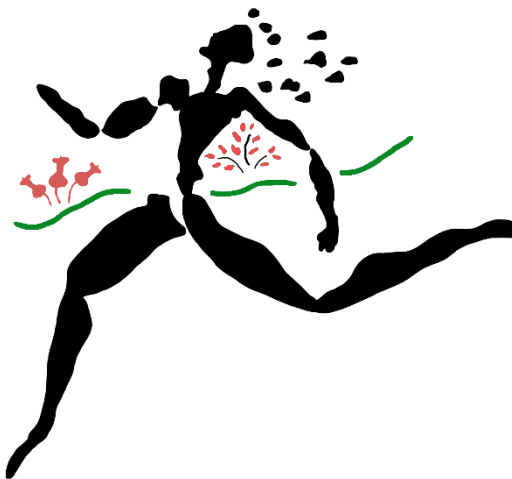


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## No (e)scape?

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



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# DECODING SNAKE DEPICTIONS IN MINOAN ART

## INTRODUCTION

The art of the prehistoric Aegean is dominant with images of the natural world. Animals appear to have been an indispensable part of the cultural identities of prehistoric societies by playing a significant role in the development of early belief systems. In Bronze Age Crete, representations in various forms of art credit animals with agency and behavior and introduce images of human interaction with them. Minoan imagery has included domestic and wild animals, various bird and marine species, as well as reptiles. In Minoan art we find numerous serpentine motifs with symbolic significance, that seem to be related with Egyptian and Near Eastern beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

Snakes are a special type of reptile with distinct physical features which have captured human imagination and emotion, since the Lower Paleolithic Period.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the iconographic coexistence of serpents with deities in early forms of art led to their association with ritual activities.

Snakes are elongated, legless, carnivorous reptiles of the suborder *Serpentes*.<sup>3</sup> The climate of Greece favors their presence, both in rural and urban environments. One hundred species of reptiles are known in Europe, seventy of which are found in Greece. Regarding snakes, although there are twenty-three species in Greece, only four of them have been identified in Crete, all non-venomous.<sup>4</sup>

In Bronze Age Crete, snakes constituted without doubt a special symbol which has provoked several, and sometimes contradictory, theories and interpretations regarding its presence and significance in Minoan art and religion.<sup>5</sup> This paper aims to examine diachronic snake depictions in the imagery of the Bronze Age Aegean, with special emphasis on Minoan Crete and to shed light on the issue of the use of the snake motif and its role in the Minoan material culture. Given the fact that through art people define and express themselves socially and culturally and objects mediate between society and human relationships, this research has the potential to provide a different aspect of conceptualizing snake depictions and define the role of snake representations in the conveyance of social beliefs and ideologies. The ultimate aim of the current work will be the investigation of the way that these depictions developed during the Bronze Age in order to explore possible links between iconographic features and aspects of social practices.

It should be stressed out that in Minoan art there is neither special literature nor a comprehensive study of the snake motif. For the purposes of the current study it was deemed necessary to go through publications of archaeological sites within and beyond Crete and systematically record objects with snake depictions in a database, including information concerning chronology, location, type of object, material, context and modes of figurative representation. After data collection, a statistical analysis was conducted in order to explore possible regional, contextual and temporal patterns as well as variations regarding snake depictions.

## SNAKE MOTIFS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN ART

The snake motif is widely represented in the art of different cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean including the Near East, Egypt, Cyprus and the Balkans. These representations had also a deep metaphorical meaning.

In the civilizations of the Near East snakes appear to have held symbolic iconographical importance. They were depicted mostly in association with deities – mainly female – on seals, figurines and engraved lithic plaques. Plastic snakes placed

close to the rim or upon the handle of vases are of particular interest.<sup>6</sup> Artefacts and written sources (e.g. the epic of *Gilgamesh*, a 4,000-year-old Mesopotamian poem) suggest their significance and connection with regeneration and fertility or their chthonic character.<sup>7</sup>

