

Creating history by re-creating the Minoan Snake Goddess

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Figure 1: Alleged Minoan 'Snake Goddess' or priestess or votary
c. 1600 bce, Faience, 29.2 cm (13.5") high, Heraklion Archaeological Museum
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Open most mainstream, popular cultural publications or current art history or humanities textbooks to the pre-Greek Aegean period, and an image of a faience statuette labelled *Snake Goddess* [Figure 1] dominates the pages. Look at advertisements for touring Crete, and the Snake Goddess (whether photos of the excavated statuette or personifications and imaginary drawings inspired by it) abound. A recent scholarly book exploring the intersections of archaeology, tourism, and historical narrative on Crete depicts on the cover a close-up of the iconic statuette, bared breasts prominent, wearing modern sunglasses with the reflection in the lens of a tourist shooting her photo [Figure 2].¹ The lead in the artistic program representing the sequence of Greek civilisation from the Minoan into the twenty-first century in the opening procession of the 2004 Summer

¹Philip Duke, *The Tourists Gaze, the Cretans Glance: Archaeology and Tourism on a Greek Island* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2007). Cover design credited to Lisa Devenish.

Olympics in Greece: A live actress dressed as the famous figurine with uncovered breasts, her bright red and yellow rigid costume permitting her to sway sinuously and spellbindingly in place on a float [Figure 3]. Moreover, when asked to choose an image within their art survey textbook that especially draws their attention and interest (one of my first class assignments), out of the great range of choices of a variety of cultures, mediums, and time periods, many of my students often choose to focus on the Minoan Snake Goddess. Such attention -- by textbook authors and publishers, tourism and entertainment organizations, as well as students -- is noteworthy because the draw to this image is in a large part a result of non-standard archaeological and historical methods. This 'Snake Goddess' is one of history's most treasured, most reproduced, and perhaps most *inventive* and even deceptive of re-creations.

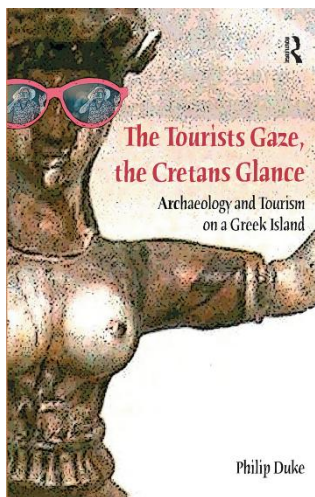


Figure 2: Cover of *The Tourists Gaze, The Cretans Glance* by Philip Duke/Taylor & Francis. Reproduced by permission of Taylor and Francis Group, LLC, a division of Informa plc.

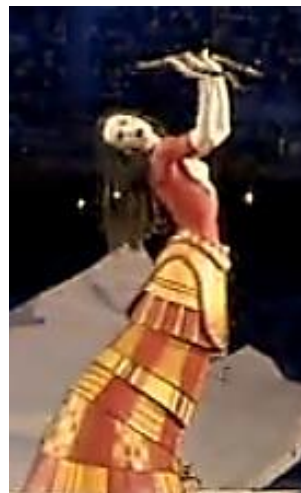


Figure 3: 'Snake Goddess', Leading figure in 2004 Greek Olympics' opening cultural/ historical procession (cropped). Reproduced by permission of <http://londonclassicstutor.blogspot.com>

The purpose of this exploration is not to contradict current studies, or solve problems on which experts are still working, or unveil novel discrepancies in the scholarship, or provide new research and data, nor even to offer a comprehensive summary of the state of the research. Like most college professors who teach general survey courses in art history or the humanities, I am no expert in the ancient Aegean Bronze Age. Although it is possible that the Minoan can make up a course's full concentration, college curriculum that includes this culture typically spans a much larger time period and geographical area, such as 'Greek Art and Culture', 'Pre-Renaissance Art History', or 'Ancient Cultures', with the Aegean – and the Minoan a subset of it – consisting of a small section of study represented by a few artefacts. It is therefore possible, even probable, that many instructors know little more than what is presented in the textbooks.

Nonetheless, the Minoan can provide an excellent educational opportunity – not by the instructor having to learn a great deal more than the information stated in the text, but by the instructor demanding of all students to learn just how much can be questioned about the presentation of specific historical artefacts and narratives. The recognition of the importance of developing in students the ability to think critically is commonly demanded of all teachers at all levels, and seems especially pertinent for college students. A major component of critical thinking is the understanding that whatever one reads, even in textbooks, is not sacrosanct, that there are few certainties in learning. Yet considering the manner in which most textbooks present 'facts', it is difficult enough for an instructor to accept this wisdom, much less the student who is reading and studying the texts 'to learn' the information. For this reason, a good tool is to have in a school term at least one theme to be studied of which students themselves are asked to explore actively the contradictions, the unknowns, the uncertainties that have been carefully sculpted into acceptable, even widely accepted, truths. For the ancient periods, a sceptical approach to the information on the Minoans is an excellent choice for practice in questioning 'standard' analyses and histories.

Much of how Minoan artefacts and their culture are described comes directly from the man who named the culture, Sir Arthur Evans, even though, as one twenty-first century archaeologist has objected: 'The influence of Evans lives on not only in the fanciful names given to Bronze Age Cretan material remains ... Arthur Evans did much more than lay down the rules of play ... he invented them. And whether consciously or unconsciously, we continue to abide by them'.² The names Evans gave to so many objects and ideas related to Cretan history have become 'constantly enshrined and perpetuated'³ to the point that even experts who disagree with Evans's conclusions, tend to use the references -- like Minoan and Snake Goddess -- in their arguments. For clarity and ease I will continue the trend in this article, using Evans's terms despite recognizing their contrived aspects and associated, sometimes misleading, connotations.

Begin by exploring the distinct uncertainties and oddities of the Minoan faience figurines

In the case of the Minoan, critical analysis exposes that even with ambiguities debated and disputed by experts and perhaps acknowledged within texts for the general public, ideas inspired over one hundred years ago by Sir Arthur Evans doggedly endure. This continued prominence of these versions of cultural storytelling offers a superb occasion to explore not only the actual creation of history and possible changing readings of events and situations, but also the

² John K. Papadopoulos, 'Inventing the Minoans: Archaeology, modernity and the quest for European identity', *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, 18:1, 2005, 134.

³ Papadopoulos, 'Inventing the Minoans', 105.

persistence of certain versions of history, often despite considerable evidence suggesting contrary interpretations. This is undoubtedly true of the faience figurines typically referred to as Snake Goddesses: The distinctive look of the figurines – long, flaring skirts, opened bodices, carefully arranged hair with distinctive headdresses, and the snakes as accoutrements – persists in dominating the common view of 'the Minoan'. Questioning the frequent perpetuation of Evans's readings of these artefacts and then broadening attention to many of the basic labels that Evans helped attach to the culture through such artefacts, can offer rich opportunities for students to consider seriously and critically the construction of the history presented and how ideas are very difficult to alter once they have become reified as 'truths' in the general domain.

Consider: fragmentation and re-creation

Sir Arthur Evans, the figurines' excavator, excelled in 'reconstitutions' (to use a favourite word of his in his writings) of the culture he uncovered. Famously for almost all elements of his excavations at Knossos – including the faience statuettes -- Evans did not just uncover the ruins and artefacts, he rebuilt them. Evans and his team took the rubble of ruins and not only imagined how they once were, but re-created walls, floors, ceilings, columns, frescoes, sculptures, etc. Indeed, buildings at Knossos comprise some of the first large-scale uses of reinforced concrete, a process that was invented in the 1860s during Evans's lifetime. Small pieces of true fresco sifted out of rubble were pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle (although without the box top's guiding image and with many, many missing pieces) into brightly coloured mural scenes that unavoidably relied on great imagination. One of his biographers admirably remarked of Evans finding 'incredibly tiny relics and drawing from them, with his visionary intuition, conclusions which might have eluded a less imaginative man'.⁴

Unfortunately, in all of his 'visionary', 'imaginative' reconstitutions, Evans was never very specific in either his writings or drawings and sketches as to the number of or size of the fragments with which he worked, how decisions were made, and how much of the restored work is original. Almost all scrutiny of Evans's approach – such as comparisons with his second-in-command Duncan MacKenzie's daybooks and a close look at early excavation photos of the little that survived in the rubble or at how small are the fragments of the original murals⁵ -- demonstrates that throughout the Knossos excavation, Evans obviously permitted substantial license in imagining the parts that were missing. Although the standards for archaeology and restoration have unquestionably changed over the past hundred years, even closer to Evans's day, his reconstitutions were often

⁴ Sylvia L. Horwitz, *The Find of a Lifetime: Sir Arthur Evans and the Discovery of Knossos* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), 105.

