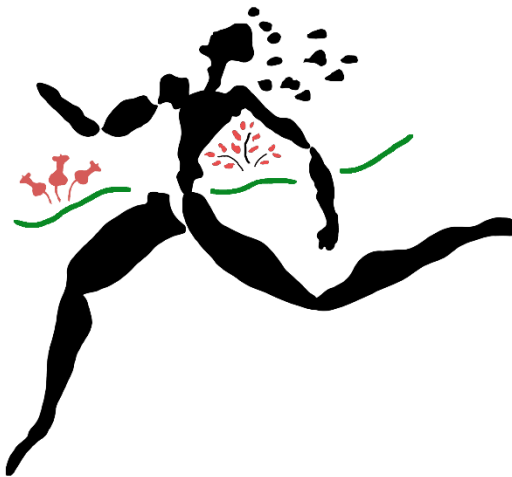


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No (e)scape?

Towards a Relational Archaeology of Man, Nature, and Thing in the Aegean Bronze Age



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ESCAPING THE PEAK: PEAK SANCTUARY RITUALS, OR RITUALS ON A PEAK SANCTUARY?

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM: PEAK SANCTUARIES AND THEIR DISTRIBUTION

There is no doubt that, ever since it has been following religious beliefs, humanity has always been spiritually attracted by high places. After a comparative look at the many different cosmologies/mythological systems around the world, one could easily argue that most civilizations recognize the existence of three kinds of parallel worlds: A material dwelling of humans and all other living beings and two additional types of spiritual worlds where the gods/spirits/dead ancestors reside, namely a celestial world(s) above the sky and an underworld(s) deep under the earth's surface. Due to this, peaks and caves are of high importance, as they are the closest points of the human world to the spiritual worlds.

This is basic human religious thinking, and as a matter of fact, Minoan Crete was not an exception. Many peaks and caves on Crete seem to have been of sacred importance for the Minoans.¹ In the case of the high places their sanctity can be presumed from a number of Minoan religious sites, the so-called "Minoan Peak Sanctuaries". This type of sites consists of a number of natural terraces and a sacred point near the top,² sometimes framed by a building, but in most cases free standing in the landscape without any buildings at all.

Peak Sanctuary sites vary considerably in size, plan, or even wealth, depending each time on the type of their surrounding settlements and the social status of the pilgrims they attracted.³ Nevertheless, in their diversity they are defined by a set of common rules.⁴ Among others a) they are located relatively close to the settlement they serve (but they are never a part of it)⁵ b) they are visibly aligned with terrestrial⁶ or celestial⁷ points of great importance (a settlement, other Peak Sanctuaries, or the rising of the sun over a nearby peak at the equinoxes) c) there is an abundance of pebbles⁸ and, above all, d) they make use of the same assemblage of equipment, such as human and animal figurines, pottery, and some other artefacts of ritual use, like ladles or offering/libation tables.⁹ A uniformity of cult on the Peak Sanctuaries cannot be accepted by the majority of the scholars,¹⁰ but still, similar cult objects indicate the practice of similar rituals.

However, despite the common nature of their rituals, the distribution of the Peak Sanctuary sites varies considerably on the island of Crete. There is a large concentration of sites on the eastern part of the island, but almost no Peak Sanctuaries are to be found on the western part. Also, in the central part, the sites appear to be grouped into three clusters, one along the west side of Mount Dikti, one along the east side of Mount Ida and one between the west side of Mount Ida and the White Mountains (Fig. 1).

A comparison of this picture with the distribution of the palaces and other possible administrative centers on the island (Fig. 2) makes obvious that these two patterns do not match perfectly. Many Peak Sanctuaries probably served the local villagers, while on the other side, not every major center is served. Settlements like Gournia, Cydonia, or even the very important palatial centers of Phaistos and Malia seem not to have any nearby Peak Sanctuaries at all. Of course the local geography plays its part, as we have large plains on the centre of the island, while very big mountains are not easily accessible to encourage a settlement to establish a Peak Sanctuary on them.¹¹ But still, these factors do not explain everything. Gournia could have had its own Peak Sanctuary on the nearby mountains; Phaistos could have had a Peak Sanctuary on the ridges nearby (just as Palaikastro does); Malia could also have had a Peak Sanctuary on Mount Selena. But so far no Peak Sanctuary sites have been confirmed in the vicinity of these major settlements.