In Egyptian art and religion the serpent has a prominent position as its variable iconographic and written sources reveal. Rundle Clark mentions eight different aspects of symbolic snake activities such as *Sito/Sata* – the primeval serpent and the spirit of rejuvenation or the underworld – and the cosmic enemy god *Apophis*.<sup>8</sup> The *Uraeus*, the typical royal emblem of the Pharaohs, is the most characteristic representation of a snake in Egypt. It derives from goddess *Wadjet* who was worshiped as the "Snake Goddess" in Thebes.<sup>9</sup>

In Cyprus the snake was a diachronic motif with continuous presence in the island's art, both on figurines and vessels. From the end of the Early Cypriot period, plastic snakes are often recognized as decorative motifs mostly on pottery. The emergence of snakes along with bulls as prominent motifs among the island's religious symbolism suggests a shift in the ideological system of its inhabitants.<sup>10</sup>

A number of scholars have argued for the presence of the snake in the art of prehistoric Balkans as early as the Paleolithic period. Moreover, serpentine features on steatopygous female figurines, such as the so-called Mother-Goddess or snake representations, along with alleged sacred animals (mainly bulls and goats) are traced in Neolithic civilizations, for example those of Cucutenii-Tripillia and Vinča which suggest snake's cultic identity.<sup>11</sup>

## SNAKE DEPICTIONS IN AEGEAN ART

### GREEK MAINLAND AND ISLANDS

In the Bronze Age Aegean, artefacts with snake forms and motifs, mainly vases, seals and terracotta snake figures, are found in archaeological contexts of island and mainland settlements and burial sites since Late Helladic I and, especially, in Late Helladic III. The assemblages of clay snake figures from the Temple Complex of Mycenae as well as the so called "snake frame" depicted on seals and signet rings are of great importance.<sup>12</sup> Also worth mentioning is the distinctive presence of painted or plastic snakes on the shoulders of Late Helladic IIIc stirrup jugs, which mainly come from the Aegean islands and resemble those from the Near East.<sup>13</sup>

### CRETE

In Minoan art snake depictions are numerous and diverse. Some scholars identify them already in the Neolithic female figurine from Kalo Chorio<sup>14</sup> that bear similarities with the serpent's head found among other zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines in the lower excavation levels of Knossos.<sup>15</sup>

#### Prepalatial period

The earliest snake depiction in Bronze Age Crete is considered to be that on the Early Minoan II figurine-vase from Koumasa.<sup>16</sup> The snake motif, either alone or in scenes accompanying human and/or animal figures, is also found on Prepalatial stone, clay and ivory artefacts, mainly on seals, vases and a jewel (from Agios Onouphrios). These come exclusively from funerary contexts, mainly as grave offerings, mostly in south-central and eastern Crete (such as the cemeteries of Mochlos and Sphoungaras at Gournia and

the tholos tombs of Moni Odigitria, Platanos, Kalathiana) and in only one case at the north-central part of the island (Phourni Archanes).

#### Protopalatial period

In Protopalatial art there is an increase in the appearance of the snake form and motif, alone and less often combined with people and/or other animals. Snake figures have been found in the peak sanctuary of Yuchtas and Petsophas, but there are also depictions on seals, vases, jewelry and even as mason's marks made of clay, semi-precious stones, metal and ivory. Most of the artefacts come from peak sanctuaries, burial contexts and a palatial sanctuary, that of Phaistos, which are distributed in central and eastern Crete.

The emergence of the snake motif in peak sanctuaries is the key characteristic of this period. The bowl with the painted "Snake Goddess" from Phaistos, is so far unique and, apparently, a significant piece of ritual equipment. It is considered to depict a cult scene with two female votaries dancing around a central figure dressed in a long robe with serpentine loops and it has been interpreted as a snake goddess.<sup>17</sup>

#### Neopalatial period

The number of artefacts with snake depictions increases in the Neopalatial period. Snake representations, alone or accompanying female figures and animals (lions, bulls, goats and boars) are found on seals, vessels, figurines, frescoes and jewelry –made of clay, semiprecious stones, metals and mortars. They are found in contexts of ritual activities in palaces and settlements, tombs, peak sanctuaries and caves distributed all over the island, including its western part, mostly in north central Crete.

