepalatial vessel figurines, interpreted as goddesses or ancestresses, swell into a bell-shape suggestive of pregnancy and are connected with the ritual pouring of liquids; two have pierced breasts alluding to lactation, and one a large pubic triangle – that from Myrtos, the only one not found in a tomb. The Prepalatial vessel figurines are therefore conceptually linked to the Protopalatial pouring vases – from funerary and other contexts – with incised or appliqué crouching females reminiscent of the Neolithic squatting figurines; a semantic bond that supports the identification of the bell-shaped Prepalatial vessels as pregnant/periparturient images. The diachronic symbolic link between these artefacts points to the continuity of a cult revolving around notions of (re)birth since the time of the first Cretan settlers. This continuity lends support to our contention that the Temple Repositories of Knossos, the most remarkable evidence of early palatial cult, is related to the worship of a midwife goddess/ancestress (see Chapter 8); a supernatural figure associated with the ritual handling of serpents since the Prepalatial period, as is suggested by the ‘snake goddess’ from Koumasa (Fig. 18) and, possibly, two other EM vessel figurines (Figs. 19, 22).

#### 9. 1. 4. Neopalatial materials (c. 1700-1450 BC)

The Protopalatial period comes to a close with the destruction of the first palaces by seismic phenomena at the end of MM IIB (La Rosa 1995). In the subsequent Neopalatial period, the palatial structures at Knossos, Malia and Phaistos are rebuilt on a larger scale, and smaller ones constructed at other sites. Knossos becomes the main administrative centre and holds supremacy in religious matters. Emerging now is an early state-level centralized system – with a new script, Linear A – which extends its cultural and economic influence beyond Crete, among other places in the Aegean to the islands of Thera and Milos (Younger and Rehak 2008a: 140-141, 152; 2008b: 169, 174).

In the religious iconography of this centralized system the dominant divine image continues to be female, but for the first time male figures of power appear on elite artefacts; they feature on carved stone vases used in ritual (Logue 2004), and some seals depict males in seemingly religious attire (Peatfield 2016: 11). In concomitance, explicit birth-related iconography, well attested in the preceding periods, virtually vanishes from the record, occurring only on a few Neopalatial glyptic finds. Beset, imported along with Taweret in MM II, appears to have left no enduring imprint on Minoan art, but her Minoanized crouching image (Fig. 35) develops into the frontal daemonic figures with broadly splayed legs engraved on LM I seals from Zakro (Figs. 37-38) (Weingarten 1983: 102-103; 2009: 142; 2013: 374; 2015).



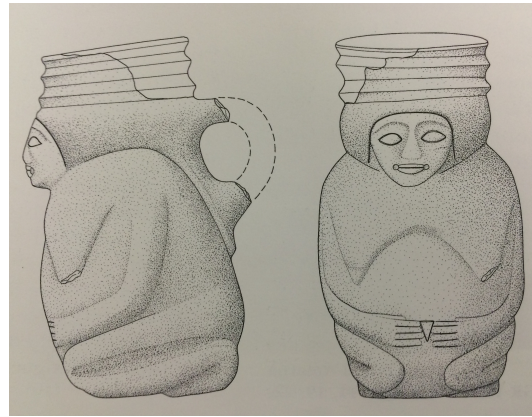
Figs. 37, 38: Squatting daemonic figures reminiscent of the Minoanized Beset. Sealings from Zakro, LM I

### 9. 1. 5. Postpalatial materials and later survivals (c. 1400-700 BC)

At the end of LM IB nearly all palatial centres are destroyed by fire, marking the collapse of the centralized Neopalatial society. Knossos comes under the control of a Mycenaean elite, either causing the generalized destructions on the island or exploiting an internal crisis to seize control. LM II witnesses the appearance of unprecedented warrior tombs (Preston 2008: 310-316) and ruler iconography (Driessen 2003: 58). By LM IIIA a new administrative tool emerges in the record, Linear B, the earliest Greek script (Driessen 2008; Preston 2008: 311).

In Postpalatial times the island undergoes a process of social and political fragmentation. The most relevant features of religion in this period are the broad distribution of the Goddess-with-Upraised-Arms (GUA) cult, and the individualization of the large terracotta GUA figures into distinctive separate personifications, suggested by the different Minoan symbols crowning their heads (e.g. horns of consecration, birds, snakes); a conceptual fragmentation which appears to be a popular response against the centralizing religious trend of the Neopalatial political order (Peatfield 1994: 28, 35; 2016: 13).

Significantly, in concomitance with the breakdown of the preceding early state system, the popular birth icon resurfaces in the record associated with pouring vessels. A LM II-III A imported *Gravidenflasche* ('pregnant flask') from the Knossian harbour of Katsambas depicts a crouching parturient with the hands on the womb (Figs. 39-40); this type of female-shaped vase was seemingly used in Egypt (18th Dynasty) to contain medicinal ointments pertaining to the management of childbirth. The example found at Katsambas, unprovenanced but possibly from the site's cemetery, displays anthropomorphic features of Taweret (see Fig. 47). The vessel was adapted to Minoan use, namely transformed into a rhyton by piercing an opening at the place of the vagina (Karetsou et al. 2001: 262 n° 262-263; Koehl 2006: 208 n° 1092; Phillips 2008: II, 69-70 n° 119). Strikingly similar to this *Gravidenflasche* is another Egyptian import, a vase in the form of a crouching monkey with the hands on the belly from a LM IIIA tomb at Hagia Triada (Fig. 41) (Karetsou et al. 2001: 253 n° 251); as we shall see, monkeys appear to have had strong connotations to females and the reproductive process in Minoan Crete, as was also the case in Egypt and the Near East.



Figs. 39-40: Egyptian stone *Gravidenflasche* with anthropomorphic features of Taweret, adapted to Minoan religious use; to allow the pouring of libations, a hole was pierced at the place of the vagina. Katsambas, LM II-III A



Fig. 41: Alabaster vase of a squatting monkey with the paws on the pregnant belly, recalling the *Gravidenflasche* from Katsambas. Hagia Triada, LM III A

The largest house at Kephala Khondrou, a site neighbouring Tsoutsouros, yielded the lower part of a squatting rhyton figurine with a pierced vagina (Fig. 42), a triton shell, a snake tube, and other artefacts probably belonging to a domestic shrine (LM IIIA2-B) (Platon 1957; Gesell 1976: 252-253; 1985: 50, 82; Koehl 2006: 77-78 n° 37; Phillips 2008: 70-71 n° 123). The connection of the birth icon with triton shells is first attested on the island in the Neolithic period. As for snake tubes, they are cult objects associated with the worship of Goddess-with-Upraised-Arms figures (see Chapter 6).



Fig. 42: Rhyton of a squatting female with pierced vagina. Kephala Khondrou, LM IIIA2-B

A LM IIIA2-B tomb at Gournia produced a rhyton portraying a squatting/sitting parturient with a hand raised to the head and the other placed on the womb (Fig. 43) (Hawes 1908: 23a, Pl. 10; Gesell 1985: 50; Phillips 2008: 50-51 n° 78); a gesture replicated by Early Iron Age pregnant figurines from Eileithyia's cave at Tsoustouros (Fig. 44) (Kanta 2011a: 32). The rhyton figurine from Gournia has delicately rendered genitals showing the rare depiction of the clitoris, which is paralleled on a later find probably associated with Eileithyia's cult, the parturient figurine from Pachlitzani Agriada with the arms raised to the breasts (Chapter 6, fig. 44) (Alexiou 1956); a gesture characteristic of the squatting Neolithic figurines, displayed by several Prepalatial vessel figurines and Protopalatial vases with incised/appliqué crouching images, which survives into the Early Iron Age.



Figs. 43, 44: LM IIIA2-B squatting rhyton with pierced/dilated vagina from Gournia; and Early Iron Age pregnant figurine from Eileithyia's cave at Tsoutsouros displaying the same arm-gesture

Also perpetuated into the early 1st millennium BC is the squatting figurine vessel, as attested by the example from a Geometric tomb at Adhromyloi with a pubic triangle in relief, an incised vulva and a spout in the shape of a water-pot (hydria) held atop the head (Fig. 45) (Droop 1905-1906: 57, fig. 23 n° 3243; Alexiou 1956: 15; Kanta 2011a: 33 fig. 17 η).<sup>14</sup> This vase brings to mind the Prepalatial vessel figurines holding a jug. Like these and the Postpalatial rhyta from Katsambas, Kephala Khondrou and Gournia (Alexiou 1956: 15-19), the vessel from Adhromyloi is often interpreted as a deity of fecundity (Karetsou et al. 2001: 264); implying the continuity of worship of a fertility/birth goddess into the Postpalatial period and the Early Iron Age (Alexiou 1956; Gesell 1985: 64). Alexiou identifies this birth deity with Eileithyia, whose cult survives into Hellenic times at Tsoutsouros/Inatos, Lato, Aptera, Eleutherna and probably Pachlitzani Agriada (1956: 17) (see Chapter 6).

<sup>14</sup> This vessel is sometimes described as found at Hagia Triada and/or assigned a LM IIIC/Subminoan date (Karetsou et al. 2001: 263 n° 264; Phillips 2008: 25 n° 35).



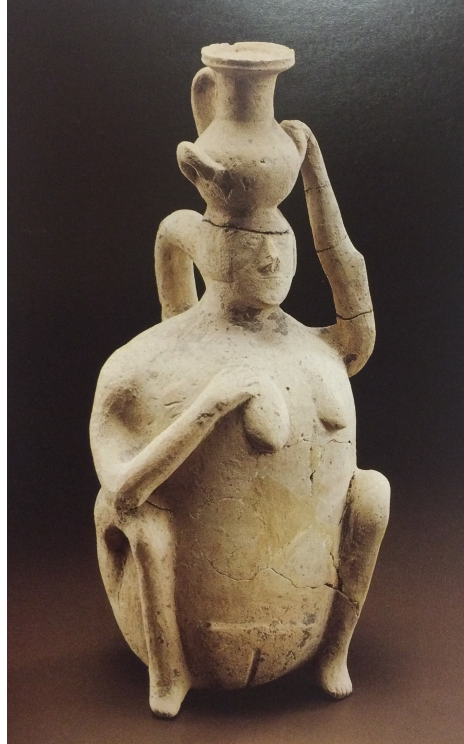


Fig. 45: Squatting vessel with an incised vulva and a water-pot on the head. Adhromyloi, Geometric period

Gesell interprets the parturient figurines found in tombs and shrines as surely offerings to Eileithyia, and suggests that, given her ancestral connection with cave cult, the goddess may also be the recipient of the concretions taken from grottoes to other Minoan sanctuaries (1985: 50, 64). Other scholars have related the worship of concretions and/or baetyls to the cult of Rhea (Evans 1904-1905: 11; Warren 1990: 206), who according to myth substituted her newborn Zeus for a stone to save the child from his progeny-devouring father Kronos (see Chapter 6). Warren argues that baetyls and concretions should be regarded as members of a continuum, since both “had the same function as forms of or vehicles for possession by divine power”; a continuum, he suggests, that “may indeed have extended beyond aniconic figures to the iconic”, such as the Prepalatial vessel figurines and the Postpalatial GUA figures (1990: 202).

The data examined thus far, taken together with the material from the previous chapter, suggest that an archetypal ancestress/goddess of likely Neolithic ancestry fostering reproduction and related metaphors of rebirth-continuity lies at the core of Minoan religion; a spiritual helper associated with water/liquid and the snake, two attributes encapsulating broad overlapping notions of fertility, renewal, cleansing and healing.

## 9. 2. Taweret and the (multiple) Minoan Genius

Let us now come back to Taweret, the Egyptian goddess affording protection against illness (Müller 1918: 60) and the hazards of parturition adopted by the Minoans in the Protopalatial period, who is portrayed as a standing pregnant hippopotamus, sometimes with a lion's head, and often carrying a crocodile on her back. Taweret, meaning 'The Great One', was a deity of Old Kingdom ancestry identified with Ipy/Ipt, translated as 'wet-nurse' or 'midwife'; with Reret, 'The Sow' (Weingarten 1991: 4, 10; Phillips 2008: I, 156, 158); and in Roman Egypt probably with the healing goddess Hygieia (Dunand 1975: 179; Thiers 2013: 161). While she had no formalized/official cult, Taweret was worshipped by all social classes, most popular among the common people (Weingarten 1991: 11; Capel and Markoe 1996: 130; Benzi 2009: 10), and the favourite amulet of Egyptian women until late antiquity (Pinch 1993: 292-295). In the Middle and New Kingdom she regularly occurs in domestic contexts protecting the household and its continuity, often assisted by the childbirth dwarf god Bes (Robins 1993: 163; Ritner 2012: 179-182; Kozma 2006: 309).

Taweret is a recurring motif on Middle Kingdom midwifery equipment, such as birth wands (Fig. 46)<sup>15</sup> and bricks<sup>16</sup> – employed in the birth-postpartum process and (re)birthing ceremonies extended beyond the sphere of human reproduction (e.g. foundation and funerary rituals). The goddess features on the 'paddle-dolls' (Chapter 4, figs. 3-4) – wooden figurines found in shrines and tombs thought to have been used in apotropaic and healing rites (see Chapter 4). And she is depicted on many other media, appearing in the form of figurines, statues and vessels (Robins 1993: 85, 95, 163; Capel and Markoe 1996: 132; Phillips 2008: I, 159); the latter include the New Kingdom *Gravidenflasche* (Figs. 39-40, 47) – some containing remains of an oil used in medicine (Spieser 2004: 54-58) – and vessel figurines with pierced breasts (Fig. 48) (Weingarten 1991: 11; Houser-Wegner 2002: 352; Hart 2005: 155).

Commonly bearing the epithets "She Who Removes Water" – which may allude to the birth process – and "The One Who is in the Waters of Nun" (Houser-Wegner 2002: 352), Taweret personifies the waters of the primeval ocean (Nun) from which the world

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<sup>15</sup> Birth wands, commonly made of hippopotamus ivory, sometimes bear the inscription "protection by night and protection by day" and display worn ends suggesting they might have been used to draw protective circles around mother and child (Teeter 2011: 169; Weingarten 2015: 182).

<sup>16</sup> Taweret is represented on the birth brick from Abydos (Wegner 2009: 454).

was created (Karetsou et. al. 2001: 152). The goddess ensures the watering and growth of plants (Sambin 1989: 83, 92) and is associated with lustration (Weingarten 1991: 11); she oversees cleansing/purification in rites of passage such as childbirth (Karetsou et al. 2001: 152), presiding as well over the rebirth of the dead (Capel and Markoe 1996: 132).



Fig. 46: Taweret holding protective knives, with a crocodile on the back – her standard composite form – on a birth wand made of hippopotamus ivory. Middle Kingdom Egypt, c. 1980-1640 BC



Fig. 47: Drawing of a *Gravidenflasche* with anthropomorphic features of Taweret. Egypt, 18th Dynasty, c. 1550-1292 BC

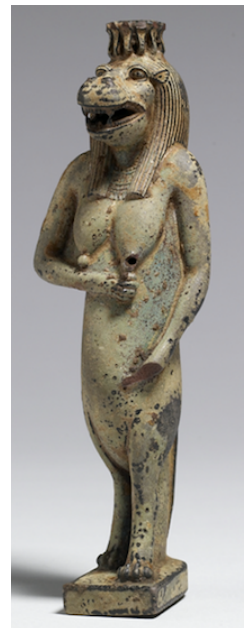
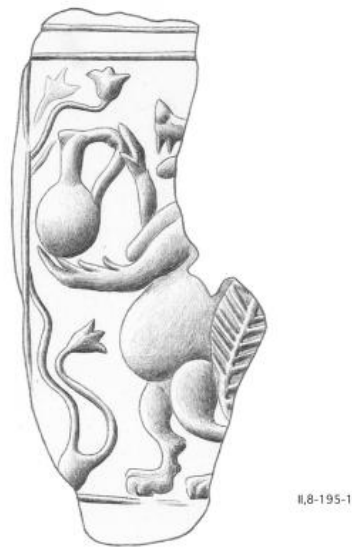


Fig. 48: Taweret-shaped flask with a pierced nipple. Egypt, 4th-3rd c. BC

Taweret's popularity in Egypt suggests that she was imported into Crete by non-elite people, such as sailors and merchants (Benzi 2009: 10). Be it as it may, the Genius resulting from her Minoan adaptation does not seem to have become an image popular among the common islanders.<sup>17</sup> This daemonic creature, surviving in Aegean art until the end of the Bronze Age, occurs only on artefacts circulating among Minoan and later Mycenaean palatial elites, mainly glyptic media (Rehak 1995; Hitchcock 2009: 100-102), and occasional ivories, stone and bronze vessels (Baxevasi-Kouzioni and Markoulaki 1996; Darcque and Baurain 1983; Weingarten 2010).