⁵ For example, in Horwitz, *Find of a Lifetime*, 113-115.

recognized as excessive. For instance, in 1930 the Austrian archaeologist Camillo Praschniker attacked Evans's reconstruction of Knossos as the creation of 'a movie city'.⁶ Two more recent archaeologists have sardonically declared it 'one of the finest examples of 1920s architecture anywhere in modern Greece'⁷ and 'the only great civilization created in the twentieth century'.⁸ The irony for today should not be ignored: this reconstructed, very imaginative vision of the past is only behind the Athenian Acropolis as the most visited tourist attraction in Greece.⁹

During the third season of excavation in 1903, Evans's team discovered the female 'Snake Goddesses', broken and buried with other items, in a small chamber near the central court of the ruins of Evans's 'Palace of Knossos'. Earlier excavation of that chamber in the first season in 1900 had revealed only two smaller, open, lidless, empty cists. Further excavation had been spurred by noticing the 'slight depression in the pavement' of the gypsum slab floors around the empty cists, resulting in what Evans declared 'in many respects the culminating point of interest in the whole four years' excavation of the Palace Site', that is, the discovery of what he quickly named the 'Temple Repositories'.¹⁰

Significantly, most descriptions in current texts do admit that many of the Knossian artefacts, including the Snake Goddesses, were reworked by Evans's restoration team; general readers (students!) just need to be encouraged to understand the ramifications, including that his creative approaches to Knossos have resulted in considerable consternation among many scholars since. Cretan scholarship especially since the twenty-first century has often questioned many of the previous century's assumptions, with the subtitle of a key 2002 anthology of scholars' works clearly promoting the goal of 'Rethinking Minoan Archaeology'.¹¹ Emily Miller Bonney's even more recent publication provides an example especially pertinent for this article, as she questions most of Evans's assumptions, offering convincing arguments against almost every element of Evans's interpretation of the female faience figurines.¹²

Evans definitely adhered to his fondness for extreme restoration with these female statuettes. According to Evans's and MacKenzie's excavation notebooks, larger fragments of three female figures were discovered in the cist, along with various faience arms. In the 1902-03 *The Annual of the British School at Athens*, he

⁶ Horwitz, *Find of a Lifetime*, 201.

⁷ Papadopoulos, 'Inventing the Minoans', 101.

⁸ Chester G. Starr, 'Minoan flower lovers', in Robin Hägg and Nanno Marinatos, eds., *The Minoan Thalassocracy: Myth and Reality* (Stockholm, 1984): 9.

⁹ Papadopoulos, 'Inventing the Minoans', 91.

¹⁰ Arthur Evans, 'The Palace of Knossos', *The Annual of the British School at Athens*, 9, (1902-03, reprint London: Kraus Reprint, 1971): 39, 1.

¹¹ Yannis Hamilakis, ed., *Labyrinth Revisited: Rethinking Minoan Archaeology* (Oxford and Oakville: Oxbow: Oxford, 2002).

¹² Emily Miller Bonney, 'Disarming the Snake Goddess: A Reconsideration of the faience figurines from the Temple Repositories at Knossos', *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, 24.2 (2011): 171- 190.

reported soon after discovery: 'Happily, however, in many cases, it was possible to reconstitute these...'¹³ Evans had, under his guidance, the Danish artist Halvor Bagge carefully piece together and join with re-imagined missing sections two of the figurines, one slightly larger than the other. Evans did not have the segment of the third (scantly documented) figurine reconstructed since, while of a larger scale than the other two, it consisted of only an intact skirt and apron, and perhaps one of the larger unattached arms that had a snake entwined around it.¹⁴ He did use this fragment as the pattern for the lower dress and apron of the larger restored figurine, since little survived of that figurine below the hips.¹⁵



Figure 4: Sketch of 'Faience Figure of Female Votary', Figure 57, p. 79, from Arthur Evans, *The Annual of the British School at Athens*, 1902-03



'Faience Figure of Snake Goddess', Figure 55, p. 76, from Arthur Evans, *The Annual of the British School at Athens*, 1902-03

Although within both the *Annual* and his later volumes of *The Palace of Minos*, Evans included drawings of the small female sculptures with the restored sections supposedly differentiated by shading [Figures 4 and 5], it is still difficult to tell from these drawings or the excavation notes or the heavily repaired figures themselves just how large some of the fragments of the figurines were when found or how much of the now displayed statuettes are early twentieth-century recreations. By the second volume of his *Palace of Minos*, his account is surely inaccurate, stating they 'had been simply broken in half and were easily put

¹³ Evans, *Annual*, 67.

¹⁴ Marina Panagiotaki, 'The Temple Repositories of Knossos: New information from the unpublished notes of Sir Arthur Evans', *Annual of the British School at Athens*, 88 (1993): 58.

¹⁵ Evans, *Annual*, 78. The unrestored figurine can be seen in Evans's Shrine photo [Figure 8] behind the smaller of the reconstructed statuettes and under one of two hanging 'votive robes' which Evans describes as 'miniature reproductions of articles of apparel in the same fine faience. These in some cases were made for suspension and had certainly a votive significance'. [Evans, *Annual*, 81].

together'.¹⁶ Such a dismissive description of the broken state of the figures minimizes the effects of reconstruction. That attitude alone should lead actively engaged students to question the construction of Minoan histories, both around the specific faience artefacts as well as (since such inaccuracies are so typical of the histories of this period) in general.

Consider: which figure is favoured?



Figure 6: Alleged Minoan 'Snake Goddess', c.1600 bce, Faience, 14.3 cm (13.5") high, Heraklion Archaeological Museum, Creative Commons [photo](#) by Wolfgang Sauber, cropped slightly, licensed under [CC BY 3.0](#).

Of the two female faience figurines excavated from the so-called Temple Repositories, re-created by Evans, and on display now at the Archaeological Museum in Heraklion, Crete, Evans seemed to have labelled the larger [almost 34.3 cm (13.5") high] of the figurines as a Snake Goddess almost immediately [Figure 6]. The smaller -- over 29.2 cm (11.5") high with restored head -- [Figure 1], he described in the 1902-03 *Annual* as 'rather that of an attendant or votary' and later in the *Palace of Minos* vaguely as 'somewhat smaller than the other, and it seems probable from her attitude that she should rather be regarded as a priestess or votary'.¹⁷ Curiously, from the beginning Evans offered very little justification to

¹⁶ Sir Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos: A Comparative Account of the Successive Stages of the Early Cretan Civilization as Illustrated by the Discoveries at Knossos*, vol. 2a, Fresh Lights on Origins and External Relations: The Restoration in Town and Palace after Seismic Catastrophe Towards the Close of M.M.III, and the Beginnings of the New Era (MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1928): 317.

¹⁷ Evans, *Annual*, 78 and Sir Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos: A Comparative Account of the Successive Stages of the Early Cretan Civilization as Illustrated by the Discoveries at*

explain his labels or especially to distinguish the roles of the two cist figurines he re-created. As archaeologist Marina Panagiotaki cursorily comments: 'if any distinction is to be made between aspects or persons, it will have to be derived from facial detail or overall stance, clearly a subjective matter'.¹⁸ Moreover, if size were so important in Evans's determination of classification, it is curious that the largest of the fragmented figurines is all but ignored by him, even if it consisted of little more than a skirt.

Oddly, it is the figurine that Evans did not identify as a goddess but instead as a votary – the one found without a head, a key part of any sculpture of a figure! – which has become the more popular of the reconstituted statuettes to represent the Minoan in textbooks. Today, that more well-known work is also typically labelled 'Snake Goddess', even if other terms such as 'priestess' or 'votary' (as mentioned by Evans) are also employed in the identification. To explore fully the significance of these female figurines that have become archetypes of the Minoan, it is really necessary to study closely *both* of the faience sculptures Evans had reconstructed.

Considering the data available about the discovery of the female figurines, the larger restored statuette seems it should have been the more likely one to become the most reproduced and familiar. First, most of this figure above the upper hips was found, minus the left forearm (restored with the tail of a snake) and the tip of the hat (restored with the head of a snake.) Major restoration mainly consists of re-creating the skirt. Since other found works, including two dimensional, substantiate a traditional shape and the long length of this article of clothing, for the most part it is chiefly the skirt's decoration that is uncertain for the outfit. Second, the larger is the one Evans (admittedly, with little justification) identified as a goddess. He did note without much emphasis or attention that this statuette's ears are 'of enormous size, possibly with a religious intention'.¹⁹ About fifteen years later, a publication on the myths of Crete described this figurine as 'semi-anthropomorphic ... with the ears of a cow or some other animal' and suggested she 'may have been thus depicted to remind her worshippers that she was ever ready to hear their petitions'.²⁰ Overall, this unusual physical feature, along with the number and size of snakes and their intimate coiling around the figure as described below, admittedly give a mystical feeling to the larger statuette.