This period is characterized by the introduction of the "snake frame" in the iconography, which is thought to be a special serpentine representation, but also by the emblematic faience figurines from the Temple Repositories and the cult equipment from the Snake Room at Knossos. A. Evans introduced the term "snake frame" for the motif that consists of two or three slim, bow-shaped bands/objects with edges that resemble snake heads, which he considered as one of the most characteristic symbols of the "Minoan Goddess".<sup>18</sup> "Snake frames" are identified on seals, signet rings and frescoes, above the head of female figures often in heraldic syntheses or with animal busts, mainly those of lions, boars and bulls.

The two faience figurines from Knossos, known as the "Snake Goddesses", were found among other significant artefacts, inside two sealed cists in the Temple Repositories of the palace, and are considered the most famous Minoan snake representations.<sup>19</sup> They show two richly dressed female figures with exposed naked bosoms, a younger and an older one. Snakes crawl on their bodies, arms, and on the crown of one of them, while the second figure holds the snakes emphatically in her hands.

The Snake Room at Knossos yielded a considerable number of clay artefacts including cylindrical snake vessels, two perforated spouted vessels with plastic snakes, and a honeycomb also with plastic snakes on it.<sup>20</sup> This unique deposit was found in a pithos excavated inside a private house close to the 'South-West Treasury House' and consisted of cult equipment similar to that of the Temple Repositories.

## Postpalatial period

The Postpalatial period has provided by far the largest number of artefacts related to snake motifs. Snake tubes, mainly from domestic spaces, form the overwhelming majority. Snakes are also depicted on anthropomorphic idols, jewelry, vases such as kalathoi and pyxides, and on sarcophagi, which are mainly made of clay, as well as by semiprecious stones and metals. They include the “Goddesses with upraised arms” and the “snake tubes” with opposing serpentine handles, and come from almost all archaeological contexts, but especially from house or domestic shrines, distributed all over the island, but still with an emphasis on eastern Crete.

The large female clay idols with upraised arms and the distinct feature of the snake are found mainly in small rooms with benches identified as shrines.<sup>21</sup> The term “snake tube” was introduced by Evans to describe cylindrical vessels with an open mouth, base and snake-like loop handles along both sides. These vessels sometimes bear plastic snakes, bucrania/horns of the bull and astral symbols.<sup>22</sup>

## DISCUSSION

Snake representations seem to be a long lasting and inter-cultural phenomenon with social, political and religious dimensions. Diachronic and comparative analysis and synthesis of the existing data are essential in an attempt to decode the snake’s presence and diffusion in the art of Bronze Age Crete, where there is a progressively growing presence of the symbol that culminates in the Postpalatial period.

Snake motifs appear in various forms of Minoan material culture (fig. 1); the most frequent are snake tubes, figurines and idols, seals, vases and snake figures, and, less frequently, jewelry, frescoes and sarcophagi. These come from a variety of archaeological contexts including domestic and palatial shrines, cemeteries, peak sanctuaries and caves (fig. 2). Snakes are represented either alone or with human (mainly female), animal or mythological figures, and/or symbols including the double axe, the horns of concentration, the "sacral knot" and astral symbols.

The choice of the snake motif was apparently not random but was symbolically encoded and expressed specific cultural concepts and meanings. Its decoding is crucial for our understanding of the way serpents were perceived by the Minoans – an issue that has raised much discussion in the last century. The snake has been regarded as the guardian of the household and a beneficial spirit for its members.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, it has been interpreted as a symbol of the regeneration of nature and human fertility due to its ability to revitalize its skin,<sup>24</sup> as well as a chthonic element with apotropaic function and an active mediator between the dead and the living.<sup>25</sup>

In the Prepalatial period, snake depictions from exclusively funerary contexts, suggest a certain spiritual/metaphysical character of the objects that carry them. It is tempting to assume that the anthropomorphic vase from outside the tholos tombs A, Γ and E at Koumasa shows evidence of snake representations in post-funerary rituals.

In the Protopalatial period, snake clay figurines and other representations are often votive offerings in peak sanctuaries, particularly in Yuchtas. Moreover, the female figure painted on the bowl from the sanctuary in the palace of Phaistos is sometimes interpreted as an early form of the "snake goddess".<sup>26</sup>

In the Neopalatial period the serpent has been established as a symbol in palatial contexts and is usually depicted on figurines, vessels, seals and frescoes. Its symbolic role is implied by its close relation with female figurines (the Knossos faience “Snake Goddesses”) or with specific cultic equipment (in the Snake Room at Knossos).