When first appearing in the Protopalatial record, the Genius is still pregnant and breasted like Taweret, hence female (Figs. 49-50). However, by LM I it becomes a wasp-shaped creature with neither belly nor breasts (Gill 1964: 2-3; Weingarten 1991: 7; 2010: 97-98; Weingarten and Hallager 1993: 12, 16), often wearing the cinch belt associated with Minoan males (Figs. 51, 53, 56, 58-61) (Hitchcock 2009: 98); but whether henceforth the daemon is actually male (Blakolmer 2015a: 30, 2015b: 200) or gender ambiguous (Hitchcock 2009) remains an open question.



Figs. 49, 50: Seals depicting an ewer-bearing Genius associated with plants, still pregnant, like the daemon's prototype Taweret. MM II

<sup>17</sup> There are no known representations of the Genius in the round (Gill 1964: 14).



Fig. 51: Two ewer-bearing Genii before an altar with horns of consecration and a plant. Lentoid, Vafio, LH IIA

The Genius retains, nonetheless, some of Taweret's attributions. Her intimate connection with water and lustration is transformed into the libation jug commonly held by the Minoan daemon (Figs. 49-51, 53, 58-61), who, like Taweret, is depicted in hippopotamus and leonine form (Figs. 49-50, 52-55, 58-61), occurring also with the head of an ass in Creto-Mycenaean iconography (Figs. 51, 57) (Weingarten 1991: 10; 2010: 97; Weingarten and Hallager 1993: 12). Like its Egyptian prototype, the Genius is frequently associated with plants,<sup>18</sup> performing as waterer and promoter of vegetation/fertility (Figs. 49-51, 58) (Evans 1935: 444-445). Its role as a libation bearer/pourer, defined in the Protopalatial period when the (then female) daemon is primarily associated with fertility and moisture, remains unaltered until the end of the Bronze Age (Rehak 1995: 215, 217).

Decisively Minoan developments, perpetuated in Creto-Mycenaean imagery, are the association of the Genius' lustral function with baetyls and pillars (Figs. 52-53) (Evans 1901: 117-118; Warren 1990: 193-194; 1995: 3; Weingarten and Hallager 1993: 13-14, 18), and new activities performed by the daemon from Neopalatial times onwards, such as hunting and carrying sacrificial animals (Figs. 54-56) (Weingarten and Hallager 1993: 18; Rehak 1995: 219-223).

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<sup>18</sup> Connecting Taweret with vegetation are Middle Kingdom hippopotamus figurines decorated with aquatic plants and lotuses (Keimer 1929; Sambin 1989: 82-83); plants also feature with the goddess on New Kingdom cosmetic/medicinal kohl jars (Sambin 1989: 83; Sparks 2006).



Fig. 52: A Genius performing a baetylic ritual. Roundel, Malia, MM IIIB



Fig. 53: Ewer bearing Genii associated with pillars. Glass plaque, Mycenae, LH IIB-III A

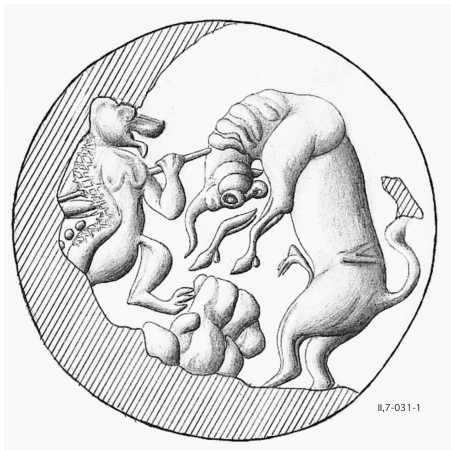


Fig. 54: A hunting Genius. Sealing, Kato Zakros, LM I



Fig. 55: A Genius assists a male hunter. Cylinder seal, Kakovatos, LH II

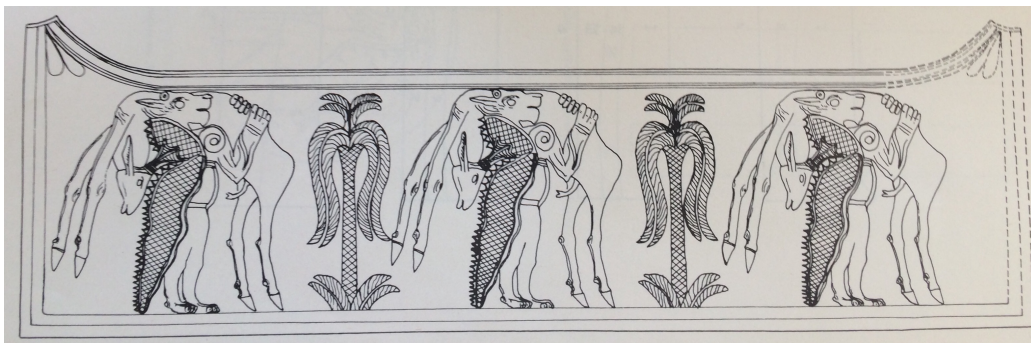


Fig. 56: Three Genii carrying dead animals. Ivory plaque, Thebes, LH IIIB

The Genius fulfils the role of assistant to female and male figures of authority (Figs. 55, 57-58), variously interpreted as goddesses, humans embodying the divinity, gods, heroes or rulers (Evans 1935: 444; Gill 1964: 6; Weingarten 1991: 10; 2013: 374; Rehak 1995: 223-229; Blakolmer 2015a: 32); the evidence suggests that the daemon is first connected with female figures (LM IA-B), its association with males occurring somewhat later (LM II/LH IIB) (Rehak 1995: 223). On a sealing from Pylos two Genii attend a goddess with upraised arms (Fig. 57), who has been related to the deity worshipped at the palace of Knossos (Rehak 1995: 225-226, fig. 8).

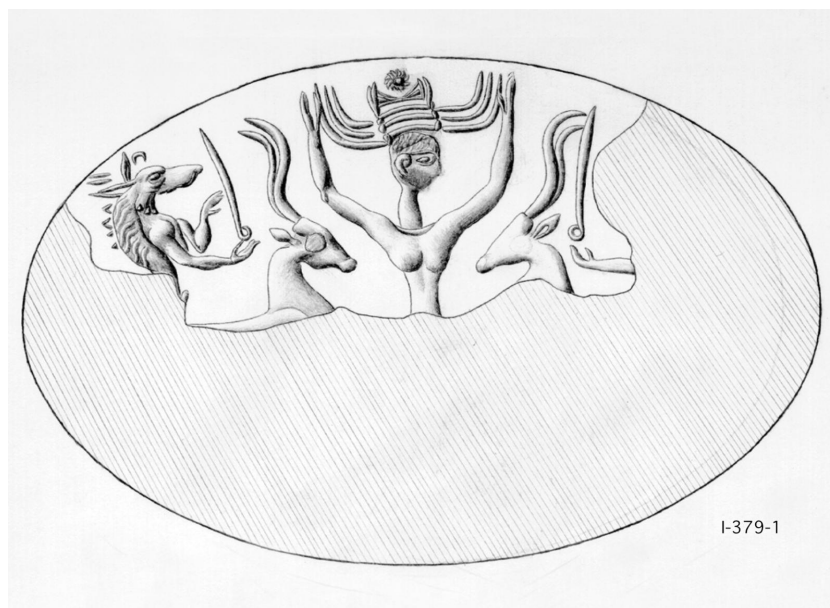


Fig. 57: Two antithetic Genii assist a goddess with upraised arms flanked by two antelopes. Sealing, Pylos, LH IIB2-C1

The Taweret-derived creature is thought to have performed as mediator between the human and divine realms (Gill 1964: 7; Baurain 1985: 114; Sambin 1989: 92; Baxevani-Kouzioni and Markoulaki 1996: 681; Chryssoulaki 1999: 116), perhaps even as a minor deity, though not an individual one since it occasionally appears in groupings (Blakolmer 2015a: 31-33). Indeed, the Genius occurs in two-, three- and fourfold form (Figs. 51, 53, 56-61).



Fig. 58: Four ewer-bearing Genii associated with plants stand before an enthroned female. Gold signet ring, Tiryns, LH II

The occurrence of the Genius in groupings brings to the fore its capacity as *both* a single and a multiple entity; a feature characteristic of archaic divine midwives, as argued earlier. It has gone unnoticed that the Minoan daemon retains this capacity from Taweret, who reduplicates in varying numbers. The Egyptian goddess is worshipped as the Twelve and Fourteen Tawerets; they seem to share a single identity, but according to late inscriptions each of the Twelve Tawerets had a name of her own and supervised one month of the year (Dasen 1993: 56-57). That the Genii themselves had individual identities is first suggested by a unique Neopalatial find. On a finely carved stone triton from Malia (LM IB), possibly used as a rhyton, two Genii interact in a marine setting (Figs. 59-60). One is pouring liquid onto the paws of the other near the shell's aperture, perhaps intended to symbolize a cave; the Genii appear in complementary stances and one is larger than the other, indicating that they are not a single being (Darcque and Baurain 1983: 18-19, 40; Baurain 1985: 111). A carved mirror handle from the Postpalatial tomb of a pregnant woman at Pankalochori (LM IIIA) displays two Genii flanking a third in a lower position (Fig. 61) (Baxevasi-Kouzioni and Markoulaki 1996: 674), also suggesting different identities.





Fig. 59, 60: Stone triton portraying two Genii of different sizes in a marine setting. Malia, LM IB



Fig. 61: Two Genii flanking a third in a lower position. Ivory mirror handle, Pankalochori, LM IIIA

Relevant to our research is the question as to why, among the myriad of Egyptian deities, Taweret was the only to be, not just imported and Minoanized (like Beset), but incorporated as a fixed feature of palatial iconography. Why was this exotic hippopotamus goddess, shaped as an animal foreign to Crete and the only Egyptian deity regularly shown pregnant,<sup>19</sup> so meaningful to the Minoan religious worldview?

Reflecting on the reasons for Taweret's import and the longevity of the Genius in Aegean Bronze Age iconography, Blakolmer suggests that her highly exotic and obviously non-Aegean appearance may have attracted the attention of the Minoans; and that the foreignness of the Genius "could have functioned as a significant marker in the definition of the divine or liminal realm" among Minoan and Mycenaean elites (2015b: 211). Baurain, who early on ruled out hypotheses of Taweret's import based solely on her physical appearance, argued that the reasons for her adoption should be sought in a cultural "contamination between Taweret and *a Minoan reality to be detected*" (1985: 101) (my italics). This seems a sounder proposition, particularly when considering that "the positional meaning of a symbol derives from its relationship to other symbols in a totality, a *Gestalt*, whose elements acquire their significance from the system as a whole" (Turner 1967: 50-51, cited by Morris and Peatfield 1990: 37).

Watrous notes that many of the motifs of Egyptian seals and amulets adopted by Minoan sealcarvers, such as Taweret, the sistrum, the snake, frog, cat or bee, were associated in Egypt "with maternal protection, particularly during childbirth" (1998: 25); an iconographic selection suggesting that this semantic field was especially meaningful to the Minoan symbolic mindset. We may recall that the first figures of power to be associated with the Genius in its role as attendant are female, which raises the issue as to whether prior to Taweret's import there existed a native goddess with similar functions that could have favoured the process of identification-adoption-adaptation-subordination of the Egyptian deity.

Weingarten argues that the Minoans incorporated Taweret, "with her interest in lustration", to a pre-existing complex of ideas that included the ritual manipulation of liquids. She mentions an EM III-MM IA glyptic theme that possibly illustrates the ceremonial handling of liquids; adding, as a footnote, that this theme perhaps conceptually descends from the Prepalatial vessel figurines (1991: 12, n. 52). As we saw, the Protopalatial pouring vessels from Malia, the vessel protome and horned figurine –

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<sup>19</sup> Only Taweret, identified with Ipy (Phillips 2008: I, 156), is commonly depicted in a state of pregnancy (Robins 1993: 80; Hart 2005: 79, 155).

possibly a vase appliqué – from Phaistos bearing the image of a squatting/pregnant female are contemporary with the adoption of Taweret, a gravid goddess of (re)birth personifying the waters of creation. But the earliest expression of Minoan pouring rituals are indeed the pregnant-like Prepalatial vessel figurines displaying a jug or pierced breasts, which have been related to the cult of an ancestress or goddess concerned with notions of fertility and (re)birth through the medium of liquid. Thus, in the metaphysical mindset of the Minoans there actually was a central pre-existing supernatural figure with whom the popular Egyptian Taweret could have been semantically identified.

This Cretan supernatural entity is likely to be Eileithyia's Minoan prototype, as suggested by the finds from Petsophas, Palaikastro, Jouktas and the Knossian Repositories examined in the previous chapter. If our analysis of such materials is consistent, it could be the case that the reduplicating Taweret was originally adapted and subordinated as multiple attendant (i.e. the Genius/Genii) to her preeminent indigenous counterpart, Eileithyia – herself an instance of a foreign divinity becoming subservient to a native one when she is assimilated as multiple assistant to the highest ranking female deity in the Greek pantheon, Hera, also endowed with midwifery functions. While testing the foregoing hypothesis is beyond the scope of this research, it may be noted that both Eileithyia and the Genius are linked to a goddess with upraised arms who has been related to the deity worshipped at Knossos, water as a fertility/cleansing agent, shells/marine imagery, and the cult of sacred stones (baetyls, pillars) – the story of baby Zeus loosing his umbilical cord on the Amnisos plain and Eileithyia's bond with the Kouretes connect the goddess with the birth myth of the newborn god substituted for a baetyl (see Chapter 6).

As Rehak suggests, the new roles performed by the Genius in LM I, such as hunting and carrying sacrificial animals, perhaps reflect the increasing centralization and complexity of Neopalatial society (1995: 215-216). In her study on the gender bending of the Genius, Hitchcock sees the daemon's iconography and tasks as “metaphorical symbols of power and potency” deployed by palatial elites. She interprets its function as waterer of vegetation as an “appropriation of the fertility role from the female Taweret”, and argues that the re-signification of the Genius into the sphere of male activities and contexts, such as hunting, animal sacrifice, untamed nature and possibly even initiation, reinforced palatial ideologies (2009: 101-102). Well attested in early state systems is the trend to transfer core functions of archaic midwife goddesses to male gods/daemons/heroes (see Chapter 4), a phenomenon likely related to the gender bending of the Genius.

This mythological creature associated with fertility that acquires new meanings through its connection with the domain of males, reduplicates in varying numbers – as beings possibly having individual identities – and occurs in Creto-Mycenaean iconography with the head of an ass, vanishes from the Aegean record at the end of the Bronze Age. It has been suggested, however, that a memory of the Genius lingered “later to expand and develop into a new mythical personality”. Among the several Greek deities and daemons proposed as possible successors of the Genii are some related to equids, the most favoured being the Centaurs, Satyrs and Silens “on account also of their hunting activities and mountain environment” (Gill 1964: 14, n. 49).

Likewise advocated as potential descendants of the Taweret-derived Genii are the Cretan Kouretes (Karo 1904: 154; Baurain 1985: 118), an interesting proposition considering their capacity as birth daemons who reduplicate in varying numbers,<sup>20</sup> their association with untamed nature, hunting,<sup>21</sup> and the cult of sacred stones. The Kouretes – the plural term for a young man, especially a warrior (Watrous 1998: 78-79) – are the armed dancers featuring in the myth of baby Zeus substituted for a baetyl. Rhea enlists them to protect the infant (see Chapter 6), and they also help Leto to conceal the birth of her children (Strab. 14. 1. 20). Styled in the sources as ‘guardians’, ‘nurses’ and ‘child-rearers’ (Harrison 1908-1909: 312), the Kouretes presumably served in ancient Crete as prototypes for youths undergoing their initiation into manhood, namely their symbolic death as boys and rebirth as warriors under the guidance of their adult peers (Harrison 1908-1909: 312-326; Koehl 1986: 105; Watrous 1998: 79); in Late Roman times, male initiation was performed with a meteoric stone (*kerounia lithos*, ‘thunderstone’) at the Idaean cave (Porph. *Vit. Pyth.* 17), where the main ritual theme concerned the birth and rebirth of Zeus (Cook 1914-1940: II 934; Kerényi 1976: 86). Likely representations of the Kouretes from the Tsoutsouros cave (Fig. 62) suggest that male transition rites may have been performed at Eileithyia’s sanctuary in the Archaic period (see Chapter 6).