Additionally, the explicit relationship of snake and curiously-dressed woman is compelling, with the importance of the snakes definitely a part of the original found fragments. (It is perhaps easier to distinguish the snakes in Evans's

Knossos, vol. 1, The Neolithic and Early and Middle Minoan Ages (London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1921), 501.

¹⁸ Marina Panagiotaki, *The Central Palace Sanctuary at Knossos*, BSA Supplementary, 31 (London: The British School at Athens, 1999): 103.

¹⁹ Evans, *Annual*, 76.

²⁰ Donald A. MacKenzie, *Myths of Crete and Pre-Hellenic Europe* (London: The Gresham Publishing Company Limited, 1917): 139. The historian D.A. MacKenzie should not be mistaken with Duncan MacKenzie, Evans's second in command.

drawing of the upper section of the faience statuette [Figure 7]). Clothed formally with her dress framing her bared breasts, she is holding the head of a very long snake in her right hand and (at least as it has been reconstructed) the tail in her left hand. Its body slithers up her arm, drapes over her shoulder, and then loops down her back and below her hips to rise and hang over the other shoulder, winding then down her other arm. (Since as I understand it, the bottom of the loop of the snake below her hips and the tail in the hand are reconstructions, it is possible that she originally held two snakes, the ends of each snake having been shown in the missing sections.) Two more snakes are wrapped around the figurine's waist and hips; another flows upward along the left border of the dress, outlining her bare breast and following the contours of the body up the neck, over the ear, towards the top of her hat. The missing end had been repaired to show the serpent's head facing forward like, it was quickly recognized by Evans and others, the Egyptian *uraeus* on the royal crowns.²¹ A similar snake echoes on the right side of the figurine the first's position, also framing the bare breast, but this time with the tip of the tail around the female's ear and the head at the figure's centre below the waist.



Figure 7: Drawing of 'Upper Part of Faience Figure of Snake Goddess from Temple Repository, Knossos, showing Knotted-Snake Girdle and *Uraeus*-like Head (Restored) above Tiara', from Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos*, vol. iv, part 1, Fig. 139, p. 176b, 1935

In contrast, for the smaller figure there survives the bare-breasted torso from the neck down, one arm, and about a third of the skirt and apron. The original includes parts of at least six of the seven flounces on the skirt and the ends of her long hair flowing down her back. However, the fact that none of the head or left arm (therefore not permitting full knowledge of the pose) of the smaller sculpture were recovered would logically seem to have relegated this figure to secondary importance, again favouring the larger figurine in terms of interest in visual

²¹ For example, in Evans, *Annual*, 84, his drawing shown in Figure 7 is so labelled, and in MacKenzie, *Myths*, 139.

reproductions such as photographs and drawings. Initially, Evans appears to have intended just that when he consigned the smaller figurine as a 'votary'.

Nevertheless, the smaller statuette has become one of the dominant images identified with the Minoan. In fact, generally when this figure is discussed and represented in many texts, the larger and more complete statuette is not even mentioned. Although the greater popularity of the smaller reconstructed female has not typically been questioned, this is actually a very pertinent point for students to consider when studying the Minoans.



Figure 8: Evans's photograph of 'Altar-Ledge of Shrine of Snake Goddess as Tentatively Arranged', Figure 377, p. 518, from Arthur Evans, *Palace of Minos*, vol. 1, 1921



Figure 9: Evans's photograph of 'Faience Figure of Snake Goddess' Figure 54b, p. 75 from Arthur Evans, *The Annual of the British School at Athens*, no. ix, Session 1902-1903



Figure 10: Evans's photograph of 'Faience Figure of Female Votary' Figure 56b, p. 77, from Arthur Evans, *The Annual of the British School at Athens*, no. ix, Session 1902-1903

Some of the earliest photographs of the two figurines [such as Figures 8, 9, 10] appeared in the *Annual* and Evans's first volume of *Palace of Minos*. In the latter

publication, the smaller figure has, under Evans's aegis, been given a head and headdress in the shrine photograph. Such photographs provide clues as to the frequent popular preference for the smaller figurine. In the photograph of the 'conjectural arrangement' of a shrine, the two statuettes stand together and thus can be easily compared [Figure 8].²² This image, along with the individual photographs of each statuette, helps substantiate that, despite all the issues that should arise from the great extent of the restorations, the most likely reason why the smaller figurine has become more popular is probably based largely on aesthetics and initial impact.

In many ways the smaller figure, although slightly shorter, can more promptly draw attention: The flounces on the skirt are more colourful, with the pattern and varied texture more eye-catching than the (borrowed and re-created) smoother, plainer texture of the skirt of the larger statuette. Plus, the colouring of the breasts in the larger figure is more mottled and not as distinct from the surrounding dress as with the smaller figurine. In that second figure, the dark sleeves provide much more of a contrasting frame to the light, creamy-coloured breasts with dark nipples, causing the breasts of that female both visually and spatially to 'pop out'.

Moreover, although Evans attributed 'attitude' to why he considered the larger a goddess and the smaller a votary,²³ the upraised arms (again, one reconstructed) of the smaller figure seem to command more attention than the larger female's calmer, outstretched arms (again, one partially reconstructed) held lower and close to her body. Similarly, it is difficult differentiating the snakes from the body of the larger figurine since the colouring of serpents and woman are similar and the snakes generally closely follow the contours of the female's form. Of course, once the various serpents are noticed, the impact is unsettling. In contrast, even though the smaller figure has been repaired to show the female holding two much smaller snakes than the other figurine, the immediate impression, somewhat paradoxically, could be interpreted as more powerful. Although the (reconstructed) snakes are little, they are very obvious – twisting away from her body, the darker colours contrasting with her pale arms -- and thus (as reconstructed) speedily identifiable as writhing serpents.

Therefore, it does not seem too surprising that once Evans had artist Bagge rectify the greatest shortcomings of the smaller female by reconstructing the arm, head, and serpents, this one would become the star figurine, and even one of the key representations overall of the Minoan. In truth, the striking characteristics of the restoration almost guarantee great interest.

²² Such a shrine photograph is in Evans, *Annual*, 92 ('conjectural arrangement') and Evans, *Palace*, vol. 1, 518 ('tentatively arranged'), with some modifications by Evans in the two versions, including the addition of the recreated head in the *Palace* photo. The photographs also include touch-ups of details, apparently with a black pen. [Senta C. German, 'Photography and fiction: The Publication of the Excavations at the Palace of Minos at Knossos', *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 18.2 (2005): 209-230].

²³ Evans, *Palace*, vol. 1, 501.

Consider: identification as goddess

Almost immediately after finding the cists, Evans not only referred to one of the figures as a goddess, he also conflated two ideas of goddesses -- a 'Serpent Goddess' and a 'Mother Goddess'. He remarked on the association by both Egyptians and Greeks of some serpents with childbirth, and determined the 'pronounced matronly forms' (for the most part his only attention to the bared breasts) of the Snake Goddess 'seem to point to her as a Great Mother'.²⁴ Although he admitted the ideas that these two goddesses might represent associated deities, he preferred the interpretation that that they are not separate goddesses but that the Snake Goddess is 'a chthonic version of the same matronly divinity...'²⁵

Evans did not offer specific arguments about why either statuette should be interpreted as a goddess -- Snake or Mother -- or, for that matter, priestess or votary. True, a number of aspects of the female figurines does suggest, at the least, considerable importance of these works to their creators. As just noted, their appearances -- from their elaborate clothing to their erect and striking poses, mesmerizing gazes (even if in one case completely reconstructed), and confident interactions with snakes -- do intimate some special significance. Other aspects -- their medium, their found location and method of burial, and the interpretative *appeal* of such an interpretation -- can be important starting points to explore the motivations, assumptions and consequences of Evans's interpretations and, at least in part, the strength of their continued relevance.