All of these Minoan centers were expected to have their own Peak Sanctuaries, but the reality is that they do not. It seems like they chose not to have one. And the question arising of this probable conclusion is, why is it that some regions of the island, contrary to others, did not need a sacred peak? Did they have an alternative?

PEAK SANCTUARY SUBSTITUTES (?)

An interesting indication in this direction comes perhaps from an unexpected source. On the so-called sanctuary rhyton of Zakros¹² we see a small sanctuary in a mountainous terrain. There is a yard with an altar and a building, which consists of three rooms, a corridor before them, and a propylon in front of this. It is seemingly dedicated to a celestial deity, as it has been suggested based on the iconography.¹³ A sacred site on a high altitude could easily be interpreted as a Peak Sanctuary, and this is actually what happened in this case, but if we follow this option, then there is a problem. From over thirty Peak Sanctuary sites, not a single one fits the plan of the structure depicted on the rhyton. However, it could be argued that by looking for similar peak sites, research has turned to the wrong direction. The structure of the rhyton does actually have real life parallels, but not on the top of a mountain. It is those Minoan sites which had chosen not to have a Peak Sanctuary that provide shrine structures closely related to it.

MALIA: THE MM II SANCTUARY

The independent bench sanctuary complex known as “the MM II Sanctuary”¹⁴ was located on a relatively empty space between the palace of Malia and the Quarter Mu.¹⁵ It was functional only during the MM II period. It consists of three adjoining rooms (a storeroom, a preparation room and the main sanctuary) and a corridor that runs in front of them.¹⁶ Beyond the corridor there was a lot of free space, which could have served as a town square or a yard. This plan is reminiscent of the sanctuary of Anemospilia¹⁷ also dating to MM II and the somewhat later plan of the building on the Peak Sanctuary of Juktas.¹⁸

The objects discovered in the rooms of the MM II Sanctuary,¹⁹ animal figurines, pottery used for libations and cooking and offering tables can also be found among the equipment of a Peak Sanctuary.²⁰ Even the cavity in the center of the main sanctuary for the pouring of libations,²¹ reminds of practices also known from Juktas²² and Atsipades Korakias.²³

PHAISTOS, UPPER WEST COURT SANCTUARY COMPLEX

During the phase MM II, a sanctuary existed at the edge of the Old Palace of Phaistos, which probably formed the NE corner of the Upper West Court.²⁴ In its main phase, it consisted of three rooms (a store/preparation room, a preparation room and the main sanctuary) and a yard, but this changed as two more store rooms were later added to the complex.²⁵ Most probably there was not a corridor between the rooms and the yard. Its position allowed the yard to be accessed without having to enter the palace at all, a strong indication that it was intended for public use. However, it was only from inside the palace that the rooms of the sanctuary and the yard were connected. This could possibly mean that the palace was exercising total control over the rituals taking place on the yard.

The finds were very similar with those from the Malia MM II Sanctuary. A cavity for the pouring of libations was found in the middle both of the main sanctuary and the yard.²⁶ The objects found in the rooms, pottery for cooking and libations, stone bowls and libation tables,²⁷ are also part of the equipment of a Peak Sanctuary. Moreover, some stone bowls and offering tables are comparable with similar objects from Juktas.²⁸

GALATAS, HALL 22 OF THE WEST WING

At the palace of Galatas²⁹ another sanctuary was found, this of a slightly later phase, but still rather similar to the sanctuaries at Malia and Phaistos. Once again, the pattern of three rooms (a main sanctuary, probably a preparation room, and a storeroom) and a yard where libation rituals took place are to be noticed. The pottery found was likewise for cooking and pouring libations.³⁰

DEFINING A PROBLEM: ARE THE MINOAN PEAK SANCTUARIES OVERESTIMATED?

It seems that a special type of sanctuaries existed at Malia, Phaistos and Galatas, which are major Minoan centers not connected to any known Peak Sanctuary site. They consisted of three rooms and a yard and they were built within the borders of the palace area, seemingly as public shrines under

direct palatial control. In these sanctuaries libation rituals took place both in the main sanctuary room and on the yard outside. Their plan, ritual equipment and the evidence for libation rituals reminds of similar patterns and practices on Peak Sanctuary sites, with most prominent examples the known evidence from Juktas and Atsipades Korakias.