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<sup>20</sup> The Kouretes have identities of their own; one of them, Eleuther, is the mythical founder of the Cretan polis of Eleutherna, a toponym thought to derive from Eileithyia (Ελεούθια) (see Chapter 6).

<sup>21</sup> See primary sources at <http://www.theoi.com/Georgikos/Kouretes.html>



Fig. 62: Dancing warriors, probably the Kouretes, and reconstructed scene. Clay plaque, Tsoutsouros cave, Archaic period

The potential role of the Kouretes as native historical successors of the Minoan Genii remains an open question. What can be suggested, drawing from the data examined so far, is that Taweret was not adopted and transformed into the long-lived Genius on account of her exotic appearance; but, rather, because her role as midwife of the living and the dead *along with* her intimate connection with water and libation strongly resonated with a set of ideas relating to (re)birth/continuity and the ritual handling of life-giving liquid that were embedded in Minoan religion since its crystallization, as is attested by the Prepalatial vessel figurines. Among the LM II-III squatting rhyton figurines is the *Gravidenflasche* from Katsambas displaying anthropomorphic features of Taweret (Figs. 39-40); a vessel lending support to our suggestion that the Egyptian deity was identified with an indigenous goddess of (re)birth, whose atavistic cult is substantiated by the images of periparturient females reviewed hitherto.

These materials, along with the Cretan finds addressed in the previous chapter, argue for the existence of a midwifery complex of likely Neolithic roots operating at the heart of Minoan religion. Most significant therefore is the fact that a number of plants recurrently associated with females in Minoan religious iconography feature as important or exclusive midwifery drugs in the Hippocratic Corpus.

### 9. 3. A Minoan sacred package of female healing plants

#### 9. 3. 1. Crete, rich in *pharmaka*

Crete is gifted with a unique combination of therapeutic and aromatic flora including many endemic species (Rackham and Moody 1996: 53-85; Alibertis 2010). In Classical antiquity the island was celebrated as the richest place in plants and medicinal herbs, deemed to have properties incomparably superior to those grown in other soils (Theophr. *HP* 9. 16. 3; Plin. *HN* 25. 53); a reputation possibly already established in prehistoric times. The Minoans appear to have exported healing herbs and knowledge to Egypt (Warren 1995: 7-8).<sup>22</sup> As early as 2000 BC they were producing aromatic and medicinal oils (e.g. iris oil) (Andreadaki-Vlazaki 1999),<sup>23</sup> a *techné* they transmitted to the Mycenaean Greeks (Melena 1976: 227; Andreadaki-Vlazaki 1999: 48; Vlazaki 2010: 359); plants mentioned in the Linear B tablets from Knossos that may have been used as perfume ingredients, condiments, dyes or medicinals include saffron, terebinth, nutgrass, coriander, fennel and possibly iris (Melena 1976; Sarpaki 2001).

Therapists such as bonesetters, root-cutters and wise-women – midwives with much wider therapeutic competence – paralleling those documented in later historical times are thought to have been practising in the Bronze Age Aegean and heavily relied on herbal remedies (Arnott 1996: 267-268; 1997: 277-278 n. 109; 2004: 162-163 n. 28). Some healers were very accomplished, as attest three trephinated skulls from the Minoan burial cave of Hagios Charalambos with partially or extremely well healed wounds indicating that the patients survived their operation; the Minoan practitioners displaying such a remarkable technique of bone incision, cutting and exfoliation seem to have followed surgical protocols passed down orally from generation to generation, and ultimately recorded in writing by Hippocratic doctors in the 5th-4th c. BC (McGeorge 2011: 310-311).

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<sup>22</sup> The Ebers Papyrus (c. 1550 BC) records the Keftiu-bean in a recipe for constipation, and the London Medical Papyrus (c. 1400 BC) a formula against the ‘Asiatic disease’ in the language of the Keftiu, a term generally thought to denote Crete (Warren 1995: 7; Arnott 1996: 268, 1999: 6, 2004: 165-167). A substance for anointing or embalming acquired in the land of the Keftiu is also mentioned in the Hieratic Leiden Papyrus, dating to the Ramesside period (c. 1292-1069 BC) but probably a copy of a late 3rd millennium text (Andreadaki-Vlazaki 1999: 49; Vlazaki 2010: 359).

<sup>23</sup> A large MM IA workshop at Chamalevri (near Rethymno) produced hearths and pyres, vases with marks of burning, a terracota channel and miniature pots bearing residues of iris oil, olive oil, honey and beeswax; as well as obsidian tools likely used to chop plant materials (Andreadaki-Vlazaki 1999; Vlazaki 2010: 362-365; Warren 2014: 23-24).

### 9. 3. 2. Women and herbal knowledge

Ethnomedical research indicates that in many developing regions of the world women, especially older women, are the main reservoirs of herbal knowledge and the primary healthcare providers at both family and community level (Sincich 2003: 289; Voeks 2007: 15-17). In their study of rural healing practices in 1960s Greece, Blum and Blum report that family healers were usually elderly females carriers of old traditions involving herbal medicine, amulets and spells; the wise-women playing an important role in community healthcare (1965: 166-173, 182-189). Midwives were the most numerous and available practitioners until recent times on Crete. Census figures by profession for 1868 record 98 physicians, 21 surgeons, 22 pharmacists and 362 midwives practising on the island (Clark 2011: 21 n. 50). Statistics for 1948 indicate that “for the average community household, the doctor was 6.0 miles away, and the dentist and trained nurse over 13 miles away. In contrast, the midwife was less than three miles distant” (Allbaugh 1953: 158).

Herbal knowledge, customarily passed down along the female line (Blum and Blum 1965: 170, 183; Faure 1973: 326; Sincich 2003: 289), was largely the province of women because they regularly used plants, flowers and seeds to treat menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth related conditions (Willets 1962: 79, 160); virtually all recent survey data indicate that users of herbal medicine products are predominantly female (Ernst 2002: 227). An ancient myth about Minos bespeaks of the atavistic bond between women, herbal knowledge and reproductive issues. The legendary Cretan king, infected by a venereal disease, was unable to procreate, since his semen ejecting “snakes, scorpions and millipedes” killed all his bedmates (Ant. Lib. 41). As recounted by the extant versions of the story, Minos was treated by a female healer named Prokris, who devised a condom out of a goat’s bladder and cured the king’s infection with a plant, the unidentified *moly* or Circe’s root (Faure 1973: 325).

In Minoan iconography floral offerings and settings are the exclusive domain of females (Goodison and Morris 1998: 128). Warren, who has thoroughly studied the ritual use of plants in the Aegean Bronze Age, concludes that many of those represented in Minoan art, including lily, dittany, myrtle, poppy, olive, papyrus and squill, are connected practically and apotropaically with fertility and the promotion of life; he notes, for instance, that lily, dittany and myrtle were associated with childbirth and menstruation in Classical antiquity (1985: 202, 207; 1988: 27). Rehak in turn suggests that in the Aegean

Bronze Age women's knowledge of plants and their properties granted them control over their bodies and reproductive functions, defining a sphere of female power which is illustrated by landscape painting; notably the Xeste 3 frescoes from Thera (modern Santorini) (Rehak 1999a: 14; 2004: 86), dating to the (early) Neopalatial period, when the Minoans had extended their cultural and economic influence to the island.

### 9. 3. 3. Maturation rites at Xeste 3: A medicinal kit for female initiation

Excavations at the Thera site of Akrotiri brought to light Xeste 3 (Fig. 63), a large public ceremonial centre which yielded frescoes depicting females of different ages engaged in activities that revolve around the harvesting and dedication of saffron to a goddess (Marinatos 1976: 22-38; Doulas 1992: 128-131; Vlachopoulos 2008). It is generally agreed that these all-female scenes represent initiation rites into puberty/womanhood and motherhood (Cameron 1978: 582; Marinatos 1984: 64; 1993: 205-209; Davis 1986; Rehak 1999a, 2002, 2004; Gesell 2000; Chapin 2000; Vlachopoulos 2007; 2008: 453; Kopaka 2009).<sup>24</sup> This interpretation rests mainly on the following evidence and observations:

- The Xeste 3 females range from girls to mature women, as is apparent from their breast development, hairstyle and clothing (Marinatos 1984: 62-65; Davis 1986; Laffineur 2000; Doulas 2000; Chapin 2000).

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<sup>24</sup> Scholarly interpretations of the frescoes sometimes allude to 'marriage' rites, prospective 'wives' and/or notions of virginity (e.g. 'shedding of hymenal blood', 'defloration') (Marinatos 1984: 64; Davis 1986: 402-403; Chapin 2000: 20; Gesell 2000; Vlachopoulos 2007: 112, 2008: 452), which are anachronistic in the Xeste 3 context. In a contribution on women in Cypriot prehistory, Hamilton rightly stresses that marital terminology "carries a host of modern connotations, including culture-specific aspects relating to the expected roles of spouses – roles which may have had no meaning in prehistory", and should therefore be avoided (2002: 384). The same goes for the patriarchal construct of 'virginity'. In the visual record of the Minoan/Minoanized world there are no depictions of the nuclear family (Papageorgiou 2008: 95), or scenes that could confidently be interpreted as wedding ceremonies, to support the existence of marriage as it is known in later times. In the Aegean context, marriage appears to be a foundational social institution of the Greek polis system associated with the establishment of patrilineal descent. According to tradition, in Attica monogamous marriage was institutionalized by the mythical first king of Athens, Kekrops, "because men of earlier times did not know who their father was, so many they were" (Ath. *Deipn.* 13. 555d). Significantly, Kekrops also deprived women of their political rights; they were no longer allowed to vote in the city's assembly as they did in earlier times (Gourmelen 2004: 104, 181-182).



- Saffron, traditionally employed as a dye, condiment, perfume and medicinal for many diseases, was an important gynaeco-obstetrical drug in antiquity; used to induce parturition and abortion, arrest uterine haemorrhage, as an emmenagogue and a pain killer in childbirth and menstruation (Cameron 1978: 582; Marinatos 1984: 65, 1987: 132; Amigues 1988: 237; Ferrence and Bendersky 2004: 207-217; Forsyth 2000: 152-153, 162, 164; Rehak 2002: 48-50; 2004: 92; Kopaka 2009: 192).

- Several of the Xeste 3 females display crocus-decorated clothes which recall the saffron-dyed garments associated with female transitions in later Greece; such as the *krokotos* worn by girls during their puberty initiation at Brauron under the auspices of Artemis, or the yellow bridal veil (Davis 1986: 403; Marinatos 1987: 132; Rehak 2002: 42; Chapin 2000: 19; Vlachopoulos 2007: 111).

- The Xeste 3 female frescoes are associated with the only lustral basin documented on Thera (Doumas 1992: 128-131). A feature of monumental Minoan architecture, lustral basins are segregated sunken rooms accessed by stairs with frescoed or gypsum-lined walls, generally interpreted as spaces reserved for ritual performances (Marinatos 1976: 24-25; Gesell 2000: 954-955; Puglisi 2012). Some archaeologists suggest that these sunken rooms are imitations of cult caves (Goodison 2001: 85); others, that they may be specifically connected with women's rites (Rehak 1999a: 13-14; Kopaka 2009: 191; Driessen 2012b: 152; Puglisi 2012).

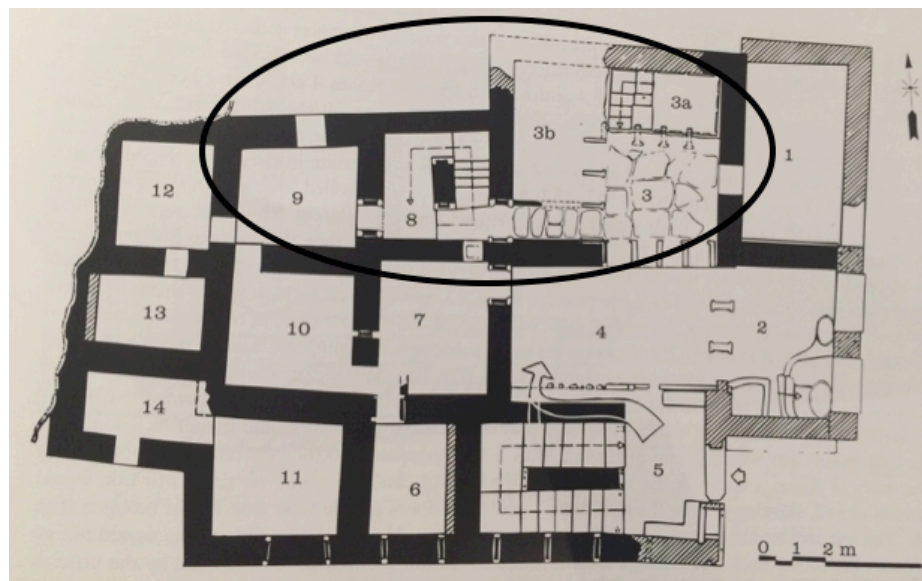


Fig. 63: Plan of the Xeste 3 ceremonial building, indicating the rooms which hosted frescoes relevant to this research

Of interest to our research are the Xeste 3 frescoes located directly above the lustral basin in Room 3a, those in the adjacent Room 3b and Room 9 (Fig. 63). The wall paintings in Room 3a are distributed over two storeys. On the upper floor three girls known as the Saffron Gatherers harvest crocuses in a rocky landscape (Fig. 64). Two are pubescent or on the cusp of menarche. The third is younger, as she has budding breasts and a partially shaved head indicative of youth (Chapin 2000: 7, 16); as in later times (see Chapter 5), the shedding of locks appears to have been a rite marking the passage from one stage of youth to the next (Davis 1986).<sup>25</sup>



Fig. 64: Two girls collect saffron in a mountainous setting; the youngest displays a partially shaved head. Xeste 3 fresco, Room 3a, upper floor

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<sup>25</sup> Davis identifies six stages of maturity on the Theran frescoes, from childhood to old age; the first four stages are indicated by variations in hairstyle. Children have shaved heads with short locks at the back and the forehead, the latter shed upon entering the next stage of youth. Pubescent girls have short hair with long locks at the back, and adult women long hair (1986).

A fourth girl, pubescent or on the cusp of menarche (Chapin 2000: 16), pours her saffron harvest into a large basket placed before a goddess, who is seated on an elevated platform, assisted by a griffin. Half way up the stepped platform, a blue monkey offers crocus stamens to the goddess (Fig. 65). Monkeys, which parallel the Genii in their role as attendants to deities (Marinatos 1987: 130), are connected with saffron also at Knossos; on the fresco of the Saffron Gatherer two blue monkeys – one previously restored as a boy – are shown picking crocuses (Rehak 1999b: 706-707). At Xeste 3 the animal appears to aid young women in their transitional stage (Greenlaw 2011: 52) and is associated with the gynecological crocus, which brings to mind the vase of a squatting monkey from Hagia Triada strikingly resembling the *Gravidenflasche* from Katsambas (Figs. 39-41); it may be noted that in the Aegean Bronze Age these animals occasionally appear with women, but never with men (Rehak 2002: 39). Interestingly, in the Near East and Egypt monkeys had symbolic connotations to fertility and female sexuality (Langdon 1990: 416; Rehak 1999b: 707; 2002: 39). In Mesopotamia monkeys were connected, among others, with omens, healing and life-giving liquids (Greenlaw 2011: 39). As for Egypt, depictions of monkeys (baboons) occur on Middle Kingdom birth wands (Greenlaw 2011: 43), and along with midwifery paraphernalia in the ritual healing kit from the Ramesseum (see Chapter 8).



Fig. 65: Dedication of saffron stigmas to a seated goddess assisted by a griffin; the offering is made by a blue monkey, itself an attendant to the deity. Xeste 3 fresco, Room 3a, upper floor

The Xeste 3 goddess displays a crocus-decorated bodice, saffron stigmas on her cheek, and a coil with a dotted pattern which crowns her head and winds down her back (Fig. 66). S. Marinatos (1976: 36) and Doumas (1992: 130-131), successively directing the Akrotiri excavations, identified this coil as a snake sticking out its forked tongue, possibly a *Vipera Ammodytes* (Fig. 67),<sup>26</sup> but there is no scholarly agreement on this interpretation.



Figs. 66, 67: Detail of the Xeste 3 goddess showing the dotted coil on her head, and image of a *Vipera Ammodytes*

On the lower floor directly above the lustral basin stood a fresco conventionally called The Adorants (Fig. 68). At the centre of the scene is a seated young woman with a bleeding wound on her foot. To the left and right of this figure, two standing females, a young woman holding a necklace and a girl draped in a veil, seem to gaze towards the

<sup>26</sup> Marinatos proposed the snake interpretation prior to the restoration of the fresco, when the connection of the coil with the head of the goddess had not yet been established (1976: 36). If a serpent, it could also be a Leopard snake (*Elaphe situla*) (Giorgos Aphordhakos, pers. comm. 10-10-2018).

adjacent wall, at an altar decorated with red lilies and spirals, streaked with blood and crowned by horns of consecration (Fig. 69) (Marinatos 1984: 74; Doumas 1992: 129; Chapin 2000: 7); a foremost religious symbol of the Minoans indicating a connection with the beliefs and rituals held at the time in Crete (Gesell 2000: 947).