First, their medium -- faience -- can be an important factor in endowing them with special importance. Ancient faience was a precursor to earthenware, stoneware, and glass and was the oldest known form of ceramic-like technique. Based not on clay but silica from powdered quartz or ground sand, it transforms by firing into self-glazing, brilliantly-coloured forms with a glassy glaze reminiscent of precious or semi-precious gems. Shaped or moulded into beads, plaques, figurines, etc., it was a luxury item most typically associated with ancient Egyptian burial objects; (the technique is often referred to as Egyptian paste, even though it likely originated in Mesopotamia). The transformation in the kiln of the difficult-to-work-with, dull, almost colourless material into luminous, bright colours was regarded as 'magical' and the technique was a very guarded secret in the ancient world.²⁶

Undeniably, the association of the faience figurines from Knossos with the religious fits into the typical interpretations of the importance of faience figurines from other ancient cultures. Furthermore, all the characteristics of faience -- the

²⁴ Evans, *Annual*, 84, 85.

²⁵ Evans, *Annual*, 87.

²⁶ See Karen Polinger Foster, 'Minoan Faience Revisited', in Caroline M. Jackson and Emma C. Wager, eds., *Vitreous Materials in the Late Bronze Age Aegean*, Sheffield Studies in Aegean Archaeology, 9 (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2008): 179-80.

technical sophistication required, the amazing quality of the products found in the repositories, the expense of importing ingredients such as natron to create the paste and manganese for black colouring, the material's 'magical' transformation when fired, the apparent ceremonial 'burial' of the broken parts of the figurines in the cists (discussed below) -- helped support Evans's assumptions of the religious, sacred, and/or ritual affiliations of the faience statuettes. A reminder to students: even allowing sacred significance, that factor does not automatically imply a figurine represents a goddess.

The location where Evans discovered the faience figures also played into his interpretation. The cists in which the faience works had been discovered were apparently hidden beneath the floor of the chamber. Plus, that chamber was in a central section of the excavated 'Palace'. In fairness, the idea of the excavation uncovering a huge royal residence preceded Evans. By 1878-9 his predecessor the Cretan archaeologist Minos Kalokairinos had labelled his Cretan archaeological excavations a 'palace'.²⁷ Evans, once he was granted permission to excavate this site in 1900, eagerly continued this identification, as shown with the title 'The Palace of Knossos' of his 1902-3 report in the *Annual*. 'Palace', after all, connotes a centre of rule and power within a civilization -- a positive for archaeologists aspiring for a great find. Yet, as scholars are now frequently pointing out, 'There are no iconographic representations of individual rulers, the layout of Knossos does not lead to a central throne complex, and no burials could be conceivably interpreted as royal',²⁸ all factors which are common features in ancient states with a hereditary ruler and thus the lack of such elements can argue against Evans's terminology.

Nonetheless, MacKenzie's daily records of the order and types of objects found -- including libation bowls, stone offering tables, and the faience and ivory items with possible symbolic meanings -- all covered with gold foil and then a layer of many clay vessels and soil, support the idea of some type of purposeful, likely ritual, burial or disposal, and that remains the dominant interpretation among current scholars, even if the circumstances of the cists being filled or the function of their deposits remain still debated. For example, Panagiotaki, who has done some of the most thorough research on Evans's Knossian excavations, agrees in the significance of the apparently careful arrangement of various objects in layers in stone-lined storage areas, and the final covering of everything with dirt. She suggests that the subsequent building over these cists intimates no more plans to disturb the contents and perhaps also an intent to obscure and thus protect their location. Such treatments of the cists 'argue for a kind of ceremonial burial'.²⁹ Eleni Hatzaki offers a variation to this interpretation, suggesting the burials did not represent the ceremonial disposal of important objects that had been accidentally damaged, but the content of the cist 'constitutes the remains of a carefully planned ritual in which specific objects were chosen for disposal and were in effect removed

²⁷ Papadopoulos, 'Inventing the Minoans', 95.

²⁸ Duke, *Tourists Gaze*, 49.

²⁹ Panagiotaki, 'Temple Repositories', 86.

from circulation. Some were intentionally fragmented, either at the time of disposal or previously, and then were placed carefully in the cists'.³⁰ She considers the practice to have occurred in that sector of the site for centuries.

Certainly Evans straightaway determined the storing of objects within the cists conferred all the contents with a sense of sacredness or specialness: 'The tendency of such an arrangement to survive would be all the greater if, as seems to result from the great religious element in the Palace finds, we have here to do with rulers who performed priestly as well as religious functions'.³¹ Evans's influential labels (significantly, he did not follow the standard practice, even during his time, of giving numerals to designate find sites³²) often supported each other through circular reasoning: Labelling the cists as 'Temple Repositories' within a royal palace -- already so described in his *Annual* of 1902-03 and today generally referred to as such even by those who question the labels -- inspired his identification of the faience figurines as goddess or priestess, which in turn supported the specific locales where these significant artefacts were found as representing both rulers (palace) and religion (temple). By the publication of the first volume of his *Palace of Minos* in 1921, Evans confidently claimed that opposite of Egypt, in which royal and priestly were kept apart and temple overshadowed palace; in Crete he had found 'a peaceful abode of priest-kings, in some respects more modern in its equipments than anything produced by classical Greece'.³³ Ilse Schoep argues that Evans's reading of the joint Palace-Temple which combined the Near Eastern idea of the Temple and the Western concept of kingship and palace -- thus supporting the Minoan anticipation of European modernity -- has made it a popular, long-standing interpretation.³⁴

In truth, likely one of the most compelling reasons for Evans's identification of a goddess was this interpretation helped heighten the (accepted) importance and magnitude of his Minoan finds. As will be discussed below, he was eager to discover a religious aspect in the Minoan that matched in importance Mesopotamian and Egyptian finds. The idea of a primeval, great goddess fits well in Evans's interests and his conviction of the vital consequence his found culture played in the development of Europe. A Mother Goddess helped substantiate the Cretan ideas as foundations of Greek (and thus European) mythology, ideas that were part of his created version of Minoan history: '... some of the oldest religious

³⁰ Eleni Hatzaki, 'Structured deposition as ritual action at Knossos', *Hesperia Supplements*, 42, Essays on Ritual and Cult in Crete in Honor of Geraldine C. Gesell, (2009), 20.

³¹ Evans, *Annual*, 148.

³² Louise Hitchcock and Paul Koudounaris, 'Virtual discourse: Arthur Evans and the reconstructions of the Minoan palace at Knossos', in *Labyrinth Revisited*, ed. Hamilakis, 51.

³³ Evans, *Palace*, vol. 1, 1.

³⁴ Ilse Schoep, 'The Minoan "Palace-Temple" reconsidered: A critical assessment of the spatial concentration of political, religious and economic power in Bronze Age Crete', *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, 23:2 (2010): 219 - 243.

traditions of the spot that survived to Classical times refer ... to the cult of the Mother Goddess...'³⁵

By the third volume of his *Palace of Minos*, he advocates 'Clearly, the Goddess was supreme.... we are to regard her as substantially one being of varied aspects, celestial, terrestrial, or infernal ...'³⁶ In a lecture at Cambridge University from around the same time as the publication of this volume, he stated his idea even more directly: 'It seems to me that we are in the presence of a largely Monotheistic Cult, in which the female form of divinity held the supreme place'.³⁷ Here, for Evans not only are the figurines representations of a supreme goddess, but this proclaimed goddess (so questionably reconstructed or found) has become aligned with monotheism, yet another aspect, as historian Christine E. Morris has pointed out, 'making the Minoans more evolved, more modern, and by extension more European than their Near Eastern polytheistic neighbours'.³⁸

Religion scholar Cynthia Eller argues that 'Evans's description of Minoan religion was not solidly based on the material evidence at Knossos'. Instead, especially in the decades when he was developing his opus *Palace of Minos*, 'Evans merely acquired a new theory, and then rearranged the evidence to fit it...'³⁹ Thus Evans's reading of a faience figurine as a goddess, for example, would become instrumental in his concept of Minoan religion. As will be discussed more below concerning the ideas of 'temple' and 'goddess', religious associations of these excavated figurines may be possible, but the almost immediate labelling as such after their discovery should be acknowledged as suspect. Must all well-dressed, impressive women – even if likely involved in rituals -- be goddesses?

Several scholars have pointed out the popularity, beginning just before Evans's excavations, of the idea of a goddess with male consort who supposedly dominated prehistoric religion, such as claimed by Sir James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1890. Although Evans does not specifically relate his Minoan goddesses to Frazer's, Eller considers 'there can be no doubt that by the time Evans began writing his tome, he was quite determinedly making Minoan religion

³⁵ Evans, *Annual*, 85.

³⁶ Sir Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos ...*, vol. III: The Great Transitional Age in the Northern and Eastern Sections of the Palace: The Most Brilliant Records of Minoan Art and the Evidence of an Advanced Religion (London: MacMillan and Co., Limited, 1930): 457.