However, the character of the “Snake Goddesses” remains enigmatic. Most scholars agree with Evans on their "sacred" character, because they had been intentionally

fragmented and deposited in the sealed cists beneath the Temple Repositories,<sup>27</sup> while others recognize them as snake charmers.<sup>28</sup> Their naked bosom may symbolize sexuality or fertility – especially if, as it is suggested by Sigmund Freud, the snake is a phallic symbol.<sup>29</sup> Faience was a luxury material, and its manufacture was considered to be special or even "magical". In Egypt, it symbolized rebirth and regeneration of life and was thus used in burial rituals and in shrines. Undoubtedly, the intentional fragmentation of the Knossian figurines reveals their significant ceremonial treatment and meaning.

The more frequent appearance of the snake and its new form in Postpalatial art must be linked with the social and religious circumstances of that period.<sup>30</sup> Snake motifs were then related to alleged cult places, i.e. free-standing buildings on the borders of settlements, apparently associated with sociopolitical conditions and religious beliefs. The reoccupation of some of the existing settlements but also the foundation of new ones in mountainous areas shows a tendency for decentralization. The shrines of the period are separate small rooms or buildings with a bench on which the cult equipment was placed and included figurines, snake tubes and other ritual paraphernalia.<sup>31</sup>

The shrines in Gournia, Kannia, Karphi, and Prinias, yielded several clay female figures with upraised arms and ritual equipment. Plastic snakes are represented on the figurines' arms, bodies and tiaras. The serpent is the dominant attribute of these idols, except for Karphi.<sup>32</sup> Without significant morphological variations, the figures hold different symbols (snakes, birds, solar discs, horns etc.) which may indicate their features and properties.<sup>33</sup>

These figures and the equipment associated with them, such as snake tubes, kalathoi and libation vases should not be considered as everyday objects but as special artefacts, used and/or displayed together in specific rituals. It is possible that living snakes were also kept in these places and participated in the rituals, perhaps as manifestations of the deity.<sup>34</sup>

The snake is also present in the art of other Aegean and east Mediterranean Bronze Age cultures, for example those of Near East, Egypt and Cyprus. But despite the long lasting and intercultural artistic appearance and material exchange between these cultures, the snake's functions and symbolic meanings are not yet fully comprehended.

It is not easy to clarify whether the snake was either a depiction of a divinity, or it was worshiped as a sacred animal or it was simply an accompanying symbol of deities. Rather than reflections of beliefs or an appreciation of the natural world, they are the material traces of human-animal relations. Further studies may encourage the beginning of a more systematic and detailed research on the subject.