Fig. 68: The so-called fresco of The Adorants, representing two young women and a girl. Xeste 3, Room 3a, lower floor

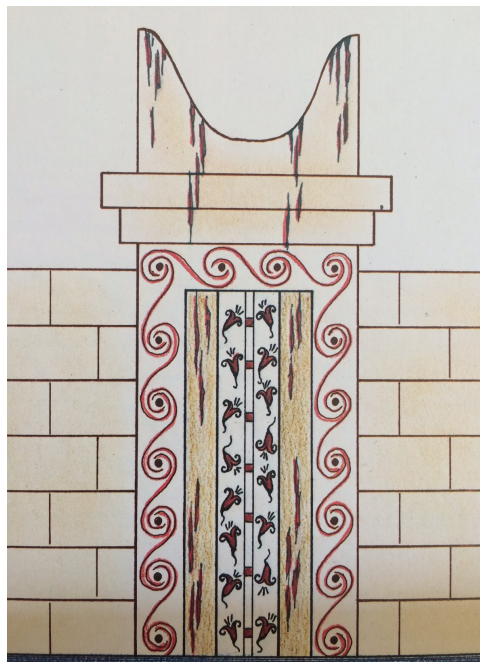


Fig. 69: Reconstructed drawing of the bloodied altar with red lilies and horns of consecration. Xeste 3 fresco, Room 3a, lower floor

The central figure in *The Adorants* fresco, the so-called Wounded Woman, is a fully pubescent and sexually mature female (Chapin 2000: 7, 20-23) displaying a hairpin with an iris finial, and a myrtle or olive twig tucked in her coiffure (Fig. 70) (Marinatos 1976: 36; Marinatos 1984: 79; Amigues 1988: 233; Porter 2000: 603; Rehak 2002: 41; Vlachopoulos 2008: 451). She is seated in a crocus-filled rocky landscape, bending towards her bleeding foot, sometimes interpreted as a metaphor for menstruation or the blood of childbirth (Rehak 1999a: 11; 2002: 41-42; 2004: 94; Kopaka 2009: 188); from the foot's wound stems a crocus blossom (Fig. 71),<sup>27</sup> a possible reference to the curative properties of saffron (Vlachopoulos 2008: 452).

Kopaka suggests that the pictorial and spatial combination of blood on the Wounded Woman's foot and the altar may be an allusion to the main female transitions, menarche and motherhood (2009: 188). Rehak, who first postulated in detail the metaphorical link between the woman's bleeding foot and menstruation, sees the twig in her hair as myrtle; and notes that in antiquity myrtle was used to induce labour/abortion (1999a: 13; 2002: 41). More confidently identified are the iris and lilies shown, respectively, on the woman's hairpin and the altar, but no attention has been paid to the ancient medicinal uses of these plants.



Fig. 70: Detail of the iris-shaped pin and the twig tucked in the Wounded Woman's hair on the fresco of *The Adorants*

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<sup>27</sup> I am indebted to Panos Angelidis for drawing my attention to this detail and providing several images of the Xeste 3 frescoes.



Fig. 71: Detail of the Wounded Woman's bleeding foot showing the crocus blossom that stems from the injury

In Room 3b (first floor), along the corridor leading to the Xeste 3 *adyton* (Room 3a), mature females were represented advancing in procession. One woman with a lily-decorated bodice carries bunches of wild roses (Fig. 72). Another has a crocus blossom on her ear and saffron stamens on her snood (Fig. 73). A third lady, bearing a lily tucked in her snood, carries a bunch of lilies (Fig. 74). A fourth woman wears a girdle with floral motifs and spirals. A fifth lady with a wild rose atop her snood displays flying fish decorating her girdle, a garment ancestrally associated with maidenhood, pregnancy and childbirth (Vlachopoulos 2007: 114; 2008: 453-454), as we mentioned when discussing the girdles depicted in the Knossian Repositories.

Lastly, calling for attention are the blossoming vitex painted in Room 9 (first floor) (Fig. 75), a bushy tree that modern Greeks call *lygaria*.<sup>28</sup> Scholarly interpretations of the Xeste 3 frescoes underscore the ancient gynaeco-obstetrical uses of saffron and the associated ritual role of this drug in female transitions, but surprisingly overlook that vitex, depicted on two walls in Room 9,<sup>29</sup> and the iris, lilies and roses appearing on the all-female scenes in the adjacent Rooms 3a and 3b were themselves important midwifery *pharmaka* in antiquity. Let us then take a close look of all these plants.

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<sup>28</sup> I am indebted to Panos Angelidis for drawing the *lygaria/vitex* fresco from Xeste 3 to my attention. English publications often render the plant as osier (Doumas 1992: Fig. 151; Vlachopoulos 2008: 454, Figs. 41.41, 41.42). At Akrotiri vitex features also on a wall painting from Room Delta 17 (Doumas 1992: Fig. 151).

<sup>29</sup> Panos Angelidis, pers. comm. 16-5-2018.



Figs. 72, 73: Two mature women, one with a lily-decorated bodice carrying wild roses, the other bearing saffron stigmas/flowers on her snood and ear. Xeste 3, Room 3b, first floor



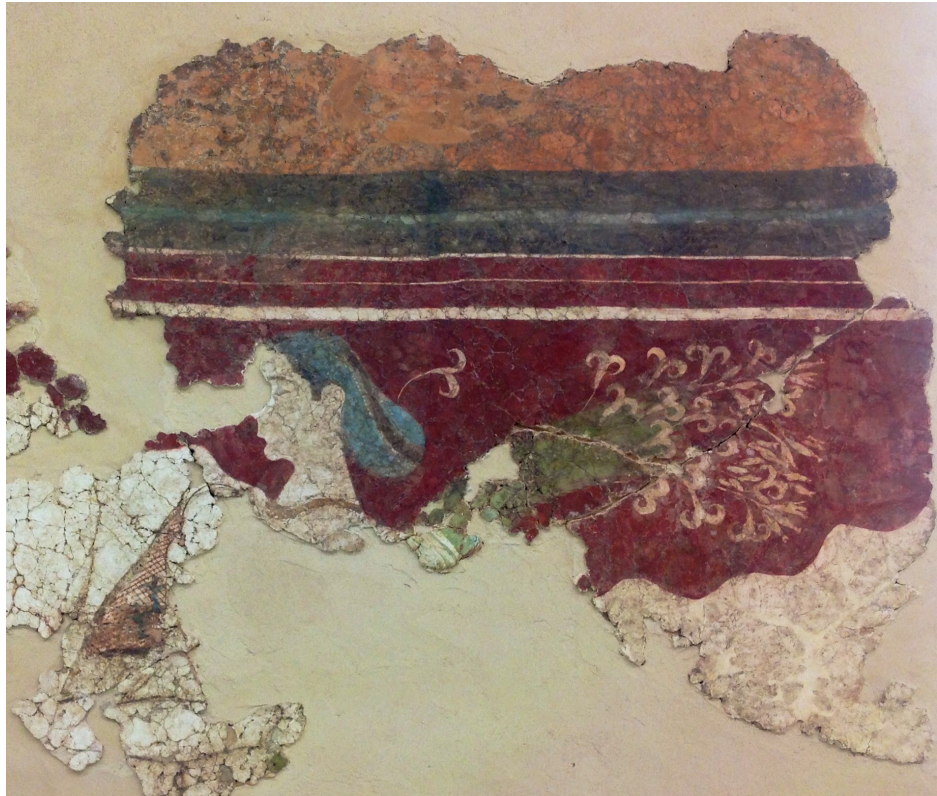


Fig. 74: Mature woman carrying a bunch of white lilies; one is tucked in her snood. Xeste 3, Room 3b, first floor



Fig. 75: Blossoming vitex branches.  
Xeste 3, Room 9, first floor

### 9.3.3.1. Vitex

In antiquity the *lygos* or *agnos* – modern *lygaria* (*Vitex agnus castus*) –<sup>30</sup> was predominantly used in medicine to treat disorders of the reproductive organs (Von Staden 1993: 25). In Babylonian medicine it is a gynaecological drug (Steinert 2012; Böck 2013: 44, n. 64). In the Hippocratic texts it is prescribed for various womb conditions, to ease difficult labour, expel the retained placenta, arrest uterine haemorrhage, stimulate lactation and conception (Von Staden 1993: 26-27; Nixon 1995: 87); from the fifteen mentions of the plant in the Corpus, the few unrelated to gynaecology regard astringent diets for liver conditions (Andò 2001: 285). Dioscorides, who records its use to induce menstruation, lactation and treat all affections of the uterus (Von Staden 1993: 28), states that the *lygos* “destroys generation”, implying its use as an abortifacient (Riddle 1992: 31). According to modern research, the vitex has oestrogen-like activity; it acts as an emmenagogue and may have oxytocic properties (Ernst 2002: 228, 231).

The Samian Hera and Artemis, two goddesses with healing capacity, were associated with the *lygos*. The former received anatomical models including female genitalia (Rouse 1902: 2015; Senkova 2016: 33-34); figurines of a bearded man with a dog coming from Babylonia, where such votives were given to the medical goddess Gula (Laskaris 1999: 10); as well as models of – and actual – pomegranates, poppies and pine cones (Kyrieleis 1993: 138-139, fig. 7.7), all medicinal agents relevant to ancient midwifery (see below). As for Artemis, at Athens and Ephesus she was offered anatomical votives (breasts, vulvae) (Senkova 2016: 32-33).

The Samian Hera was reputedly born under the *lygos* growing in the Heraion (Paus. 7. 4. 4), the oldest known sacred tree in Pausanias’ time (8. 23. 5). During her annual festival, the cult image of the goddess was ceremonially bound with branches of her emblematic tree, the *lygos* (Kyrieleis 1993: 135).<sup>31</sup> This ritual strongly recalls Lygodesma (‘*Lygos*-bound’), a surname of Artemis Orthia (‘Upright’), so called because her wooden image was found in a thicket of *lygos* bushes and the encircling branches made the statue

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<sup>30</sup> Ancient grammarians and lexicographers support two contrasting etymologies for *agnos*. Some say it derives from *hagnos*, ‘chaste’, which is considered false by modern linguists. Others instead argue that the *lygos* is also named *agnos*, if as ‘sterile’ (*a-gonos*), because its fruit when eaten makes the human seed (*gonos*) disappear (Von Staden 1993: 53-54). The vitex, also called chaste tree, was deemed anaphrodisiac; to alleviate their sexual urges, Medieval monks strew their beds with *agnus castus* (‘chaste lamb’), because the plant “made man a lamb” (Andò 2001: 285).

<sup>31</sup> Athenaeus records the related etiological myth in the *Deipnosophistes* (15. 12. 671f-672e).

stand upright (Paus. 3. 16. 10-11).<sup>32</sup> The presence of the gynaecological *lygos* in this foundation myth has been related to the fact that Spartan girls consecrated themselves to Artemis Orthia when reaching menarche (Calame 1997: 164). Artemis Orthia also oversaw the puberty initiation of Spartan ephebes, who underwent the *diamastigosis*, ritual flogging probably performed with twigs of *lygaria*, the bush sacred to the goddess used medicinally to stimulate menstruation, lactation, etc. (Calame 1997: 163-164; Riddle 1997: 58); this has prompted the traditional interpretation that the flogging activated the forces of growth and fecundity in the youths experiencing their initiatory death from childhood and rebirth into manhood (Calame 1997: 164-166). We may recall that ancient rites of passage often metaphorically replicate childbirth. Noteworthy here is therefore the *mastigosis*, the whipping of the parturient's lumbar spine with twigs of *lygaria* or myrtle, a treatment applied until recent times by Greek midwives to ease difficult birth; before the introduction of Cesarean deliveries, this may have been a life-saving oxytocic procedure, since according to neurophysiological studies (gate control theory of pain) stimulation of the lumbar nerves relieves birth pangs and relaxes the uterine cervix, thus accelerating parturition (Oikonomopoulos and Oikonomopoulou 2012: 658-660). The *mastigosis* is not recorded in ancient medical sources, but raises the possibility that the ritual flogging of Spartan ephebes seemingly with *lygos* twigs aimed to propitiate their symbolic rebirth into adulthood.

The *lygos* was strongly associated with the most widespread of Greek festivals, the Thesmophoria, a three-day annual rite restricted to women that some scholars believe to have pre-Hellenic, even Neolithic origins (Burkert 1985: 13, 242; Von Staden 1993: 40).<sup>33</sup> This was an all-female festival honouring Demeter celebrated in the month of sowing (Pyanopsion-October/November) to foster agricultural and human fertility. The women, congregated in the wildness, slept on couches strewn with leaves of *lygos*, uttered ritual obscenities, ate pomegranate seeds and cakes shaped as female genitalia, sacrificed piglets and imitations of snakes (Burkert 1985: 242-246; Von Staden 1993: 37-40; Dillon 2002: 110-120). The last day of the Thesmophoria was that of Kalligeneia, whom the women invoked "for the fertility of their own womb" (Dillon 2002: 113), or perhaps more specifically to propitiate 'good birth', as this is the meaning of Kalligeneia; a surname of,

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<sup>32</sup> At Agra, near Athens, the image of Artemis was garlanded with *lygos* (Willets 1962: 160 n. 100).

<sup>33</sup> According to Herodotus (2. 171), these rites were brought from Egypt by the Danaids, who taught them to the Pelasgian women – the Pelasgians were the populations inhabiting the Aegean before the arrival of the Greeks.

or an attendant to Demeter,<sup>34</sup> the goddess whose canonical role was to oversee the (re)birth of grain, but presided also over human parturition.<sup>35</sup>

In her study of the Xeste 3 frescoes N. Marinatos makes no mention of the *lygaria/vitex* bushes from Room 9, but she argues that the Thesmophoria – including the ritual of Kalligeneia possibly involving prospective mothers – provides a good parallel for the Xeste 3 ceremonies; as “both are vegetation festivals, in both women are the protagonists, in both there is a strong emphasis on fertility” (1984: 72). The Xeste 3 depictions of vitex constitute the earliest evidence for the plant’s connection with female transitions; from its occurrence in such context along with other ancient midwifery drugs (crocus, lily, iris and rose), it may be inferred that the gynaeco-obstetrical properties of vitex were already well known in the Bronze Age Aegean.

### 9.3.3.2. Crocus

The crocus is one of the most frequently depicted plants in Aegean Bronze Age art. The highly prized saffron flower held sacral status, since it features as offering to the goddess and is a recurring motif on cult paraphernalia (Marinatos 1984: 89; Day 2011); when it appears associated with human figures, they are usually female (Day 2011). The connotations of the plant to the universe of females is likewise attested in later Greece, where saffron-coloured garments were intimately bonded to the cult of goddesses, women’s rituals and transitions (e.g. the peplos of Athena, the yellow gowns worn at the Thesmophoria, the *krokotos* used in the puberty initiation at Brauron, the bridal veil) (Håland 2004: 156; Vlachopoulos 2007: 111).

Saffron is first mentioned in an Assyrian botanical dictionary (7th c. BC) documenting, among others, its use for childbirth and disorders of the menses; the text follows a herbal tradition recorded in Old Babylonian originals placing the medicinal use of saffron in the 17th c. BC or earlier (Ferrence and Bendersky 2004: 207). Its applications in the Hippocratic Corpus are largely, but not exclusively, gynaecological (Andò 2001: 299). In folk medicine saffron has been employed as a sedative, soporific, antipyretic, expectorant, laxative, antiemetic and antidepressant; for eye infections, ear ache and superficial wounds; to induce labour, promote lactation, treat dysmenorrhea and chronic

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<sup>34</sup> See primary sources at <http://www.theoi.com/Nymphe/NympheKalligeneia.html>

<sup>35</sup> See Marinatos 1984: 72. At Taranto (Apulia) and Himera (Sicily), Demeter held the explicit patronage of childbirth; she bore the epithet *Epilysamene*, ‘She who loosens/delivers’. See Daremberg and Saglio 1873-1919, s.v. Ceres; and Brugnone 2011: 78-81.

uterine bleeding; as an abortifacient, contraceptive, aphrodisiac and fertility enhancer (Ferrence and Bendersky 2004: 207-208). According to phytochemical research, crocus stigmas are rich in crocin (Montalvo-Hernández et al. 2012) – similar to prostaglandin, which stimulates uterine contractions and controls uterine bleeding – and contain other substances that mimic female sex hormones regulating menstruation, fertility and childbirth (Ferrence and Bendersky 2004: 216-217; Mayall 2011: 63).