³⁷ Sir Arthur Evans, 'The Earlier religion of Greece in the light of Cretan discoveries, ' Frazer Lecture for 1931 in the University of Cambridge (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1931): 41.

³⁸ Christine E. Morris, 'From ideologies of motherhood to "collecting mother goddesses"', in Yannis Hamilakis and Nicoletta Momigliano, eds., *Archaeology and European Modernity: Producing and Consuming the 'Minoans'*. *Creta Antica (Rivista annuale di studi archaeologici, storici ed epigrafici, Centro di Archaeologica Cretese, Universita di Catania)*, 7 (Padua: Bottega d'Erasmus, 2006), 70.

³⁹ Cynthia Eller, 'Two knights and a goddess: Sir Arthur Evans, Sir James George Frazer, and the Invention of Minoan Religion', *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, 25.1 (2012): 75, 78.

an exemplum of Frazer's theory about the Mother Goddess and the rising and dying God, her son'.⁴⁰



Figure 11: Drawing of 'Group of Boy-God Adoring Goddess
(Restored drawing by Monsieur E. Gilliéron, Fils)
from Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos*, vol. 3, Fig. 318, p. 456, 1930

That Evans claimed his Goddess has a 'satellite' is just mentioned in the *Annual*,⁴¹ but by the first volume of *Palace of Minos*, the association has become more decisive. Here, referring especially to motifs on seals found in the Repository, he described the Mother Goddess accompanied by 'a youthful satellite, variously regarded as the consort, son, or paramour of the Goddess, mortal though ever resurgent...' which 'may be traced back to its earliest religious stratum'.⁴² He supported the interpretation not with the faience works found, but with some ivory figurines. Most of the ivory figurines, though (as will be noted more below), did not have a clear provenance. Still, Evans seemed to have a special affection for two that suggested this Mother-Son link: the ivory goddess figurine in the Boston museum (no provenance) and a 'boy-God' (in Evans's personal collection, no provenance) that Evans decided 'form a single group of the divine Child God saluting the Mother Goddess' [Figure 11].⁴³ In fact, in a 1931 lecture Evans related 'the remarkable scene' found in Crete on both painted terracotta and a signet ring of the 'youthful male personage who is coupled with the Minoan Goddess' directly to 'the holy Babe of the later Religion on the lap of ... the Madonna'.⁴⁴ That his European contemporaries could readily identify with such a divine mother and child pair undoubtedly made the association especially appealing and especially unlikely for him to consider that both of these favourite ivories are likely forgeries.⁴⁵ Religious

⁴⁰ Eller, 'Two knights,' 91.

⁴¹ Evans, *Annual*, 86.

⁴² Evans, *Palace*, vol. 1, 161.

⁴³ Evans, *Palace*, vol. 3, viii.

⁴⁴ Evans, 'Earlier Religion of Greece', 42.

⁴⁵ See especially Kenneth Lapatin, *Mysteries of the Snake Goddess: Art, Desire, and the Forging of History* (Houston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2002).

history developed through smoke and mirrors, or rather more likely as recent scholarship now strongly suggests, forgery and repurposed ancient ivory.

Consider: uncertain restorations

Again, it must be emphasized that because substantial portions of both statuettes have been reconstructed, all consideration of these figurines should include considerable scepticism. True, some popular writings such as textbooks that discuss these artefacts do typically note dutifully that the figures as portrayed have been greatly restored by their excavator. The restoration, however, is not immediately obvious in the images. Almost inevitably, my students react to the image as depicted. Even students who quote elements of the text (thereby showing they did read the accompanying explanation), typically ignore initially the importance of considering the restored elements. Their response is aided by the texts themselves; one popular art history textbook acknowledges the smaller figurine is 'reconstructed from many pieces', but nonetheless describes a woman that 'holds snakes in her hands and supports a tamed leopard-like feline on her head. This implied power over the animal world also seems appropriate for a deity'.⁴⁶ In other words, although the text mentions the restorations, it still develops ideas about the culture and period based on the *restored* elements documented. The result: the description may acknowledge some or all that is involved in the restoration, but the image triumphs. The pictured work is shown as complete, compelling, and easier to recall and admire than the more cautious clarifying text.

Certainly the restoration of the smaller figurine included aspects that can very much influence interpretation. For instance, as discussed above, although the small snakes the figurine holds are key in the typical reading of the figure, it is not definite that the statuette as found even held snakes. Again, the second arm and snake are complete reconstructions. The one arm that survived does hold a twisting object, but since this object contained no head until renovated, it might not have represented a snake. As Bonney has notably argued, the spiralling 'candy-cane' stripe shown is *not* an actual marking on any snake.⁴⁷ Bands either go around the body of snakes like rings or follow the length of the snake as stripes. Moreover, a close look at the figurine's snakes shows the stripes are actually raised in texture from the surrounding bodies of the snakes. This is different from the smooth spots, actually possible snake markings, of the serpents interacting with the larger figurine. Both Bonney and Joseph Alexander MacGillivray suggest that rather than the sleek, tubular body of a serpent, the smaller statuette could once have held a

⁴⁶ Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages: The Western Perspective*, 14th ed., (Cengage Learning, 2014): 9.

⁴⁷ Bonney, 'Disarming the Snake Goddess', 178.

textured rope, cord, or twine.⁴⁸ As will be explored below, such objects have possible symbolic interpretations that could fit in with a full bosomed, bare-breasted young female.



Figure 12: Drawings of 'Upper Part of Faience Figure with Head Restored... Lower Part of Seated Animal and Tiara with Rivet Holes', Figure 362, p. 504, from Arthur Evans, *The Annual of the British School at Athens*, 1902-03

Even more uncertain is the re-creation of the smaller figurine from the shoulders up. Not only did Bagge have to re-create this statuette's head guided only by surviving female faces represented elsewhere, but he added a very conspicuous headdress. Sometime after the publication of the *Annual*, Bagge and Evans decided that a fragment of faience was part of this figure's headpiece. Bagge placed on top of it a feline figure – Evans often referred to it as a spotted pard – reportedly found in the vicinity.⁴⁹ Although the result is certainly interesting (as the art history textbook quote above suggests), the recreation of the head and headdress unquestionably should receive more scrutiny and scepticism than it usually does. Evans and Bagge decided the headdress was 'a series of raised medallions, forming perhaps a conventional rendering of an original crown of roses',⁵⁰ even though the round circles look little like even the most abstract version of a flower. The fragment of faience that inspired this interpretation, as represented as shaded segments in the drawings on the right of the page in Evans's illustration [Figure 12], makes up less than a fifth of the re-created headwear, with little to support that it was truly meant as part of headgear. The animal was added because the fragment of the tiara had a 'small circular rivet hole on the flat upper surface' that was 'found

⁴⁸ Bonney, 'Disarming the Snake Goddess', 178 and Joseph Alexander MacGillivray, *Minotaur: Sir Arthur Evans and the Archaeology of the Minoan Myth* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 223.

⁴⁹ Evans, *Palace*, vol. 1, 503-4.

⁵⁰ Evans, *Palace*, vol. 1, 504.

to answer to a similar feature on the base of a miniature lioness or spotted pard from the same Repository, suggesting the almost certain restoration', writes Evans.⁵¹

'Almost certain' is unsubstantiated. Whether or not the two rivet holes are meant to be aligned, or even, if so, represent a headpiece, begs consideration. Plus, Evans was very vague as to when and where the feline figurine was discovered. Although he declares it from the same repository, a cat or similar animal is not mentioned nor illustrated in the *Annual*, MacKenzie's daybooks, nor Evans's annotated sketches at the Ashmolean Museum. In the sketches, published by Panagiotaki at the end of the twentieth century after having been discovered in the museum's archives, Evans drew various faience objects in groups -- cups, marine objects, land animals, and plaques (all which Panagiotaki helpfully transcribes). Again, no feline is mentioned with the land animals.⁵² Panagiotaki admits that 'All too often Evans would refer to objects, but not illustrate them',⁵³ but it seems odd that a faience animal that appears to have been discovered whole and would seem a likely candidate for symbolism was not mentioned or illustrated when found, when even formless fragments were often noted and/or sketched. Somehow, though, it has become standard to declare the feline form was 'excavated in the same room as the female figures',⁵⁴ without corroboratory excavation reports cited. By the publication of the first volume of the *Palace of Minos* in 1921, Evans simply declared: 'This votary, or double of the Goddess ... was eventually found capable of complete restoration',⁵⁵ and then proceeded to describe the result with no verification.