Stylios Tzirakis  
Postgraduate student  
University of Crete

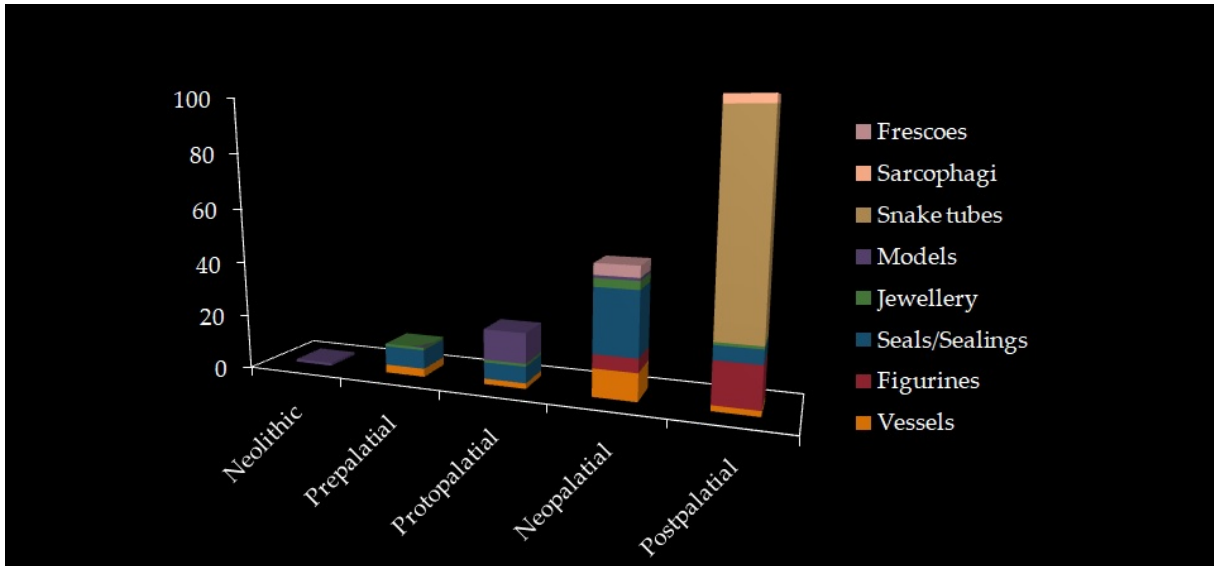


Fig. 1: Chart with the types of artefacts found in Crete (source: personal data).



Fig. 2: Findspots of the artefacts on the island (source: Google Maps®).

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<sup>1</sup> Hall 1928, 64-74; see also Wiener 2013, 34-43.

<sup>2</sup> Gimbutas 1989, 122, fig. 189.

<sup>3</sup> Vitt-Caldwell 2014, 595-620; see also Hickman et al. 2001, 572-73.

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- <sup>4</sup> Βαλάκος et al. 2004, 13-57. These are the cat snake (*Telescopus Fallax*), whip snake (*Hierophis Gemonensis*), leopard snake (*Zamenis Situla*) and dice snake (*Natrix Tessellate*).
- <sup>5</sup> Evans 1935, 143-145; see also Nilsson 1950, 320; Branigan 1969, 43.
- <sup>6</sup> Krumholz-McDonald 1994, 22, fig. 1.
- <sup>7</sup> Ward 1994, 141-143, pl. XI.
- <sup>8</sup> Clark 1959, 239-40.
- <sup>9</sup> James 1982, 156-65; see also Hassan 1998, 109.
- <sup>10</sup> Catling-Karageorghis 1961, 115, fig. 5.
- <sup>11</sup> Gimbutas 1989, 121-33, fig. 215b; see also Palaguta 2016, 337-54.
- <sup>12</sup> Moore - Taylour 1999, 63-9, fig. 21, pls 23-5; see also Hägg and Lindau 1984, 67-77.
- <sup>13</sup> Βλαχόπουλος 2012, 108-09.
- <sup>14</sup> Gimbutas 1974, 101, fig. 65.
- <sup>15</sup> Evans 1964, 238, fig. 60:16.
- <sup>16</sup> Xanthoudides 1924, 39, pls II, XIX, no. 4137.
- <sup>17</sup> Levi 1976, 74-78, 93-96, pl. LXVIIa.
- <sup>18</sup> Evans 1921, 721; see also Hägg - Lindau 1984, 67-77.
- <sup>19</sup> Evans 1921, 495-523, figs 354-82.
- <sup>20</sup> Evans 1935, 138-68.
- <sup>21</sup> Gazi, Gournia, Chalasmenos, Kannia, Karphi, Kavousi, Kephala Vasilikis, Prinias and the Shrine of the Double Axes at Knossos; see also Hallager 2009, 108.
- <sup>22</sup> Evans 1935, 140-49.
- <sup>23</sup> Nilsson 1950, 325.
- <sup>24</sup> Baring - Cashford 1993, 79-80.
- <sup>25</sup> Evans 1921, 507-09.
- <sup>26</sup> Rutkowski 1986, 108.
- <sup>27</sup> Panagiotaki 1993, 86; see also Hatzaki 2009, 20.
- <sup>28</sup> Kopaka 2001, 21.
- <sup>29</sup> Freud 1900, 370.
- <sup>30</sup> Branigan 1969, 36-8.
- <sup>31</sup> Hallager 2009, 108.
- <sup>32</sup> Gesell 2010, 138.
- <sup>33</sup> Gesell 2006, 322.
- <sup>34</sup> Prent 2005, 191.