### 9.3.3.3. Lily

The Hippocratic treatises mention lily oil (*sousinon*) thrice: in a pessary to promote menstruation, one to block vaginal discharges, and a remedy for aphtae (Andó 2001: 291). According to Dioscorides, *sousinon* is the most effective oil to treat female ailments (*Mat. med.* 1. 62). Pliny reports that the root of the lily acts as an emmenagogue and the juice extracted from the flower as an emollient for the uterus (*HN* 21. 74). Soranus prescribes lily oil in pessaries for womb disorders, chronic amenorrhea and dysmenorrhea; and applied in injections for uterine atony – lack of contractions (Temkin 1991: 228). Until recent times midwives on the island of Chios used to massage the womb of the labouring woman with lily and almond oil mixed with hen grease (Argenti 1944: 345).

Along with the crocus, the lily is one the most commonly depicted plants in Aegean Bronze Age art, a sacred flower appearing as tribute to the deity, associated with cult objects (Marinatos 1984: 89; Fitos 2010; Aphordhakos and Warren 2011: 276), and connected mainly with females (Figs. 76-77). It is the floral motif par excellence on LM larnakes, probably symbolizing regeneration/rebirth (Watrous 1991: 295). The Minoan Villa of the Lilies at Amnisos yielded a fresco with sprays of lily, iris, vetch and a species identified as the medicinal *Satureja Juliana Benth* (Fig. 76). Cameron sees these plants as floral offerings befitting Eileithyia, whose cave sanctuary is a short walk from the villa (1978: 584); a likely proposition considering the uses of lily, iris and *Satureja* species in ancient midwifery practice (see below).

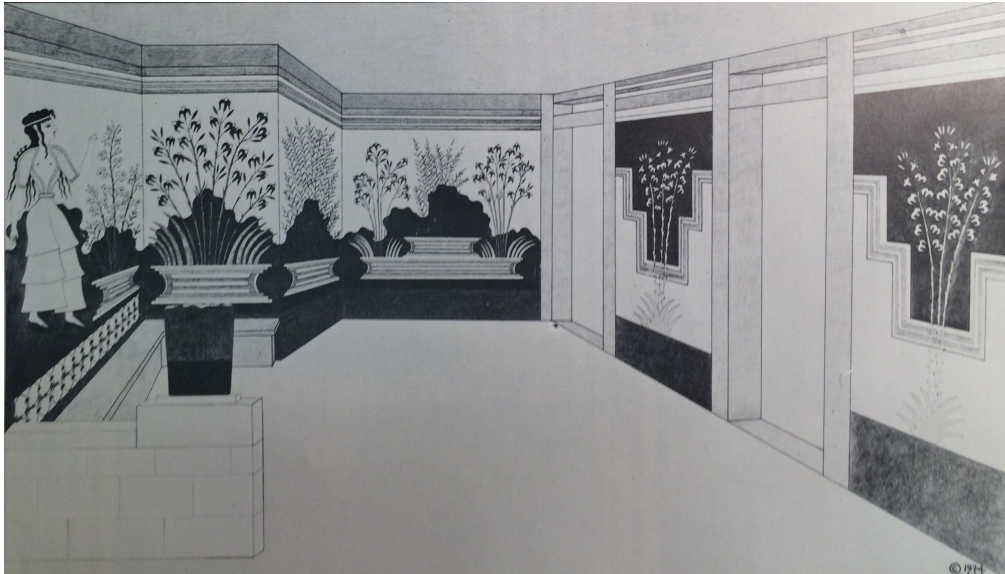


Fig. 76: Fresco of the Villa of the Lilies (Room 7) at Amnisos, as reconstructed by Cameron



Fig. 77: Female holding lilies before an altar.  
Lentoid, Rutsi (Pylos), LH IIA-III A

The lily has strong historical connotations to the reproductive process. According to Greek mythology, a squirt of Hera's breastmilk formed the Milky Way (*Galaxias* < *gala*, 'milk'), and from the drops fallen on earth lilies sprouted (Chirassi 1968: 105; Fitos 2010: 105; Aphordhakos and Warren 2011: 272). The Heraion at the mouth of the Sele (Poseidonia/Paestum), where Hera-Eileithyia was worshipped, yielded female busts crowned with lilies, pregnant/birthing figurines, and votive keys dedicated for safe childbirth (Zancani Montuoro and Zanotti-Bianco 1951: 14-15; Stoop 1960: 24-41). In Christian iconography the Madonna Lily (*Lilium candidum*) embodies the mystery of the

Incarnation; it is the flower of the Annunciation, given by the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary when informing her that she would conceive Jesus (Fig. 78) (Fitos 2010: 114-115). Thence the Greek expression *myrise ton krino*, ‘she smelled the lily’, used in Crete to say, sometimes with sexual undertones, that a woman got pregnant.<sup>36</sup>



Fig. 78: The Annunciation by the Renaissance painter Filippo Lippi, c. 1440

#### 9. 3. 3. 4. Iris

Used by the Minoans as early as 2000 BC to produce scented oils, the iris was a very popular botanical ingredient in ancient perfume industry and medicine (Andreadaki-Vlazaki 1999, Vlazaki 2010). In the Hippocratic Corpus iris-based remedies are exclusively gynaecological (Andò 2001: 301). Euryphon, a 5th c. BC physician from Cnidos, recommends suppositories of the best quality of iris (*Iris illyrica*) for retained placenta (Temkin 1991: 228). According to Dioscorides, who describes the various healing properties of the plant (e.g. purgative, emollient, diuretic, emetic), dried iris flowers taken in wine bring down the menstrual flow; as for iris oil (*irinon*), it expels the foetus and alleviates inflammations of the vulva (*Mat. med.* 1. 1; 1. 66). Soranus prescribes *irinon* as an abortifacient, for thrush (genital infection), swelling and distention of the uterus (Temkin 1991: 227-228).

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<sup>36</sup> Nikos Kakogiannakis, pers. comm. 30-10-2015. In the Greek mainland ‘to smell the lily’ refers to the loss of virginity (Amalia Kontouli, pers. comm. 1-4-2018).

The irises, lilies and *Satureja Juliana* represented on the mural of the Villa of the Lilies at Amnisos could then be related to Eileithyia's cult, as Cameron suggested; ancient medical sources record the emmenagogue and abortifacient properties of *Satureja* species (Andò 2001: 256). Irises associated with crocuses, lilies, wild roses, myrtle, vetch, papyrus and monkeys appear on a landscape from the House of the Frescoes at Knossos (Fig. 79) (Immerwahr 1990: 42); not a realistic, but a religious landscape combining plants from different terrains that may allude to the regeneration of nature (Marinatos 1984: 92).



Fig. 79: Iris flowers, other plants and a monkey on a landscape. House of the Frescoes, Knossos

### 9. 3. 3. 5. Rose

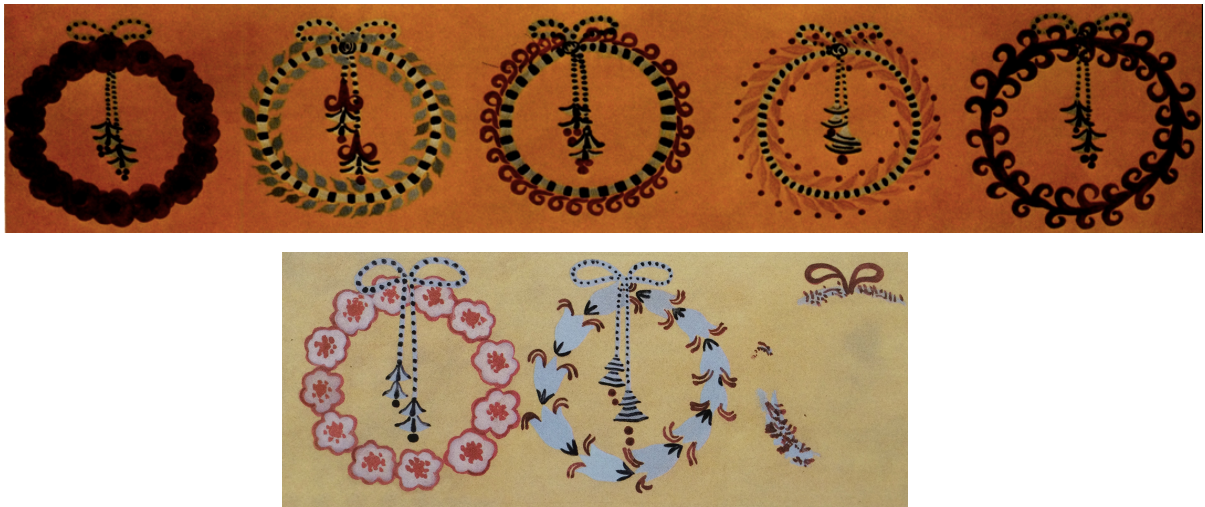
The rose is referenced over ninety times in the Hippocratic Corpus, exclusively in gynaecological treatments (Andò 2001: 242).<sup>37</sup> Dioscorides, who recommends *rosaceum* oil for several skin conditions, states that administered in suppositories it soothes irritations of the vulva and the intestines (*Mat. med.* 1. 53). Soranus prescribes rose oil in contraceptive pessaries, remedies for uterine haemorrhage, womb inflammations, drying up breastmilk, skin ulcers in infants, and gonorrhoea (Temkin 1991: 227-228). Until the last century – when superseded by licensed doctors – midwives on Chios applied dried rose

<sup>37</sup> Throughout antiquity *rodon* (rose) was a slang word for the female genitals (Totelin 2009: 204).



leaves boiled in wine and honey on the belly of the newly-delivered woman before bandaging it (Argenti 1944: 347, 349).

Flowers resembling the roses carried by one of the mature women at Xeste 3 – likely *Rosa canina* or Cretan rockrose (*Cistus incanus creticus*) – feature on the Fresco of the Garlands from the North Building at Knossos, along with lilies, crocuses, papyrus and greenish leaves that might stand for dittany, myrtle or olive (Figs. 80-81) (Warren 1985: 193-204; 1988: 24; 2000: 367, 373).



Figs. 80, 81: Reconstruction of the Fresco of the Garlands displaying wreaths plaited with roses, crocuses, lilies and other plants. North Building, Knossos

Warren includes the collection and dedication of flowers (e.g. in bunches, wreaths) among the rituals characteristic of Minoan religion, and argues that the plants involved in such ceremonies had symbolic values derived from their perceived usefulness and efficacy (1988: 24-27). He notes that lily, dittany, withy/osier (i.e. *lygaria/vitex*), pomegranate and myrtle were associated with childbirth and menstruation in Classical antiquity. And he suggests that the wreaths depicted on the Fresco of the Garlands have a bearing on the cult of one or several Minoan goddesses; as in historical times the Cretan Eileithyia,<sup>38</sup> Diktyнна, Ariadne and Europa-Hellotis were garlanded with plants symbolic of fertility, such as dittany, pine, mastic and/or myrtle (Warren 1985: 202 n. 59, 205; 1988: 26), all belonging to the wise-women's pharmacopoeia (see below).

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<sup>38</sup> Associated with the Greek Artemis (i.e. Artemis-Eileithyia).

### 9. 3. 3. 6. Xeste 3: A midwife goddess and her *pharmaka* of life

The Minoan religious practice of collecting and dedicating flowers brings to the fore the ancient female rite of the *anthologeîn* ('flower gathering'), which preceded the plaiting of wreaths (*stefanoplokein*) offered mainly to female deities.<sup>39</sup> Significantly, the *anthologeîn* is associated with brides.<sup>40</sup> Greek myths link flower gathering to the abduction/rape of maidens,<sup>41</sup> namely their (forcible) initiation to sexuality and motherhood.<sup>42</sup> Under the guise of a bull exhaling an inebriating scent of saffron, Zeus carries away Europa – the (future) mother of Minos – as she is gathering flowers, including lilies, crocuses and roses (Mosch. *Id.* 2).<sup>43</sup> In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (6-7, 426-427), Hades abducts Kore/Persephone when she is picking, among others, crocuses, lilies, irises and roses. These flowers, represented at Xeste 3 and related only to female figures,<sup>44</sup> were all *pharmacologically* relevant to young women about to experience the potentially hazardous childbearing process.

Interpretations of the Xeste 3 frescoes have failed to recognize that the crocus is not the only (identifiable) gynaecological plant with ancient ritual connotations to females depicted at the Theran ceremonial centre. Having examined the therapeutic and deriving symbolic/ritual relevance to women of the lilies, iris, roses and vitex represented in Rooms 3a, 3b and 9, we may now argue that these plants composed, along with the crocus, a *medicinal herbal kit* crucial to females in their transition to menarche, pregnancy, childbirth, the postpartum and lactation.

This healing kit raises the issue of the identity of the Xeste 3 goddess. According to the prevailing interpretive framework, she is a mistress of nature (Marinatos 1984: 70), a *Potnia theron* or mistress of animals (Marinatos 1976: 33; Cameron 1978: 582; Rehak 1999a: 12; Chapin 2010: 227; Day 2011: 344). However, on account of the many healing properties of saffron Ferrence and Bendersky have instead suggested that she is a medical goddess (2004). Considering that deities patterned on the wise-woman commonly presided over female maturation ceremonies, the Xeste 3 goddess is in all likelihood a healing

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<sup>39</sup> See Chirassi 1968: 92-96.

<sup>40</sup> See Sourvinou-Inwood 1978: 104-113.

<sup>41</sup> On such myths, see Chirassi 1968: 97-100.

<sup>42</sup> The ritualized abduction of the bride, signaling possession by her husband, was part of the ancient Greek marriage ceremony. This transition did not grant her a higher legal or political status; she was simply transferred from the control of one male to that of another (Blundell 1995: 123-124).

<sup>43</sup> For fuller references, see Chirassi 1968: 97 n. 14.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Vlachopoulos 2007: 111.

goddess; a divine midwife whose emblematic *pharmaka* of life (crocus, lily, iris, rose, vitex) played a central role in her cult.

Both the Xeste 3 fresco assemblage and the broadly contemporary Knossian Repositories include depictions of females, dresses decorated with crocuses, representations of girdles, lilies and flying fish. If, as argued by S. Marinatos and Dumas, the coil crowning the Xeste 3 goddess is a serpent, she may have a bearing on the snake-related deity associated with the Knossian Repositories, whom we identified as Eileithyia. Cameron, the first to recognize the menstrual use of saffron and relate the Xeste 3 *adyton* frescoes with initiation into womanhood, suggested that the Xeste 3 goddess and Eileithyia had “fused” cults; a suggestion raised by a comparative study of the Knossian and Thera frescoes portraying crocus fields, monkeys and floral tributes to female deities, and his restoration of the mural from the Villa of the Lilies at Amnisos (Cameron 1978: 579-582), which displays three midwifery *pharmaka* – lily, iris and a species of *Satureja*.

Scholars tend to connect the Xeste 3 goddess with the Greek Artemis because she protected women of all ages, oversaw childbirth, presided over puberty rites involving the use of crocus-dyed garments (at Brauron) and the dedication of hairlocks, and was associated with wild animals (Davis 1986: 403; Vlachopoulos 2007: 115). Prehistoric female-related cults are notoriously persistent. So, if the Xeste 3 goddess were the Bronze Age prototype of Artemis, her cult would be expected to have survived into historical times; in other words, Artemis should feature among the archaic deities of childbirth worshipped on Thera. But she doesn't. Those attested are Eileithyia, who had a temple on the island; the Nymphs, who received hairlocks in offering; Damia, Lochaia and Kallone (Baur 1902: 34, 70). As far as Crete is concerned, in the 1st millennium BC Artemis is strongly associated with the island and the native Eileithyia, but this bond cannot be determined in the preceding millennium (Nosch 2009: 32).

However, more significant than the personality of the Xeste 3 goddess – which given the lack of written sources may never be known – is the archetypal figure she embodies. The crocus, lily, iris, rose and vitex associated with her cult indicate that she is patterned on the wise-woman and provide evidence for a female pharmacological tradition. Likely belonging to this prehistoric midwifery tradition are other medicinal plants connected with females in Aegean Bronze Age art and/or with the cult of Cretan goddesses in historical times.