Consider: forgeries and uncertain provenances

The uncertain origins of the cat figure is not unusual. Besides his 'imaginative' reconstitutions, it seems pertinent to acknowledge that by the publication of the *Palace of Minos*, Evans had proved himself to be lax in his concern about the provenance of works. Considerable attention in the past few decades has focused on the doubts of authenticity of many of the works associated with the Minoan, especially many ivory figurines often linked by Evans and popular culture to the faience Snake Goddesses. It is now generally suspected that many of the ivory figures (and other 'Minoan' artefacts) were manufactured in the early twentieth century, perhaps specifically to attract the attention of Evans. The title of one article sums up this supposition: 'Snake Goddesses, Fake Goddesses: How forgers on Crete met the demand for Minoan antiquities'.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Evans, *Palace*, vol. 1, 504.

⁵² Panagiotaki, 'Temple Repositories', 68.

⁵³ Panagiotaki, *Central Palace Sanctuary*, 2.

⁵⁴ For example, Eller, 'Two knights', 83.

⁵⁵ Evans, *Palace*, vol. 1, 503.

⁵⁶ Kenneth Lapatin, 'Snake Goddesses, fake Goddesses: How forgers on Crete met the demand for Minoan antiquities', *Archaeology*, 54:1 (Jan./Feb. 2001), 33 – 36.

That Evans bought for his personal collection some of the artefacts that remain questioned for authenticity (such as the ivory boy-god) further indicates Evans's implicit acceptance of these objects. In other cases, as the preeminent expert, his interest and approval generally helped to authenticate items. He assumed and argued works authentic, despite a lack of record of their find spot, because he said they exhibited characteristics of documented works that had not yet been published. What he apparently did not consider, or at least publicly acknowledge, was that those who had excavated the works would have known of these characteristics before publication.⁵⁷ Significantly, Evans's chief restorers at Knossos, both father and son named Emile Gilliéron, had a family business selling 'official replicas' to major museums,⁵⁸ and thus would have been in a good position to fabricate unofficial replicas. Moreover another archaeologist, Sir Leonard Wooley, claimed he was present with Evans when a key member of Evans's excavation team gave a death bed confession of Minoan forgeries. Wooley professed to going with Evans and the police to a house named by the dying forger and finding a manufacturing plant for forged ivory works, some of which were Snake Goddesses.⁵⁹

Although according to the recollection Evans was at this encounter, this discovery was not a part of his own history of his excavations; in truth, issues with forgeries are scarcely mentioned in his *Palace of Minos* accounts. Kenneth Lapatin, one of the recent scholars most involved in disclosing forgeries, suggests Evans was an example of how 'little more than wishful thinking'⁶⁰ led to the perpetuation and endurance of unsubstantiated finds in the creation of history. As a result, both suspected forgeries and the heavily reconstructed pieces like the faience Snake Goddesses have served prominently as genuine representations of the Cretan Bronze Age in many standard textbooks. Ironically, the uncertain ivories have

⁵⁷ Suggested, for example, by Kate Cooper and Julia Fenn, "'A Minoan Mystery" from the Royal Ontario Museum', 2013-14, at <http://www.rom.on.ca/en/collections-research/research/world-culture/rom-minoan-ivory-goddess>, accessed 10 July 2016.

⁵⁸ For information concerning the Gilliérons and possible forgeries, especially regarding ivories, see for instance, Lapatin, *Mysteries*; Mary Beard, 'Knossos: Fakes, facts, and mystery', *New York Review of Books* (24 July 2009), in *Newsletter*, Auckland Classical Association, #3 (Nov. 2009); and Seán Hemingway, 'Historic Images of the Greek Bronze Age', New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000, at <http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2011/historic-images-of-the-greek-bronze-age--the-reproductions-of-emile-gillie%C3%A9ron--son>, accessed 10 July 2016.

⁵⁹ Sir Leonard Woolley, *As I Seem to Remember* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1962): 21-23, in Andrea Sinclair, 'Enduring fictions of late Victorian fantasy: Sir Arthur Evans and the faience "Goddesses" from Minoan Crete', *AncientPlanet Online Journal*, 5, (August 1, 2013): 9, at <http://ancientplanet.blogspot.com/2013/08/vol-5-2013-preview-contents.html#.VYyOykYYH85>, accessed 10 July 2016. Lapatin describes a similar incident, *Mysteries*, 171.

⁶⁰ Kenneth D. S. Lapatin, 'Journeys of an Icon: The Provenance of the "Boston Goddess"', *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*, 13:2 (2000): 134.

seemed to corroborate the importance of the subject of the re-created faiences: females with snakes. Such circumstances are something of which students should be made very aware since they offer a powerful insight into the invention and fabrication of history.

Consider other symbolism

Despite the endurance of Evans's interpretation, show either of the two re-created faience figures to a college class and ask what the students believe the figures might signify, and 'fertility' and 'female sexuality' are almost certainly mentioned before 'goddess'. The explicit emphasis on both statuettes' full, uncovered breasts immediately suggests to many sexuality, sensuality, fertility, childbearing, lactation, motherhood. That is, as one scholar phrased it: the 'open front design surely facilitated breast-feeding and likely was rooted in ritual related to fertility and/or sexuality'.⁶¹ However Evans did not discuss the implications of the exposed breasts, except to declare without elaboration that they 'are of matronly proportions'⁶² and later offer the circular argument that 'The female breast itself ... is specially suggestive from its known associations with this Mother Goddess and her sister forms'.⁶³ True, Evans's Mother Goddess does necessitate fertility, but his eager association of her with the Virgin Mary helps de-sexualize the concept. That Evans did not seem to even consider any symbolism or meaning beyond that related to the sacred, should lead a class of students to question why and suggest other possibilities.

This point becomes even more thought-provoking when it is paired with other interesting lapses in Evans's discussions of gender and sexuality in the Knossian artefacts, including the idea that clear representations of gender and sexuality are not typical in the art. An interesting direction in recent scholarship is the questioning of a simplistic division of Minoan figures into a 'male/female' binary. In addition to the confusions and uncertainties of reconstructions, and often likely forgeries, in the frescoes and sculptures, Benjamin Alberti refers to the popular bull-leaping fresco to point out the inconsistencies and lack of details of the standard criteria traditionally denoting male/female. Many students familiar with Egyptian art readily follow Evans's reading such as in the *Toreador fresco* of light-skinned figures as female and darker, redder figures as male. But Alberti rightly questions whether the conventions of one culture should be automatically consigned to another culture, especially since multiple skin colours within the Cretan frescoes exist, and so many of the frescoes involve Evans's imaginative

⁶¹ Bernice R. Jones, 'The Minoan "Snake Goddess": New interpretations of her costume and identity', in *Potnia: Deities and religion in the Aegean Bronze Age, Proceedings of the 8th International Aegean Conference/8e*, (Göteborg: Göteborg University, 12-15 April 2000): 264.

⁶² Evans, *Annual*, 76.

⁶³ Evans, *Palace*, vol. 1, 656.

reconstitutions.⁶⁴ Plus, Alberti concludes from his study that there are few other clues such as different clothing (for example, figures of both colours appear to wear a codpiece) or physical attributes that suggest the gender of the figures, noting specifically 'depictions of genitalia are absent and depictions of breasts rarely occur'.⁶⁵ (This also brings into question why the emphasis on breasts in the faience figures goes against the trend.) Lapatin is likewise interested in the confusing gender identification of certain figures, questioning the cross-dressing ivory with golden codpiece Our Lady of Sports at the Royal Ontario Museum (uncertain provenance) and suggesting that the boy-god also with the shaky provenance that Evans was so fond of likely had been forged as a counterpart to Evans's supposedly *female* bull-leapers but then misidentified by him.⁶⁶

Returning to Evans's interpretation of the faience statuettes, for the most part Evans did not develop any significance of the serpents outside the 'chthonic character of the worship here represented',⁶⁷ which is automatically relating them to the spiritual realm of the Underworld. Another interpretation published by the National Psychological Association in 1917 (before Evans's own *Palace of Minos*), also interpreted one of the figurines (this time the smaller one) as a goddess. Similar to Evans, she is not just a snake goddess, but the 'Great Goddess ... whose particular domain seemed to comprise all dead and living things'.⁶⁸ Yet in this instance, it is the *sexuality* of the figure that led to this interpretation. The statuette's 'over-emphasis of the female sexual elements' and the 'well-known' and 'over-emphasized' (by her holding two serpents) 'phallic symbol of the snake' evoke the idea she 'therefore represents the generative force in nature...'⁶⁹ Although the word 'fertility' is not specifically used, the phrase 'generative force' suggests it is a principal association.