The common evidence for libation rituals at the epicenter of both kinds of sites indicates a kind of outdoors libation ritual of unknown nature (rain magic?) that was important enough to require the support of a whole sanctuary in order to be accomplished and retained. This kind of ritual was practiced mainly on a peak but alternatively on an open yard, and because of its importance the Minoan palaces took good measures to keep under their own control. Depictions, like those on the Zakros rhyton,³¹ or on the even much later Hagia Triada sarcophagus,³² on which, interestingly enough, spikes and a bird are once again encountered, could perhaps be seen under this light as distant memories of rituals in an older type of sanctuary, which at that time did not exist anymore.

The occurrence of the same libations ritual on both peak and non-peak sites shows a lack of dependency on location, considering the practice of very important rituals. A high place was probably desirable, but not absolutely necessary. A palace-controlled domestic sanctuary could easily replace a Peak Sanctuary site, for a number of practical or even ideological reasons.³³ After all, the ritual equipment remains the same throughout the different sites. If valid, this conclusion could change our views about the religious dominance of the peaks in Minoan Crete, which Briault boldly calls “environmental determinism (and, indeed, romanticism)” of our own era.³⁴

But then, another question arises. If the location does not really matter for practicing specific rituals, if the peak is escapable, why then do we encounter Peak Sanctuaries on Crete on such an overwhelming scale? Why, at a later stage, were the Minoan palaces so much interested in exercising control over these distant rural sanctuaries,³⁵ if they could easily replace them by practicing the same rituals literally from their own yard?

Probably there are some other reasons. Nowicki, based on the fact that Juktas is so far the most ancient known Peak Sanctuary site came up with the interesting theory (and he more or less keeps supporting it), that the Peak Sanctuaries were the Knossian way to expand their dominance and influence all over the island. That left the other major players in this game of dominance (Malia, Phaistos) no other choice than resisting, of course, this effort, by negating the adoption of Peak Sanctuaries within the limits of their realms.³⁶ It is a fascinating theory, but it can never be proved.

A Peak Sanctuary however could also be useful in other ways. A comparison of equipment with other types of sanctuaries³⁷ shows that it is only on Peak Sanctuary sites that huge concentrations of figurines are to be expected. Moreover, some groups of figurines are almost unique to these sites and they have a very special story to tell. They represent distinct groups of young men, mainly boxers³⁸ or practitioners of the Minoan bull grappling ritual.³⁹ These groups of young men are possibly connected to initiation rituals.⁴⁰ Figurines of young women are also present, mainly on Petsofas⁴¹ and other east Cretan sites,⁴² but they are much rarer and there is not enough evidence to attribute them to a similar purpose. Almost unique to the Peak Sanctuaries are also the so-called “votive limbs”, mainly interpreted as offerings of pilgrims seeking help for a medical problem or healing for some kind of disease.⁴³

To conclude, it is possible that the same kind of rituals could be practiced almost everywhere, but there were also reasons that could make the location of a sanctuary significant. A peak could offer a remote sacred location for initiation rituals, or a mountain deity could better relieve supplicants from health problems associated with living on or near the mountains. Most important, in a mountainous terrain the sanctuaries have to be placed high, because up there is where the gods reside. And if the Minoans wanted to ask for more rain, no matter how many libations they performed on the lowlands, they already knew that in order to better access and communicate with a celestial deity they had to get closer to his/her realm, the cloudy sky. They had to ascend the mountain. After all, their human nature was always subject to the imposing effect of the mountain peak.

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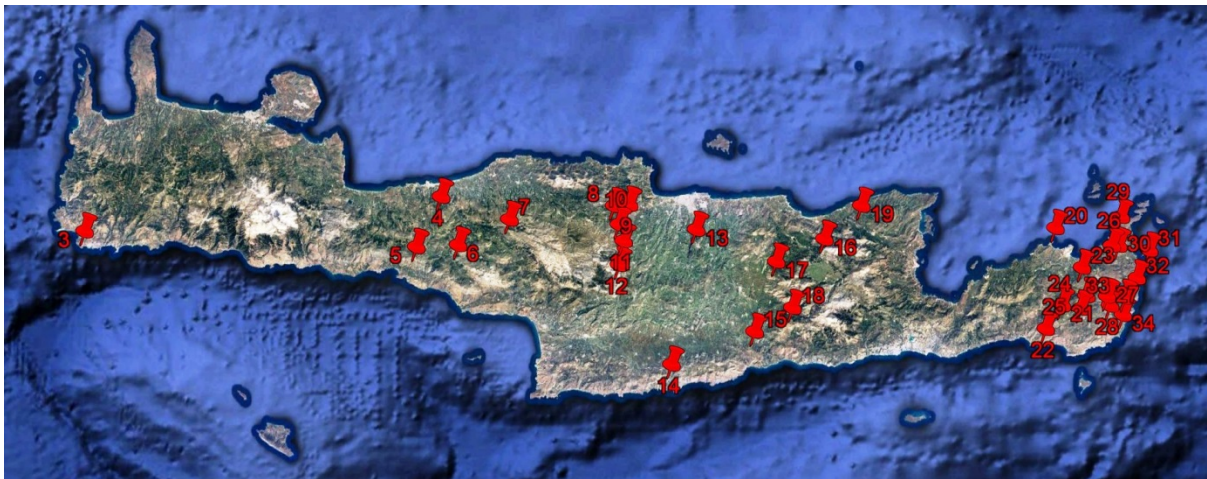