### 9.3.4. Pomegranate

The pomegranate (*Punica granatum*), represented in the Temple Repositories along with crocuses and lilies, is another ancient *pharmakon* relevant to the treatment of female conditions. In Babylonian medicine it is a midwifery drug (Böck 2013: 44). In the Hippocratic Corpus it occurs frequently, though not exclusively, in the gynaecological texts (Laskaris 1999: 11; Andò 2001: 237-238), prescribed to expel the foetus and the afterbirth, cleanse the uterus, treat prolapse and other womb conditions (Nixon 1995: 86). Soranus records five contraceptive pessaries containing pomegranate rind (Riddle 1991: 11; Nixon 1995: 86). According to modern scientific research, pomegranate extract stimulates uterine contractions (Promprom et al. 2010; Kupittayanant et al. 2014: 531, 534); the fruit has female sex hormones accounting also for its effectiveness as a contraceptive (Riddle 1991: 12; Nixon 1995: 86).

This plant, native to central Asia, was introduced in Crete in the 2nd millennium BC. Its earliest occurrence in an Aegean cult context are the bud inlays from the Knossian Repositories (Chapter 8, fig. 60) (Immerwahr 1989: 402-403 n. 24; Ward 2003: 530, 534). In Classical antiquity goddesses overseeing human, plant and/or animal (re)birth, such as Eileithyia, Hera, Artemis, Demeter, Persephone and Aphrodite display the emblem of the pomegranate, a fruit with strong symbolic connotations to life and the afterlife still surviving nowadays. In modern Greece the pomegranate features in two major and often paralleled rites of passage, marriage (i.e. initiation to childbirth-motherhood) and death. In some rural areas the seeds are scattered behind the newlyweds, the fruit offered by the groom to the bride or thrown over her head on the wedding night. *Kollyba*, the ancestral funerary dish believed to cleanse mourners from sin, contains pomegranate seeds (Lawson 1910: 13, 535, 559; Ward 2003: 532). The New Year's custom of smashing a pomegranate on the threshold of the home is yet another instance of its role as an agent of rebirth (see Chapter 7). The persistent fertility symbolism of this fruit, commonly attributed to its many seeds and blood-red juice (Greco 2016: 188; Ward 2003: 532), may have stemmed from its practical applications to facilitate childbirth, namely its efficacy as an oxytocic drug.

### 9. 3. 5. Opium poppy

The opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*) is another medicinal plant connected with ritual and female iconography in the Aegean Bronze Age. In the Hippocratic treatises it is employed primarily for female ailments (Guerra Doce 2006: 141). This powerful painkiller occurs in a prescription for tiphus, a beverage for phtisis and two remedies for pulmonary conditions; the other twenty-one references to the drug in the Corpus relate to gynaecological treatments (Andò 2001: 259). Soranus recommends opium to arrest uterine haemorrhage (Temkin 1991: 234), a therapy still advocated in 19th c. medicine (Dorrington 1844).<sup>45</sup>

A Postpalatial bench sanctuary at Gazi (LM IIIB) produced a concretion, snake tubes and five ‘goddesses with upraised arms’, one displaying on her tiara slit poppy capsules which attest to the extraction of the sap, namely opium (Fig. 82) (Marinatos 1937; Kritikos and Papadaki 1967; Gesell 1985: 69-70). This GUA figure has variously been interpreted as an aspect of the Minoan goddess endowed with healing capacity (Marinatos 1937: 288; Gesell 1985: 65); as a deity of ecstasy whose multivocal poppy attribute symbolizes life, wealth, therapy, welfare and, by extension, fertility; and as a goddess of the dead who puts mortals to sleep and awakens them to a new existence, her narcotic poppy symbolizing immortality (Kritikos and Papadaki 1967).

Rhyta in the shape of a poppy capsule came to light in LM III funerary contexts at Mochlos and Maroulas (Koehl 2006: 126), and a Proto-Geometric tomb at Prinias yielded a lekythos of the poppy type which may have contained opium for medicinal purposes, as suggests the snake depicted below its handle (Fig. 83) (Stampolidis 1998: 78); the snake is among the attributes of the Postpalatial GUA figures, thought to be connected with the earlier palatial cult of the deity embodied by the ‘snake goddesses’ from the Knossian Repositories (Alexiou 1958: 253-260; Gesell 1985: 47, 62-63; 2004: 139; Prent 2005: 196).

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<sup>45</sup> In modern Crete mothers “watered” their anxious infants “to sleep” with a poppy infusion (Marinatos 1937: 288 n. 1), a practice also attested in the Balkans (Predrag Kilibarda, pers. comm. 21-5-18); in southern Italy poppy capsules served as baby dummies for teething pain (Maurizio Buttazzo, pers. comm. 15-8-2013).



Fig. 82: Terracotta figure of a goddess with upraised arms crowned with opium poppy capsules. Gazi, LM IIIB

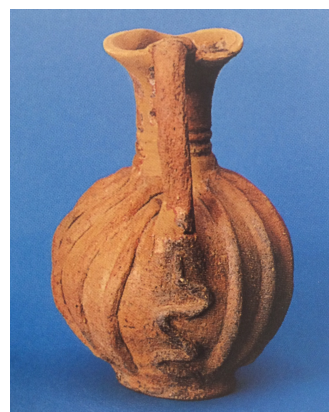


Fig. 83: Clay lekythos shaped as a poppy capsule with applied snake. Prinias, Proto-Geometric period

On a signet ring from the acropolis of Mycenae two women and a girl offer opium poppies and lilies to a female seated under a tree, likely a goddess or a priestess (Fig. 84) (Younger 2009: 208; Beckman 2012: 31). On the ring feature also the crescent moon, the sun and a row of six disembodied lion heads. According to Younger's interpretation, the depicted flowers may refer to the easing of parturition, as opium is useful in relieving pain and relaxing muscles, and lily oil was used in antiquity as an emollient on the vaginal lips.

Younger goes on to suggest that if the crescent moon situates the scene “within the general context of women’s menstruation, pubescence, fertility and childbirth”, the six lion heads could stand for the Minoanized Taweret. He then tentatively proposes that the seated female is a birth goddess (2009: 207-208). It has been suggested that the tree on the scene might be a terebinth (Beckman 2012: 30-31); if this were the case, three would be the gynaecological plants represented on the ring as, like the opium poppy and the lily, the terebinth was a pharmacological agent in midwifery (see below).



Fig. 84: Females offering opium poppies and lilies to a likely goddess or priestess seated under a tree, possibly a terebinth. Gold signet ring, Mycenae, LH I-II

### 9. 3. 6. Squill

Occasional depictions of the sea onion or squill (*Drimia maritima*, syn. *Urginea maritima*) in its double-bulb form (Fig. 85) occur on cult scenes associated with females in Aegean Bronze Age glyptic. Double squills are represented on the signet ring from Mochlos in connection with a Minoan goddess on a boat and a sacred tree (Fig. 86) (Marinatos 1933: 224; Warren 1984: 21, Pl. 7 fig. 2; 1990: 200-201), and on a sealing from Hagia Triada portraying a female and a sacred tree (Fig. 87). A signet ring from Chania suggests that double squills were hybridized with baetyls (Fig. 88), aniconic cult stones thought to have propitiated the fertility of humans and the broader natural world (Warren 1984: 19-21, Pl. 7 figs. 3, 4; 1990: 200-201).



Fig. 85: Double squills



Fig. 86: A seated goddess on a boat, a sacred tree and double squills. Gold signet ring, Mochlos, LM I

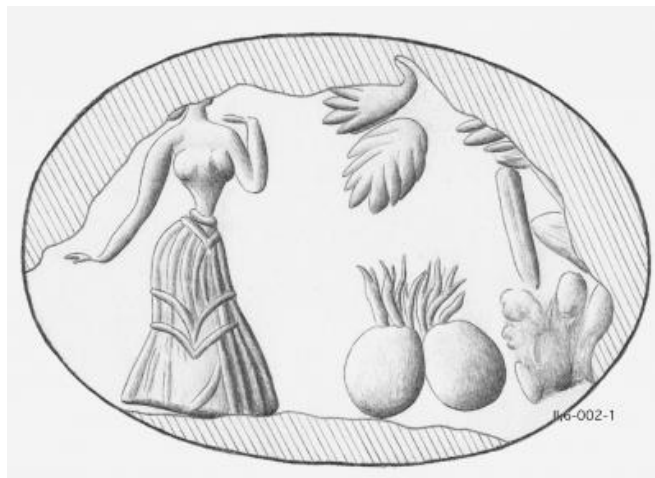


Fig. 87: Female, double squills and sacred tree. Sealing, Hagia Triada, LM I





Fig. 88: Two females and baetyls seemingly hybridized with double squills. Signet ring, Chania, LM I

This plant was involved in ancient rites propitiating fecundity, coming of age, cleansing and protection. During the Athenian festival of the Thargelia, aimed at the fertility of the earth, the *pharmakos*<sup>46</sup> – a person regarded as the embodiment of evil – was beaten on the genitals with squills and expelled from the city (Papamichael 1975: 76). When meat was meagre, Arcadian boys flogged the statue of Pan with squills to restore the god’s life-giving power. At Priene (Ionia) ephebes transitioning to adulthood engaged in a ‘squill fight’ (*skillomachia*) (Warren 1984: 18), a ritual recalling the whipping of Spartan ephebes with likely vitex twigs. Squills were planted before the door (Theophr. *HP* 7. 13. 4) (Warren 1984: 18) or hung on it to avert harm (Diosc. *Mat. med.* 2. 202).

In rural areas in Crete and the broader Aegean it is still a New Year’s Day custom to hang a squill on the front door (Fig. 89), or place it on the doorstep – alone or with a pomegranate – to ensure fertility for the house and the family, sometimes as a specific request ‘for a boy’ (*gia agori*) (Warren 1984: 17). On that same day Greek shepherds used to throw double squills in the sheepfolds for the ewes to bear twins (Papamichael 1975: 59). The squill, growing in rocky and sandy terrains, is symbolic of immortality; it never dries up and continues to flower even when uprooted, which accounts for *athanatos* (‘immortal’), its name in the Mesara. It is thus possible that in Minoan rituals this plant with observable regenerative qualities expressed hopes for annual rebirth (Warren 1984: 17-18, 21), abundance and prosperity.

<sup>46</sup> The term *pharmakos* is probably connected with *pharmakon*, ‘medicine, drug, poison’ (Compton 2006: 3).



Fig. 89: New Year's Day squill attached to a front door on the island of Symi, 2015

In the Hippocratic Corpus squill occurs as an ingredient in pessaries to cleanse the uterus, remedies for wounds and bronchial infection (Andò 2001: 246). Dioscorides recommends squill wine as an emmenagogue (*Mat. med.* 5. 26). The plant, listed as an abortifacient in a Medieval source (Riddle 1992: 123), is used in folk medicine to promote conception (Papamichael 1975: 58). Recent phytochemical studies indicate that it has abortifacient properties and affects the menstrual cycle (Kameshwari et al. 2012).

### 9. 3. 7. Dittany, pine, mastic and myrtle

Lastly, let us look at dittany, pine, mastic and myrtle, which were offered in wreaths to female deities worshipped in early historical Crete (Fig. 90), a ritual practice probably originating in Minoan times, as suggested by Warren in his study of the Fresco of the Garlands from Knossos; one of those garlands displays greenish leaves, perhaps depicting dittany, myrtle or olive (Fig. 91) (1985: 206-207, 194; 1988: 24).



Fig. 90: Male worshipper holding a wreath.  
Relief pithos, Crete, Archaic period

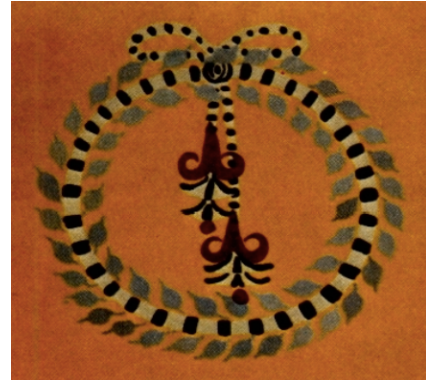


Fig. 91: Detail of the reconstructed  
Fresco of the Garlands from Knossos

Dittany (*Origanum dictamnus*), Crete's most famous medicinal herb in antiquity (Warren 1985: 194), is mentioned eleven times in the Hippocratic Corpus, exclusively in gynaecological treatments (Andò 2001: 277). Regarded in ancient sources as a panacea, dittany was used to facilitate childbirth, placental expulsion and lochial discharge after delivery, as an abortifacient, an emmenagogue, and for uterine moles; against stomach disorders, gastric bleeding, intestinal and spleen complaints, rheumatism, to heal injuries and as a cataplasm for oedemas (Liolios et al. 2010: 230; Dhoga-Tolis 2014: 43). Eileithyia-Artemis and Diktyнна were garlanded with dittany, *diktamnon* (Lawler 1948; Warren 1985: 194, 202 n. 59; Liolios et al. 2010: 231-232), which is thought to have an etymological link with mount Dikte and Diktyнна (Faure 1964: 99; Liolios et al. 2010: 233).<sup>47</sup>

Along with dittany garlands, Diktyнна was offered wreaths of pine or mastic (Warren 1985: 205; 1988: 26). We learn from Theophrastus that seers called the resin exuding from the silver fir<sup>48</sup> statues of Eileithyia the 'menstruation' of the goddess (*HP* 5.

<sup>47</sup> Another theory derives Diktyнна's name from δίκτυο, 'net', following the myth in Callimachus' *Hymn to Artemis*. As she escaped the sexual advances of Minos, Britomartis leapt into the sea from atop a cliff and fell into the saving nets of fishermen; thus becoming the Lady of the Nets, namely Diktyнна.

<sup>48</sup> *Abies alba*, belonging to the family of *Pinaceae*.

9. 8); whence it may be inferred that the pine tree was also sacred to Eileithyia. The Samian Hera received pine cones in offering, together with poppies and pomegranates – terracotta models and the actual plants (Kyrieleis 1993: 138-139). Demeter, yet another goddess with healing capacity, was herself related to the pine tree. The scholiast on Lucian states that during the Thesmophoria women threw pine branches and piglets into chasms, two offerings suitable to Demeter as both are symbolic of the *genesis* of crops and humans. Reporting on the Thesmophoria at Miletos, Stephanos of Byzantium says that the women dedicated pine cones and used pine branches to build their make-shift shelters, again because of the plant's connection with *genesis* (Nixon 1995: 86). In ancient medical texts most of the applications of pine (e.g. resin, extract, bark) are gynaecological. It was prescribed to ease difficult labour, expel the placenta, stimulate lochial flow and lactation, as an emmenagogue, abortifacient and contraceptive, for abnormal uterine discharges and prolapse. Recent studies suggest that the *Pinus sylvestris* contains female sex hormones (Nixon 1995: 86-87).

The mastic dedicated in wreaths to Diktyнна is the resin obtained from *Pistacia* species, including the terebinth (*Pistacia terebinthus*) and the lentisk (*Pistacia lentiscus*). The Ebers Papyrus describes pessaries with terebinth resin to 'loosen' the child from the belly (Riddle 1992: 70-71), attesting to its use as an oxytocic drug. In the Hippocratic Corpus terebinth occurs primarily, but not exclusively, in the gynaecological treatises (Laskaris 1999: 5); it is prescribed as an emmenagogue, analgesic and aphrodisiac, to treat menorrhagia and cure ulcers (Andò 2001: 280). As for the lentisk, its pharmaceutical applications in the Corpus are solely gynaecological (Andò 2001: 295).

Classical medical sources include myrtle as an ingredient in early stage abortifacients, oral and topic contraceptives, decoctions for uterine haemorrhage (Temkin 1991: 231; Riddle 1992: 77-78, 26, 30, 47), ulcerations and prolapse of the uterus (Plin. *HN* 23. 44, 81-82). Myrtle is mentioned eleven times in the Hippocratic treatises, only in one instance unrelated to gynaecology (Andò 2001: 235). This may account for the plant's symbolic association with marriage – the Athenian groom wore a myrtle wreath (Totelin 2009: 210). Myrtle was linked to the cult of Aphrodite, Artemis Soteira, Demeter; and to the worship of the Cretan goddesses Europa-Hellotis and Ariadne, who were garlanded with it. Hellotis/Hellotia had a women's festival to fertilize the crops, seemingly analogous to the Thesmophoria, which involved the dedication of myrtle wreaths. These were some sort of May garlands like the ones fashioned to celebrate the rebirth of spring in present day Greece (Fig. 92) (Willettts 1962: 159-162), where wreaths are still associated with

marriage, another rebirthing rite. Flower garlands crown the bride and groom in the Orthodox marriage ceremony; and the traditional wedding bread in Crete is made in the shape of a wreath decorated with symbols of fertility, such as flowers and snakes (Fig. 93).