Evans's Snake Goddess obviously gives serpents prominence. True, the smaller and typically more reproduced figurine may or may not hold snakes, but the larger re-created figurine decidedly is associated with snakes. One of the spare arms (that may go with the largest female faience piece not 'reconstituted' by Evans) also has a snake. Nevertheless, in terms of the symbolism of the snakes, it should be pointed out, which in general writings on the Minoan it typically is not, that snakes were not even that prevalent among all the objects within the Repositories, or in truth, all Minoan finds. Indeed, several recent scholars have questioned Evans's promotion of snakes or snake goddesses as of great importance in Cretan

⁶⁴ Benjamin Alberti, 'Faience goddesses and ivory bull-leapers: The Aesthetics of sexual difference at Late Bronze Age Knossos', in *The Archaeology of Identities: A Reader*, ed. Timothy Insoll (London, New York: Routledge, 2007): 102.

⁶⁵ Alberti, 'Faience goddesses', 98.

⁶⁶ Lapatin, *Mysteries*, 173-4.

⁶⁷ Evans, *Annual*, 85.

⁶⁸ Isador H. Coriat, 'Varia: Note on the sexual symbolism of the Cretan Snake Goddess', *Psychoanalytic Review*, National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis, 4, (1917): 368.

⁶⁹ Coriat, 'Varia', 368.

mythology. Lapatin, for example, points out that female snake handlers are rare in Minoan art and there are no such representations in surviving Minoan frescoes, engraved gems, or seal rings.⁷⁰ Bonney considers the Snake Goddess 'to be understood as hybrids of Syrian-Cretan imagery and an intentional evocation of the exotic'.⁷¹ As the exotic, it therefore would be the opposite of a traditional iconography. Geraldine C. Gesell early on indicates that in order to champion the importance of snakes in Crete, Evans looked towards other artefacts such as Snake Tubes (named by Evans), who connected them with snake worship, but that only three of those found showed snakes on them; the other tubes had symbols not connected with snakes.⁷² In other words, Evans's eagerness to promote snakes and Snake Goddesses led him to champion snakes in other artefacts, either exaggerating their importance such as in the so-called Snake Tubes, or, as Andrea Sinclair suggests: 'unwisely inspired him to incorporate snakes where there were none originally indicated...'⁷³

Although other finds in Crete do sometimes repeat an interest in snakes, they also, however, reinforce the interest in other creatures or objects, such as birds or plants or the ocean.⁷⁴ Thousands of sea shells, some modelled faience shells, some fish bones, and a few faience flying fish found in the depositories would signal an interest in the sea. Of the faience shells from the cists that are identifiable in current collections, six are Argonaut shells.⁷⁵ Since the Argonaut shell is created to house the eggs of the female, Panagiotaki suggests they may symbolize both the sea and fertility.⁷⁶

Many other Repository faience objects can suggest 'fertility', 'reproduction', and 'motherhood'. Evans recognized such interpretations in the 1902-03 *Annual*, deciding 'fruit and flowers, shells and fishes, and notably the cows and goats suckling their young illustrate the cult of a Nature Goddess'.⁷⁷ In 1931 he provided a longer list of the associations of 'the Goddess': 'guardian lions and watch-dogs, deer and wild goats of the chase, swans and doves, and— both as a sign of domestic motherhood and of the awesome power in the Underworld—snakes, both harmless and noxious'.⁷⁸ In other words, although snakes may have held symbolic importance to the Minoans, even Evans implies they were not necessarily more

⁷⁰ Lapatin, *Mysteries*, 76.

⁷¹ Bonney, 'Disarming the Snake Goddess', 181.

⁷² Geraldine C. Gesell, 'The Minoan snake tube: A Survey and catalogue', *American Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 80, #3 (summer, 1976): 247.

⁷³ Sinclair, 'Enduring Fictions', 6.

⁷⁴ For example, see Geraldine C. Gesell, 'From Knossos to Kavousi: The Popularizing of the Minoan palace goddess', *Hesperia Supplements*, 33, XAPIE: Essays in Honor of Sara A. Immerwahr (2004): 139.

⁷⁵ Panagiotaki, 'Temple Repositories', 63.

⁷⁶ Panagiotaki, *Central Palace Sanctuary*, 80.

⁷⁷ Evans, *Annual*, 86.

⁷⁸ Evans, 'Earlier Religion', 40.

important symbolically than other creatures or objects. Or that certain females (or goddesses) had stronger ties to serpents than to other creatures. Such uncertainties provide yet more important elements for students to consider in their interpretation of this history.

Interestingly, if the smaller figure were holding a rope or cord rather than a snake, the suggested meanings could remain similar. Both ropes and cords traditionally have all types of symbolism that could be associated with this bare-breasted female: umbilical cords, the pain of menstruation as like tight bands around the middle, childbirth as a kind of loosing of knots to achieve birth, the family 'ties' that link members, life as a cord that can be severed, a ribbon of breast milk or menstrual blood, etc.⁷⁹ The suggestion that she could be holding something else such as sheaves of grain or necklaces, as held by other Bronze Age figures⁸⁰, could change the figure's significance, although sheaves of grain could still fit into a broader concept of nature's fertility and the necklaces might have associations with status or functionary roles.

Other early interpretations also differ from a simply religious meaning. Just a few years after their discovery, it was suggested the figures represented snake charmers such as in Egypt, appropriate accompaniments to the acrobats (like bull leapers on the famous *Toreador Fresco*) that had also been found at Knossos.⁸¹ Evans simply dismissed the snake handler idea, declaring staunchly of the figurines: 'the whole associations in which they were found show that they were of a religious character, and formed in fact the central objects of a shrine'. But, he continued, both interpretations were 'a distinction without a difference' since, he claimed, 'the practice of snake-charming would clearly have been part of their priestly functions'.⁸² Although Lapatin believes most scholars do not accept the snake charmers explanation 'which if correct would certainly reduce the importance of the statuettes as central documents of Minoan religion...',⁸³ this interpretation does have proponents in recent scholarship, with one of the current experts on Minoan faience production believing it 'compelling the conclusion that the faience figures are not themselves divine, but mortal women whose participation in handling snakes and other activities brought them into ecstatic contact with the divine'.⁸⁴ Students will note that obviously the assumptions of divine or priestly functions is not true of all

⁷⁹ For example, see Christopher L.C.E. Witcombe, *Minoan Snake Goddess*, 2000, at <http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/>, section 9, accessed 10 July 2016.

⁸⁰ Lapatin, *Mysteries*, 87.

⁸¹ Hermann Thiersch, *Aegina, das Heiligtum der Aphaia* (1906): 372, cited in L. D. Caskey, 'A Chryselephantine Statuette of the Cretan Snake Goddess', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 19:3 (July-Sept. 1915): 247. Lapatin in his *Mysteries*, 81, also notes Thiersch's idea of the snake charmer, adding another such suggestion by René Dussaud a year earlier.

⁸² Evans, *Palace*, vol. 1, 506-7.

⁸³ Lapatin, *Mysteries*, 81.

⁸⁴ Foster, 'Minoan Faience Revisited', 183.

snake charmers in all cultures. Snake charmers and fertility and mother figures do not just pertain to the sacred realm.

Consider labelling

So far most of the 'lessons' explored here concerning the construction of histories revolve specifically around a careful consideration of the faience statuettes themselves. However, the questioning of their identification as Snake Goddesses should help open in students' minds further avenues of exploration into the inherent challenges of many of Evans's other popular terms so closely associated with the culture. Without doubt, Sir Arthur Evans's flair for imaginative labels of the Cretan culture has proven quite persistent and influential. Most students will understand that a good critique should establish whether the data is reliable or instead untrustworthy or somehow manipulated. However students may not as quickly recognize the subtlety of some basic assumptions, such as the possible interpretative importance of names or labels. But once one label, such as Snake Goddess, has been challenged, others – from the descriptive locations such as Temple Repositories and Palace of Knossos, to the name of the culture itself – can also be more easily recognized as suspect.

Consider: Labels of 'Temple Repositories' in 'the Palace of Knossos'

It would surprise most students and tourists that one of the most recognized concepts of the Minoan, the Palace of Knossos, is now widely questioned, with scholars closely involved in current Cretan studies admitting that 'disagreement reflects a wider lack of consensus in the discipline'.⁸⁵ Although some scholars continue to favour the idea of a Palace as a residence for principals of authority and with a communal ceremonial focus, for many the labels are moving to more neutral terms such as Court Complexes or Court Centres, with much attention now focused on the open Court as key to ritual ceremonies and holding special public or community functions.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Ilse Schoep and Peter Tomkins, 'Back to the Beginning for the Early and Middle Bronze Age on Crete', in Ilse Schoep, Peter Tomkins, and Jan Driessen, eds., *Back to the Beginning: Reassessing Social and Political Complexity on Crete during the Early and Middle Bronze Age* (Oxbow Books: 2012): 19.