Fig. 1: Distribution of Peak Sanctuaries on Crete (own creation).

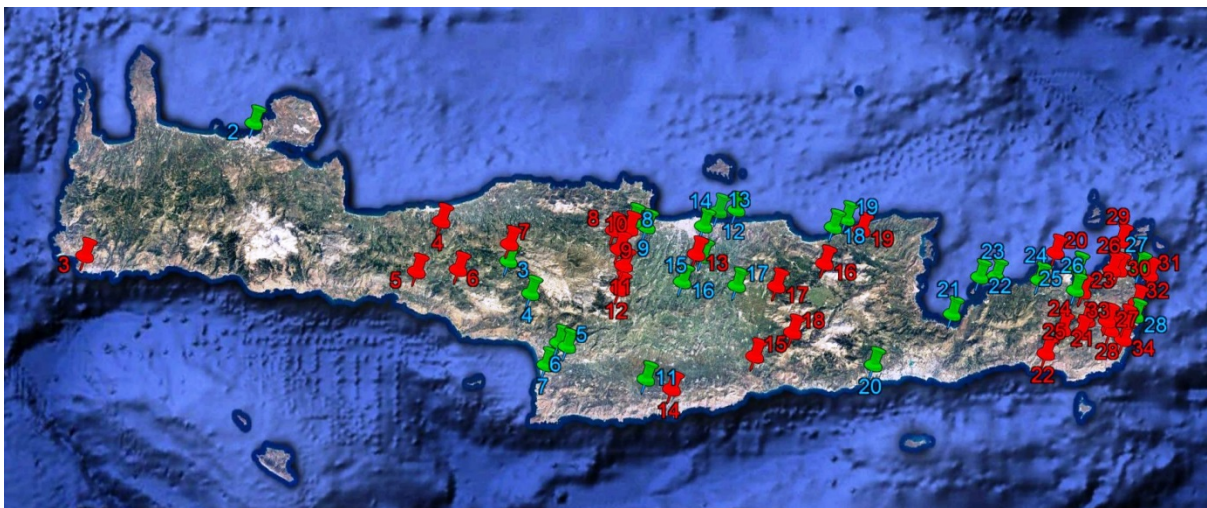


Fig. 2: Comparison of the distributions of Peak Sanctuaries and important Minoan centers on Crete (own creation).