Fig. 92: *Protomaia* ('May 1st') garland blessing a home in the old neighbourhood of Plaka. Athens, May 2016



Fig. 93: Cretan *gamokoulouro*, the customary wedding bread

### 9. 3. 8. Female ritual plants as a main source for early *materia medica*

Knowledge of the therapeutic properties of plants was transmitted through myth, ritual and religion long before it was put down in medical writings (Riddle 1997: 58). Laskaris argued that the plants used in Archaic cults, particularly those of deities linked to healing, are an important and often unexplored source for establishing the *materia medica* that was available to early healers and, eventually, to Hippocratic doctors. She suggested, for instance, that the medicinal applications of the pomegranate, mainly gynaecological in the Hippocratic Corpus, and those of the pine and opium poppy partly account for their connection with the worship of Demeter, Kore-Persephone, Hera and Aphrodite (1999: 1, 9).

In an earlier, groundbreaking approach to the practical significance of the plants involved in the cults of Demeter and her daughter Kore-Persephone, Nixon examined the pine, vitex, pomegranate and pennyroyal (*Menta pulegium*), documenting their ancient gynaeco-obstetrical uses. The pine and vitex are associated with the Thesmophoria. According to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, which portrays the goddess as skilled in herbal medicine, after abducting Persephone Hades fed the maiden pomegranate seeds. As for pennyroyal, it is an ingredient of the *kykeon*, the drink requested by Demeter when she arrived at Eleusis after wandering in search of her lost daughter. Pennyroyal was used in antiquity to expel the foetus and the afterbirth, foster lochial discharge, and as an emmenagogue; modern research corroborating that it stimulates uterine contractions (Nixon 1995: 85-87). Nixon concluded that these four plants provided an “easily accessible way for women to regulate every stage of their reproductive lives (menstruation, conception, abortion, delivery, lactation, and possibly menopause)” (1995: 88).

To this female medicinal kit identified by Nixon we may add the opium poppy, sacred to Demeter;<sup>49</sup> myrtle, used in crowns by the Eleusinian hierophants;<sup>50</sup> and the flowers that Persephone was gathering when abducted by Hades, the narcissus, violet, crocus, lily, iris and rose. The four latter, represented at Xeste 3, and the poppy have already been addressed. As for the narcissus,<sup>51</sup> known in antiquity for its narcotic, emetic and emmenagogue properties, it is an exclusively gynaecological drug in the Hippocratic Corpus; and so is the violet (*Viola odorata*), a flower prescribed to expel the foetus and the afterbirth (Andò 2001: 125, 247, 278). Demeter personifies grain. Relevant here is therefore the hypothesis raised by Wasson, Hofmann and Ruck (1978) that the central ingredient in the *kykeon* – the ceremonial potion drunk by the initiands at Eleusis – may have been the psychoactive ergot (*Claviceps purpurea*) (Chapter 3, fig. 6), a fungal parasite of rye, wheat and barley.<sup>52</sup> Ergot, from which Hofmann isolated lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) while devising an obstetric drug, is a *pharmakon* ancestrally used by midwives to hasten birth that contains a powerful oxytocic substance (1978: 25-34, esp. 27).

The Eleusinian mysteries, the most famous of initiation rites in antiquity, are thought to have originally been a festival of the autumn sowing, like the all-female

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<sup>49</sup> For primary references, see <http://www.theoi.com/Olympios/DemeterTreasures.html#Plants>

<sup>50</sup> See Willetts 1962: 161, n. 102.

<sup>51</sup> *Narkissos* derives from *narki*, ‘paralysis, anesthesia’.

<sup>52</sup> The *kykeon* is described in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (208-209) as a mixture of barley, water and pennyroyal.

Thesmophoria in which women propitiated both the fertility of the fields and their own (Nilsson 1940: 25-26); as we saw, the gynaecological vitex, pomegranate and pine were involved in the Thesmophoria, ceremonies of likely prehistoric ancestry. In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, the myth explaining the origins of the Eleusinian mysteries and the seasonal cycle (birth-death-rebirth of grain), Demeter is said to come from Crete; and another extant tradition ascribes a Cretan origin to the mysteries (Diod. Sic. 5. 77. 3). Various regions of the Greek world celebrated a feast for Demeter *Eleusinia*. The *Eleusinia* was a festival held in honour of Eileithyia (*Eleuthyia*), which has been related to *Eleusinos*, a month name attested at the Cretan *poleis* of Olous, Viannos, Gortyna, and on the island of Thera. Several scholars have thus established a link between *Eleusis*, *Eleusinia*, *Eleusinos* and *Eleuthyia*, and associated all these names with “a goddess of fecundity and fertility” of likely Minoan origin (Genevrois 2017: 407-410, n. 72). It is hence noteworthy that part of the female herbal kit connected with Demeter’s cult is prefigured at Xeste 3 (vitex, crocus, lily, iris, rose); and on the fresco of the Villa of the Lilies at Amnisos (lily, iris), related to Eileithyia’s worship by Cameron, who suggested that she and the Xeste 3 goddess had fused cults.

Willets argued that the chief Minoan goddess “was associated with herbal magic, which is older than agriculture and is everywhere the province of women”; noting that in later Greece herbal offerings linked to the cult of female deities often had special associations with childbirth and menstruation – e.g. dittany, vitex, lily, pomegranate, myrtle, galingale, helichryse (1962: 160, n. 96-101). Following his lead, Warren postulated that many of the plants featuring in Minoan religious iconography had a practical bearing on the promotion of life (1985: 207; 1988: 27).

The comparative evidence brought forward in this chapter provides substantive and well-documented support to Willets’ and Warren’s contentions. It allows us to conclude that a Minoan sacred package of gynaeco-obstetrical drugs, including the crocus, lily, iris, rose, vitex, pomegranate, opium poppy, squill, terebinth/mastic, and likely dittany, myrtle and pine, was associated with the cult of an ancestress/goddess presiding over (re)birth attested by periparturient iconography; an archetypal figure conceived in the image of the native wise-women, who displays as attributes the main pharmaceutical plants employed by her human counterparts. The identification of this herbal kit is of utmost importance to the early history of medical practice, as it reveals the existence of an Aegean female healing tradition long predating Hippocratic medicine, and shows that the plants involved in female-related rites are a main source for prehistoric *materia medica*.





## **Conclusions**

Hippocratic medicine, formulated in the Aegean and southwestern Anatolia in the 5th c. BC, is traditionally regarded as marking the dawn of Western medical practice, but an increasing number of scholars are challenging this view. They postulate that Hippocratic doctors were more likely to have organized and systematized an older body of knowledge than to have been tackling fundamentally new questions. And they argue that this older body of knowledge, passed down from generation to generation, is to be sought in the Bronze Age Aegean, namely in the tradition of Minoan and later Mycenaean healers (McGeorge 1988: 51; 2011: 311; Laskaris 1999; Arnott 2004: 153-154; 2014: 51).

As reported in the first chapter of this research, *On the Diseases of Women* and *On the Nature of the Woman* are the texts thought to comprise the oldest part of the Hippocratic Corpus. Scholarship has noted that, in contrast with the rest of more theoretical treatises, these texts contain a systematic catalogue of therapies and pharmacological recipes not found elsewhere within the Corpus; recording over a hundred medicinal compounds and more than sixty plants which belong exclusively to female pharmacopoeia. Because medical knowledge was passed down orally long before it was put down in writing (mainly by male authors), and because midwives were the practitioners traditionally treating the health issues of women and children, it has been claimed that these two Hippocratic texts originated in an older, oral female tradition. In other words, that the foundational core of Greek hence European medicine is an ancestral body of female knowledge and practice.

This thesis develops an integrated response to that sound but unattended claim. A number of nagging queries triggered the research. In the art of the Aegean Bronze Age females are the ones associated with plants, including a powerful analgesic, the opium poppy, and a recognized ancient gynaecological drug, the crocus. Why then do mainstream narratives of the dawn of Western medicine ignore this unmistakable female-*pharmaka* connection and focus only on historical sources, as if medical practice could possibly have sprung ex nihilo with the emergence of writing conventionally dividing history from prehistory? Other doubts were raised by *sage-femme*, the French term for midwife meaning ‘wise woman’, a name hardly compatible with traditional scholarly portrayals of the folk midwife as an ignorant and superstitious practitioner. Like many women in the West nowadays, when giving birth to my son I-we endured what the World Health Organisation has recently typified as obstetric violence. I was then left wondering if the crisis, the miracle, the unspeakability of bringing forth life had always been handled in such a cold, mechanical and intrusive manner. This thesis is somehow also a reply to that query .

Archaeologists have long studied funerary data as a crucial source for interpreting prehistoric and ancient societies, their culture, social organization, beliefs about the world and the afterlife. But while the high incidence of maternal and perinatal mortality is a well recognized feature of these societies, no attention has been paid to the medico-religious systems developed to address the health issues causing such a distinctive rate of reproductive mortality. The major difficulties in this research have thus been of the conceptual kind, challenges which in turn have shaped and structured the thesis. In the course of gathering insights from archaeological, historical, ethnographic, anthropological and other sources, it soon became apparent that the emerging evidence I was collecting for a prehistoric female healing system in Crete needed to be framed within the context of similar traditions suggested by a comparative approach to primary data. It also became apparent that the main reason why these primal therapeutic systems have remained unseen, hence untheorized, are gender and other academic biases supported by binary oppositions (e.g. male-culture-rationality-medicine-religion/female-nature-biology-magic-superstition), which overshadow the relevant data and their interconnections.

Help to conceptualize these healing complexes came from pioneering anthropological research challenging the presumed ‘naturalness’ of human birth. From the study of cephalopelvic proportions in fossil hominids, evolutionary anthropologists have inferred that the pattern of regularly seeking assistance in childbirth (termed ‘obligate midwifery’) set in early on as women’s *cultural* response to the hazardous delivery of notoriously large and helpless newborns; a flaw deriving from bipedal adaptation and encephalization. I have thus called the integrated medico-religious responses (mechanical, pharmacological and ritual) developed to cope with this pressing survival issue *archaic midwifery complexes*.

In the endeavour to trace the articulation of these healing systems in the prehistoric record, Chapter 2 explores the links between birth, medicine and religion. It looks at the health issues causing a high rate of reproductive mortality; and argues that the crisis of childbirth, the foremost embodied experience of (re)creation, has deeply imprinted religious beliefs and practices, as shown by the many transitions conceived and ritualized as metaphorical rebirths (e.g. puberty, adoption, marriage, purification, death). This is a crucial point to understanding three entwined issues that permeate the research: the complexity of archaic midwifery systems, the relevance of the folk midwife’s role as facilitator of critical passages, and the use of birth-related materials and symbolism in rebirthing rites. After locating the pattern of assisted birth at the origins of midwifery, the

chapter makes two other important points. Firstly, undermining the ingrained idea that women's rituals are magical/superstitious practices, it stresses that the customary trance-inducing techniques of midwives are mainly prophylactic (preventing obstructed delivery) and oxytocic (facilitating birth). Secondly, the presumed invisibility of birth in the material record is challenged by collecting cross-cultural ethnographic evidence for the ritual use of figurines to ease labour; some depict the spiritual/ancestral midwives invoked for guidance by their human counterparts, significantly indicating that premodern midwifery was expressed and practised *within* the cult of such supernatural healers. Then, turning to the archaeological record, the chapter reviews scholarly interpretations of periparturient Paleolithic figurines relating them to obstetrics and (re)birth rites. It examines relevant iconography from Neolithic Çatalhöyük (periparturient/splay-legged images, weasel skulls embedded in plastered breasts), which provides a first glimpse of the cultic geography of the weasel later encompassing Crete (2nd millennium BC) (Chapter 8). Lastly, materials from Chalcolithic Cyprus are also addressed, notably the birth deposit from Kissonerga-Mosphilia which comprises periparturient figurines and shells – an association documented as well in prehistoric Crete (Chapter 9). Concluding that the midwife is likely the most primeval of healers, I suggest that fully developed midwifery complexes may have been in place since the Upper Paleolithic.

Chapter 3 focuses on the ill-understood practitioner at the heart of these systems, much differing from the biomedical midwife, both in status and in the functions she performs. A relevant development in the research came when I realized that the term *sage-femme*, 'wise woman', is no French oddity but a survival of the oldest and commonest name for the midwife; a name identifying her as a shaman, 'one who knows'. Seeking to characterize her *techné*, the chapter reads into her lexicon and collects plentiful ethnohistorical evidence for midwifery as a core shamanic practice. The disseminated myth of the shaman as a primordially male healer is then thoroughly contested through a review of prehistoric graves interpreted as shamanic burials, all hosting skeletons of women; an overlooked female grave with shamanic features from Çatalhöyük is included in the discussion. I argue that these burials contain a distinctive range of funerary items intimately bonded with the wise-woman's craft in later historical traditions (e.g. pregnant figurines; remains of weasels/mustelids, puppies, tortoises; shells); these categories of materials significantly occur in Minoan votive assemblages pointing to midwifery cult and practice (Chapters 7-9). Using Eliade's classical characterization of the (male) shaman, I then identify the main functions of the midwife in the ethnographic record:

obstetrician=maker of human life (birth), pharmacologist-general practitioner, diviner, and midwife of the dead (rebirth). I argue that these are her *prototypical* functions because they are mirrored by the earliest midwife goddesses in the historical record; and conclude that the wise-woman is a foremost shamanic healer. This is a major breakthrough in the thesis, as it accounts for the cross-cultural divinization of the midwife. Also relevant is another phenomenon observed in this chapter, the transfer of the genesiac functions of archaic divine midwives (i.e. creating=fashioning humans and determining their destiny) to male gods in rising patriarchal societies; an early historical trend shedding light on the demotion-demise of Eileithyia pinpointed in Chapters 5-6.

Chapter 4 draws from primary and secondary sources on Near Eastern, Egyptian and Graeco-Roman goddesses presiding over birth to develop methodological guidelines for the study of archaic midwifery complexes. As a caveat to prospective researchers in this new field, I illustrate how the midwife-nurse-mother-nature recurring misassociations in modern scholarship overshadow primary data on female therapeutic lore; obscuring the pharmacological dimension of plants and animals emblematic of birth goddesses, and fostering conflicting oppositions between archaic midwifery and medicine, as exemplified in Chapter 7. The point is made that the folk midwife is often respectfully addressed as ‘mother’, ‘grandmother’ or ‘godmother’ (of all those she has delivered), a spiritual motherhood *not* to be conflated with the biological one. The focus then turns to an intrinsic feature of birth goddesses that I term the *specular pattern*, which has long been noted by scholarship but is surprisingly underexplored: such deities are modelled in the image of the human midwife, namely they *mirror* the functions and attributes of the earthly practitioners. Thus, while these healers passed down their knowledge orally, their (divinized) lore and/or equipment may be traced in the reflections of their supernatural counterparts (e.g. professional attire; medical instruments and ritual devices; drugs – plants, animals, minerals; symbols); this is illustrated in my comparative analysis of Nintu’s and Ninisina/Gula’s medical attributes. Looking into the specular pattern I then identify *replicability*, the capacity to be one and several, as a prototypical trait of archaic divinities overseeing the reproductive process (e.g. Eileithyia/Eileithyiai; Taweret/Twelve Tawerets); this valuable conceptual tool for spotting birth deities/daemons in primary sources is used in the analysis of the Taweret-derived multiple Minoan Genius (Chapter 9). Further light is shed on the material and symbolic universe of midwifery by identifying ancient themes and motifs persistently associated with birth (water, light, astral and snake imagery; doorways/passages, keys and knots). Lastly, drawing from the compelling evidence for

shared practices and beliefs, Chapter 4 devises a methodological template for the study of midwifery complexes linked to the cult of archaic birth goddesses which identifies categories of materials liable to belong to these therapeutic systems.

In the second part of the thesis this template is applied to the study of the evidence for a midwifery complex in prehistoric Crete, taking Eileithyia's cult as an established starting point. Chapter 5 underscores the contrast between the popularity of her cult in ancient Greece and her low status in canonical religion. I pinpoint literary and iconographic sources which illustrate the process of demotion-demise she undergoes from Archaic to Classical times; concluding that Zeus – assisted by Hephaestus or Prometheus – takes over Eileithyia's genesiac role, as well as her auspicious gesture of birth, the upraised arms. Other data examined in this chapter indicate that the Greek Eileithyia was a more complex deity than is commonly assumed, as she oversaw not only human birth, but also animal reproduction and metaphorical rebirths/transitions, likely a legacy from her Cretan predecessor.

In Chapter 6, the review of textual and archaeological evidence for Eileithyia's cult on Crete attests to three main issues: her popularity on the island; her connection with a goddess of Minoan ancestry displaying upraised arms; and her association with water and caves (hence concretions/baetyls), elements persistently linked to birth-healing-cleansing in historical and ethnographic records. The diachronic approach to the offerings from Eileithyia's cave at Tsoutsouros marks another important development in the thesis. I argue for a critical change in the characterization of the goddess in the 9th-7th c. BC, visible in her unprecedented association with *explicit* childbirth scenes and images of nursing females, iconographic themes hitherto absent from the Cretan repertoire whose emergence reflects the rise of city-state gender ideology on the island. This observation lends support to Demargne's and Nilsson's argument that Eileithyia's Bronze Age prototype was gradually restricted to a single one of her functions, the patronage of human birth. The research is thus led to re-evaluate Eileithyia's role within the broader context of Minoan religion. I raise the hypothesis that, if the Eileithyia of Greek times is the direct descendant of a Minoan midwife goddess performing manifold (re)birth-related functions, she should have retained, along with the upraised arms, some of the healing attributes of her Bronze Age ancestress; and these attributes should be discernible in the Minoan votive record in association with materials liable to belong to a midwifery complex.

Chapters 7 and 8 are devoted to testing this hypothesis. Chapter 7 challenges the conflicting argument, fostered by the midwife-mother-nature misassociations, that Eileithyia was a healing goddess only where she received anatomical votives (on Paros). I identify visible and encoded medical emblems of the goddess in the historical record, including the *harpē* (obstetric knife), shears, and physician's hat, as well as plants and animals pertaining to the ancestral pharmacopoeia of midwives. These are dittany, the pomegranate, the dog (bitch/puppy), the snake and the weasel, all sources of ancient midwifery drugs/treatments used primarily but not only to ease birth; oxytocic agents also playing a role in rebirth rites, some of which have survived into the present.

A special word is owed here to the weasel, the 'good birther' (Cretan *kalogennousa*), the 'little midwife' (e.g. Spanish *comadreja*), to which/whom this thesis is greatly indebted because major breakthroughs came by tracing its/her persistent connection with women-birth-midwifery in the linguistic, ethnographic, historical and archaeological records. As in Classical written sources the animal is an exclusive attribute of Eileithyia and cognate birth goddesses (Hekate and Leto/Wadjet), I conjectured that the weasel was a pharmacological animal in midwifery. The confirmation of this hypothesis by a quote in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* and a critical analysis of Galinthias' myth triggered the search for other medical attributes of Eileithyia (Chapter 7). And this offered a sound argument to refute the traditional interpretation as pests/vermin of the weasels (figurines) from Petsophas, where, like at Minoan peak sanctuaries more broadly, the occurrence of anatomical votives has long been recognized as evidence for a healing cult (Chapter 8).

Thus, following the trail of mustelids in the Minoan votive record and beyond, Chapter 8 brings to light materials and interconnections within and without Crete providing evidence for a midwifery complex on the island: such as the weasel, tortoise and dog models associated with explicit gynaecological offerings at Petsophas; the mustelid iconography from its associated settlement, Palaikastro, along with the evidence for dog/puppy and weasel sacrifice at the site; the gynaecological votives, dog/puppy figurines and snake models from Jouktas, the Knossian peak sanctuary; or the Temple Repositories of Knossos yielding a weasel skull, the famous 'snake-goddesses' – so similar to the snake-handling deities on contemporary Egyptian midwifery paraphernalia – iconography of gynaecological plants, votive girdles, shells, deer antlers and other relevant finds. I argue that these materials are to be associated with the cult of Eileithyia, as she is the only Cretan-born goddess connected with the snake, dog, tortoise, deer *and* weasel in later historical sources. The fact that the earliest Minoan votive weasels appear mainly in the

northeasternmost part of the island (Petsophas and Palaikastro), and occur with models of tortoises, dogs and explicit gynaecological votives (Petsophas), suggests close Cretan interactions with Near Eastern therapeutic practices; practices originating in the Mesolithic Levant and Neolithic Anatolia, later attested in Mesopotamia, as is indicated by the Natufian female shamanic burial from Hilazon Tachtit hosting two mustelid skulls and 86 tortoise shells; the woman interred with a puppy at the Natufian site of ‘Ain Mallaha; the female buried with a weasel and a puppy at Çatalhöyük – probably a wise-woman – and the weasel skulls embedded in plastered breasts at the site; the close bond of dogs/puppies with the Mesopotamian medical goddess Ninisina/Gula, patterned on the midwife; and the use of puppies and snakes by Hittite wise-women in healing, cleansing, apotropaic and divinatory rituals (Chapters 2-4, 7-8). My suggestion that the snake goddesses associated with a weasel (skull), serpents and other oxytocic agents (plants) in the Knossian Repositories depict Minoan wise-women is to be framed within this overarching therapeutic system also encompassing Egypt (i.e. Middle Kingdom snake-handling birth deities, the Ramesseum deposit, Wadjet’s sacred weasel/ichneumon); and within historical traditions of snake-handling therapists in the Eastern and Central Mediterranean (i.e. the Cypriot Ophiogenes, Lybian Psylli and Italic Marsi) (Chapter 8).

Through a diachronic approach to the periparturient icon (e.g. squatting images, female vessels), associated finds and iconographic themes/motifs in the Cretan prehistoric record, Chapter 9 postulates the continuity of a cult revolving around notions of (re)birth from Neolithic to Post-Minoan times: a cult involving the ritual use of shells and special stones since the Final Neolithic (at Phaistos), and the ceremonial handling of liquids and serpents since Prepalatial times. This religious background is consistent with my contention that the Knossian Repositories are linked to the worship of a midwife ancestress/deity, not a ‘mother goddess’ as has traditionally been presumed – an assumption unsupported by the lack of Minoan kourotrophic imagery, as noted by critical scholarship (Chapter 8). I posit that this embedded Cretan (re)birth cult may have fostered the Protopalatial import of Taweret, the Egyptian multiple goddess intimately bonded with childbirth, the rebirth of the dead and water/lustration who was transformed into the multiple Minoan Genius; the replicability and functions of the Genius suggesting that Taweret could have been adopted as assistant to the midwife goddess articulating the healing complex under investigation. Since the weasel-related materials discussed in Chapter 8 point to Eileithyia, and some scholars see the Kouretes as the historical descendents of the Genii, I then explore Eileithyia’s connections with these mythical



warriors performing as birth daemons of Zeus. Lastly, a comparative approach to the close bond of females with plants in Aegean Bronze Age iconography results in the identification of a ritual package of medicinal plants belonging to the ancestral pharmacopoeia of midwives; some are represented in the Knossian Repositories pointing to Eileithyia's cult, and on the Xeste 3 frescoes thought to represent female transition rites on account of the pervasive depiction of the gynaecological crocus. This package of healing plants comprising the crocus, lily, iris, rose, vitex, pomegranate, opium poppy, squill, terebinth/mastic, and likely dittany, myrtle and pine, includes some of the botanical species recorded in the Hippocratic Corpus as exclusive to women's pharmacopoeia (Chapter 9). As for the dog/puppy, snake, tortoise and deer, they appear in the Hippocratic Corpus as pharmacological animals used mainly in the treatment of female conditions (Chapters 7-9).

The claim that the oldest Hippocratic treatises compile a pre-existing body of female lore thus finds an integrated response in the evidence for a prehistoric midwifery complex in Crete brought forward in this thesis; a response calling for a final discussion within the context of birth-related practices and beliefs shared across the Near East, Egypt and the broader Mediterranean, Eileithyia's cult, and the data attesting to her historical demotion-demise.

Prehistoric Crete was inscribed in an overarching midwifery system transcending the idiosyncrasies of local traditions, namely a midwifery koine; as shown by similarities in the use of gynaecological *materia medica* – e.g. vitex, crocus, pomegranate in Mesopotamia, terebinth in Egypt (Chapter 9); the cultic geography of weasels, puppies, tortoises and snakes (Chapters 2-4, 7-8); parallels in healing/cleansing rites related to the wise-women's craft (e.g. puppy sacrifice) (Chapters 7-8); the widespread use of pregnant-periparturient images, shells and special/exotic stones in (re)birth practices; or the cross-culturally attested role played by key midwifery drugs (plants and animals), implements and/or symbolism in ancient rituals marking physical, social or seasonal transitions envisaged as metaphorical rebirths (Chapters 2-4, 7-9).

As may be recalled, the way in which a society views and handles the birthing event essentially mirrors its attitudes toward the experience of living (Gélis 1996: xi) and the constructions of gender underpinning its broader symbolic ordaining/understanding of reality (Chapter 2). Changes in the place held by the birth icon in the religious mindset of (pre)historic societies and variations in the functions of midwife goddesses thus reflect

transformations in social constructions of gender. As a state-level system consolidates in Mesopotamia, Nintu, the Sumerian *Dea faber* who creates life through her midwifery skills, yields to male gods her capacity to create humans from clay and determine their fate – a transfer subsequently attested in other cultures (e.g. the Egyptian Khnum and Ptah, the Hebrew Yahweh, and the Greek culture hero Prometheus mould human life from clay) (Chapters 3-4). In Jacobsen's words, the ancestral prominence of Nintu in the cosmic hierarchy proved untenable in a rising patriarchal society, since "a goddess as a supreme ruler, rather than a god, a midwife rather than a warrior", did not fit into the new emerging ideology (1973: 294). In turn, Bolger noted that the Chalcolithic centrality of the birth icon in Cyprus wanes in the 2nd millennium BC when, announcing the rise of Bronze Age state-level society, unprecedented depictions of females holding and nursing children appear in the record; kourotrophic images emphasizing the re-defined social role of the woman as mother (2002), as *mater* rather than *genitrix*, a paradigm shift pointing to an ideological decline of female status within an emerging patriarchal system (1996: 369, 371).

This phenomenon finds parallels in Crete. From the Neolithic, beginning in the 7th millennium BC, to the early 1st millennium BC there are virtually no images of nursing females. Save for a (relative) gap in the Neopalatial period – precisely when a centralized system first crystallizes on the island – throughout these six millennia the periparturient (re)birth icon can be traced in the visual record, but there are no images of completed motherhood, no child-rearing scenes; such depictions appear in the Early Iron Age in concomitance with the articulation of an (armed male) aristocracy heralding the rise of the polis system, and soon thereafter the birth icon twilights from the Cretan repertoire (Chapters 6, 9). There can be no doubt that continuity was fundamental for Neolithic and Bronze Age Cretans. Yet in their omnipresent representations of females, human and divine, the symbolic emphasis is never placed on them as prolific breeders, implying that the primary social role of women was *not* mothering. Evidence for the traditionally presumed 'mother goddess' of the Minoans is hence nowhere to be found. If the line of reasoning in this thesis is consistent, there is instead evidence for a religious therapeutic metaphor patterned on the wise-woman, an archetype associated in the Bronze Age with plant and animal midwifery drugs, agents of (re)birth practically and symbolically fostering the continuity of the life cycle.

The examined weasel-related materials strongly suggest that this archetypal healer, probably a multiple=replicating entity (i.e. one and several), was central to Minoan

religion; and is identifiable with Eileithyia in Protopalatial times (e.g. at Petsophas, Knossos), when the squatting icon features on pouring vessels and seals (in tombs and other contexts), and the foreign-looking but conceptually familiar Taweret is imported into Crete. In the Postpalatial period, when Eileithyia is mentioned on the Knossian tablets, female rhyta with pierced vaginas are connected with funerary rites (at Katsambas, Gournia) and a shrine (at Kephala Khondrou); but there is yet no kourotrophic iconography in the record (Chapter 9). This excludes the existence of a goddess specialized in the (re)production of children, implying that in the 2nd millennium BC Eileithyia's functions transcended the domain of human parturition; as is actually indicated by votives from Tsoutsouros linking the goddess to the protection of both human and animal welfare.

The trend towards Eileithyia's specialization in *childbirth* emerges in the Early Iron Age, when childbearing and nursing scenes appear at Tsoutsouros. This incipient specialization, concomitant with the establishment of the sanctuary of Zeus Thenatas at Eileithyia's birthplace (Amnisos), foreshadows the demotion of the midwife goddess in canonical Greek religion, which is completed in Classical times when Zeus takes over her capacity to foster birth=life=creation (Chapter 5). Calling for future research is a detailed exploration of this process that would involve the study of the assimilation myths naturalizing the Greek god as Cretan (e.g. cave birth, identification with a baetyl, loss of umbilical cord at Amnisos); the votives from his shore sanctuary at Amnisos suggesting that he was worshipped together with the locally cave-born Eileithyia; the association of both deities with baetylic cult; Eileithyia's bond with Zeus' birth demons, the Kouretes (e.g. at Tsoutsouros); and the evolution of the goddess as a therapeutic metaphor in Greek iconography. Comparative approaches to the emergence of nursing imagery, the waning of the birth icon, the demotion of archaic midwife goddesses, and the (male) professionalization of medicine in rising patriarchal societies would help framing Eileithyia's case within a broader early historical trend.

The data analysed in the second part of this research substantiate Nilsson's argument that birth had a deeper foundation and significance in Minoan belief. And the data lend support to my suggestion that the historical Eileithyia embodies the fallen archetype of a Minoan divine wise-woman performing – like her human prototype – manifold therapeutic (re)birth roles, who in her assimilation to Greek religion is downgraded to the core function of her craft, the patronage of human birth; retaining into historical times the upraised arms emblematic of the GUA type deity associated with Eileithyia at Tsoutsouros – and likely at Pachlitzani Agriada.

According to Alexiou, the GUA image was introduced in Protopalatial Crete from the Near East, where in Old Babylonian iconography Ninkarrak, Inanna/Ishtar and Nana are typically portrayed with upraised arms (1958: 237-243). It may be noted that Nana/Nanaya is connected with childbirth (Streck and Wasserman 2012: 184, 198), and so is Inanna/Ishtar (e.g. she ferries the foetus through the amniotic water). As for Ninkarrak, she is no other than Gula, the medical goddess associated with puppies made in the image of the wise-woman (Chapter 4). Characterizing Eileithyia in Greek iconography are her upraised arms, a gesture auspiciating labour and delivery occasionally performed by parturient deities/mythical creatures (e.g. Zeus, Medusa) (Chapters 5, 7). Elsewhere in the Mediterranean there are iconographic instances of females with upraised arms seemingly fostering rebirth in funerary contexts (e.g. Tanit symbol, squatting figures from Tarquinia) (Chapters 7-8).

In the Cretan record the upraised-arms gesture is first embodied by an Early Neolithic squatting figurine from Knossos. There seems to be a gap in the Prepalatial period (?).<sup>1</sup> Then, in Protopalatial times, the upraised arms appear again associated with crouching females. The Postpalatial GUA figures displaying the gesture have been related to the earlier cult represented by the snake goddesses from the Knossian Repositories – in all likelihood Eileithyia's – one holding serpents in her upraised arms; images in turn connected with Prepalatial female vessels with serpents (from tombs at Koumasa and Mochlos). The Postpalatial rhyton with pierced vagina from Kephala Khondrou was found with a snake tube, a cult implement characteristic of GUA worship (Chapters 8-9). GUA figurines featuring in Early Iron Age models from Tsoutsouros (e.g. boat with embryo, bowls) have been interpreted as depictions of Eileithyia/the Eileithyiai. The Early Iron Age sanctuary of Pachlitzani Agriada, thought to be related to her cult, yielded a parturient figurine and the probable base of a GUA. The Geometric/Orientalizing funerary vessel from Ampelokepoi with upraised arms and a vagina-like spout elicits ideas about rebirth. When the polis system consolidates on Crete, both the GUA image and the periparturient icon wane from the repertoire, which seems no coincidence. The connection of the upraised-arms gesture with notions of (re)birth and midwife goddesses

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<sup>1</sup> Or could perhaps the so-called 'sheep-bells', enigmatic objects occurring in EM III-MM IA funerary, domestic and sanctuary contexts (Peatfield and Morris 1990), depict females with upraised arms? Interpreted as votive horned masks, or votive robes recalling those from the Knossian Repositories, 'sheep-bells' occasionally display faces and appear as a dyad (Peatfield and Morris 1990), namely as replicating images.

is yet another relevant topic awaiting broader investigation; and so is the characteristic replicating/multiplying pattern of such deities, whose worship appears to be deeply embedded in prehistory.

Thus, as this thesis brings to light a Cretan female healing tradition long predating Hippocratic medicine and re-assesses Eileithyia's figure, it opens new avenues of research within and beyond the Cretan context; offering basic parameters for the study of archaic midwifery complexes that may hopefully inspire studies further contributing to map women's fundamental role in the making of medical knowledge.

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