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- 1 Faure 1960, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1967, 1969, 1972; Rutkowski 1972; Rutkowski 1986.
 - 2 On two occasions (Petsofas, Pyrgos), the site extends to more than one Peaks (Rutkowski 1988, 86–87).
 - 3 For example, the site of Juktas that served the major centres of Knossos and Archanes differs considerably from Atsipades Korakias that served the local villages. See also Karetsou 1981; Peatfield 1992.
 - 4 Peatfield 1983.
 - 5 Peatfield 1983, 275; Nowicki 1994, 41–46.
 - 6 Peatfield 1983, 275–76; Nowicki 2004, 94.
 - 7 Henriksson & Blomberg 1996; Peatfield 2009, 259; Davis 2014.
 - 8 Nowicki 1994, 34–39, 41–46.
 - 9 Jones 1999; Kyriakidis 2005, 128–68; Briault 2007.
 - 10 Peatfield (1992, 61; 1994, 21) supported this option. But Dickinson (1994, 269) is skeptical and many other disagree (Nowicki 1994, 48, n. 55; Watrous 2001, 194; Briault 2007, 124).
 - 11 Accessibility is a major factor for the affiliations of a Peak Sanctuary site. The distance on the map between Knossos and Juktas from the one side, and Malia and Karphi from the other, is almost identical, but their accessibility differs tremendously. In contrast to the easily accessible Juktas, who evolved to serve Knossos and Archanes, Karphi is not easily accessible from the sea, as at least two mountains stand between the site and the coast, and it never served the settlement of Malia. In fact, despite of its relatively small distance from the northern coast, Karphi is a very remote site that served only the surrounding inland villages. It is not a coincidence that many centuries later a refuge settlement was built on the same location.
 - 12 Platon ΠΑΕ 1963, 185 pl. 152b, 153; Ergon 1963, 172–73 fig. 187; 1971, 163–68; 1974, 152–56. See also the reconstruction of the depicted building at Shaw 1978, 436 fig. 9, although it does not take into consideration any depth perception for the building beyond the yard.
 - 13 Kardara 1966, 176, 187–88, Rutkowski 1971, 11; 1972, 179; 1986, 91. The four spikes before the rooms are probably there in order to attract lightning, as Kardara has very persuasively argued (Kardara 1966), and the animals depicted, birds and wild goats, could have been seen as messengers of the pilgrims to a celestial deity. The habitats of eagles, falcons, ravens and other mountainous birds can expand on areas of very high altitudes, where they could have easily access to a celestial deity. In many cultures, they are in close relationship with powerful deities. The climbing skills of the goats on the other side are awe inspiring (for an eyewitness account Bloedow 1990, 68–69), to the point that someone could believe that they can fly, and of course, a mountainous animal that could fly, could also access the deities on the skies. It is not a coincidence that wild goats are probably depicted on Minoan art (Hagia Triada Sarcophagus, Minoan Ring from Speliaridia, CMS VI 285) dragging the chariots of the gods. See also Small 1972.
 - 14 Poursat 1966; Van Effenterre 1980, 442–44; Gesell 1985, 107.
 - 15 Van Effenterre 1980, 255 fig. 352.
 - 16 Poursat 1966, 516 fig. 3, 516, 518–27.
 - 17 Sakellarakis & Sakellarakis 1997, 271 fig. 67; Jasink & Krukliadis 2013, fig. 7,8.
 - 18 Karetsou 1981, 142 fig. 5.
 - 19 Poursat 1966, 530–48.
 - 20 *Supra* n. 9.
 - 21 Poursat 1966, fig. 10,18; Van Effenterre 1980, 444 fig. 599.
 - 22 Karetsou 1978, 246–52.

 - 23 Peatfield 1992, 68–69.
 - 24 Pernier 1935, 195–246; Pernier & Banti 1951, 572–81; Gesell 1985, 120–24.
 - 25 Pernier 1935, 195–217; Pernier & Banti 1951, 573–78.
 - 26 Pernier 1935, 197, 206. Both in Phaistos and Malia, the cavity in the main sanctuary was actually the curved centre of an elaborate plate (Poursat 1966, fig. 10, 18; Van Effenterre 1980, 444 fig. 599; Pernier 1935, 229).
 - 27 Pernier 1935, 217–46,

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- 28 Compare Pernier 1935, 221 fig. 99, 227 fig. 105 with Karetso, Godart & Olivier 1985, 95 fig. 2; Pernier 1935, 220 fig. 96, 243 fig. 118 a-b with Karetso, Godart & Olivier 1985, 101 fig. 5.
- ²⁹ Rethemiotakis 1999, 725, pl. CLII.
- 30 Rethemiotakis 1999, 725.
- 31 *Supra* n. 12.
- 32 Paribeni 1908.
- 33 To this we could add the much-discussed theory of Cherry (Cherry 1978, 429; 1984, 34; 1986, 31) that Peak Sanctuaries and Minoan Palaces are very closely related, where the obvious similarity of the cult apparatus on both types of sites also plays a role to his argumentation.
- 34 Briault 2007, 123.
- 35 Peatfield 1983, 273; 1990, 130–31.
- 36 Nowicki 1991, 144–45; 1994, 46; 2004, 92; 2013, 164. Recently, Nowicki came back with this theory at the 12th International Congress of Cretan Studies (21–25.09.2016).
- 37 Briault 2007, 132, table 3; Watrous 1996, 93–94, tables 2–3.
- 38 Rethemiotakis 2014.
- 39 Tzachili 2016, 215–24.
- 40 Sphakianakis 2012, 210.
- 41 Myres 1902/3, 367–73, pl. VIII, XI; Rutkowski 1991, 29–32, pl. XVI-XXXII, XXXV-XXXVII, XL.
- 42 A group from Prinias is currently studied by the East Cretan Peak Sanctuary Publication Project.
- 43 Morris and Peatfield 2014.