⁸⁶ See, for example, Jan Driessen, 'The Central Court of the Palace at Knossos', *British School at Athens Studies*, 12 (Knossos: Palace, City, State, 2004): 75-82; Peter Tomkins, 'Behind the horizon: Reconsidering the genesis and function of the "First Palace" at Knossos (Final Neolithic IV – Middle Minoan IB)': 32 – 80, in Schoep, Tomkins, and Driessen, eds., *Back to the Beginning*; Colin F. MacDonald, Colin F., 'Palatial Knossos: the Early Years', 81 – 113, in Schoep, Tomkins, and Driessen, eds., *Back to the Beginning*; Ilse Schoep, 'Bridging the divide between the "Prepalatial" and the "Protopalatial" periods', pp.403- 428, in Schoep, Tomkins, and Driessen, eds., *Back to the Beginning*.

Similarly, as already suggested, the term 'Temple Repositories' and its connotations may elicit disagreements. Nevertheless, whatever the label employed to describe the cists Evans excavated, the importance of these sites – and consequently the importance of their contents – in the understanding of the culture has been recognized from their discovery and continues to be widely accepted. The earliest records of the excavation at Knossos, MacKenzie's day-books, although not always containing as much information as researchers today might wish, were written, according to a modern scholar, 'matter-of-factly, describing the soil texture and colors, every bit the work of the well-trained, scientific archaeologist'⁸⁷ and thus are generally used as a check to Evans's often imaginative remembrances and conjectures that were frequently written much later after the event. (Panagiotaki does add the warning that thorough recordkeeping in the *Day-Books* was 'in reality impossible for a single person to accomplish, given the number of trenches open at a number of locations across the site'.⁸⁸)

Consider: label of 'Minoan'

Almost all texts discussing the Minoan acknowledge this descriptive term was made popular by Sir Arthur Evans at the beginning of the twentieth century; much of the scholarship of the twenty-first century makes significant inroads into deconstructing the Evans's legacy, and this includes that label. For example in *Labyrinth Revisited* of 2002, previously mentioned as one of the key publications that helped establish this century's frequent reactions to Evans's theoretical baggage, editor Yannis Hamilakis in his introduction proposes the suppression of the term 'Minoan' as one of various changes needed in the scholarship.⁸⁹ Indeed, with the clever title of this scholarly anthology, Hamilakis neatly employs a term – labyrinth – a word almost synonymous with 'Minoan', in order to put forward the complicated, convoluted, confusing puzzle of how the history has been constructed, promoted, and revised. A few years later he and Nicoletta Momigliano renew the 'plea for abandonment of the term "Minoan" and its derivatives' since these labels are so loaded.⁹⁰ Yet flawed as the term Minoan might be, omitting such a long-established, widely-used name is generally recognized as awkward and confusing. The label thus perseveres as a popular cultural reference even, for the most part, among experts of the area -- including Hamilakis, who persists using the term, now often in quotes, while acknowledging its problems.⁹¹ The more general usage, however, does not straightforwardly consider how Evans's name has associations that can influence

⁸⁷ MacGillivray, *Minotaur*, 176.

⁸⁸ Panagiotaki, *Central Palace Sanctuary*, 4.

⁸⁹ Hamilakis, ed., *Labyrinth Revisited*, 4.

⁹⁰ Hamilakis and Momigliano, eds., *Archaeology and European Modernity*, 55.

⁹¹ For example, in his 2006 article 'The Colonial, the national, and the local: Legacies of the "Minoan" past', in *Archaeology and European Modernity*, Hamilakis and Momigliano, eds., 145-162.

interpretations, all the more reason to explore in class the various significances of the loaded word.

Consider: label of 'Minoan' as 'Greek'

Employing the term 'Minoan' effectively ties the culture with ancient Greece through mythology. Ironically, although Evans expressed amusement in Heinrich Schliemann's 'literal belief in the records of Homer and of other ancient authors',⁹² Evans's own naming of the Minoans proves to be a quintessential example of the power of associations with a name, and specifically, with a mythology. 'Minoan', derived from King Minos, automatically provides a rich 'history' for this culture based on ancient Greek myths as vague memories of the past. King Minos was a son of Europa and Zeus and the stepfather of the Minotaur, the creature who supposedly restlessly prowled the labyrinth tunnels beneath the palace. That a map of the ruins at Knossos does resemble a maze or labyrinth; that references throughout the excavations to bulls or bull horns do seem to fit in well with the story of a king whose both mother and wife were seduced by bulls; that Sir Arthur noticed during an earthquake the sounds reminded him of 'the muffled roar of an angry bull ... the bellowing of the bull beneath the earth'⁹³ – all helped in endorsing Crete's relationship with Greece through Greek mythology.

Significantly, Evans's discovery of the ancient culture was exactly the period in which this island was at last officially linking politically with Greece. His discoveries consequently reinforced the political connection that will finally be recognized in 1913. Crete, in part through Evans's presentation of mythology, is promoted as Pre-Greek.

Moreover, Evans's determined use of the term Minoan also promoted his insistence that his Minoans were earlier than, distinctive from, and dominant to the Mycenaeans.⁹⁴ In other words, with the Minoans Evans introduced to the Greeks new forbearers. To support his argument Evans could be quite conniving. MacGillivray observes, for instance, that site supervisor Duncan Mackenzie began his detailed excavation record *Day-Book of the Excavations at Knossos*, using the Greek and Roman spelling of the town. Evans, however, quickly converted the spelling to 'Knossos' since, according to linguistic theory, place names with 'ss' were of greater antiquity than those with clear Greek roots.⁹⁵

Evans's promotion of the supposedly peaceful Minoans compared to the supposedly bellicose Mycenaeans became (and still largely remains) ingrained in

⁹² Sir Arthur Evans, introduction to *Schliemann of Troy* by Emil Ludwig (New York and London: G. P. Putnam, 1931), cited in Horwitz, *Find of a Lifetime*, 62.

⁹³ Sir Arthur Evans, letter to his half-sister Joan, cited in Horwitz, *Find of a Lifetime*, 211.

⁹⁴ For example, Evans, *Palace*, vol. 1, x, 25.

⁹⁵ MacGillivray, *Minotaur*, 176.

popular thought (and textbooks).⁹⁶ The degree of truth to his claims, controversial even during his lifetime, is not significant for the purposes of this article beyond providing students yet another opportunity to recognize the extent of various assumptions and manipulations in this historical creation. For instance, Philip Duke has noted that 'it is not just coincidence that archaeology in the Mediterranean flourished at the same time as the collapse of the Ottoman Empire',⁹⁷ of which Crete had been a part. Also concentrating on the significance of this period, Cathy Gere suggests that the Christian-Muslim massacres during the Greco-Turkish War of 1897 so affected Evans that from the time he returned to Crete in 1898, he selectively disregarded evidence of some of his earlier explorations there in which he had 'explored the network of fortifications in the eastern part of the island and revelled in a description of a warlike society constantly feuding with itself'.⁹⁸ By 1901 he proclaimed the opposite: that Knossos showed 'no signs of an elaborate system of fortification such as at Tiryns and Mycenae',⁹⁹ instead claiming the Minoan was a pacifist paradise.

Much current scholarship also points out how problems of linking Cretan past with Greece's go beyond the careful construction of this preferred myth of history; the relationship also proves a considerable simplification of history. Although there are periods in which the paths of Greek and Cretan history are similar, there are also notable divergences. Furthermore, the term 'Minoan' suggests a uniformity of Cretan culture, both throughout the island and in various epochs, that is a type of simplification. Anna Simandiraki has shown a good example of this in the Greek school curriculum in which ethnic homogeneity is promoted: 'there is currently no room for discussion about the diverse origins, influences, and connections of Minoan societies'.¹⁰⁰ Yet, she argues, whereas 'Crete' and 'Minoan' are generally used interchangeably, although all Minoans were Cretans, not all Cretans were Minoans.¹⁰¹ Identity has rarely been easily assigned and undisputed, however much history likes to offer clean, clear labels like Minoan or Greek.

⁹⁶ For a summation of Evans and the Mycenaean/Minoan debate, see Papadopoulos, 'Inventing the Minoans', 2005 and also David Roessel, 'Happy little extroverts and bloodthirsty tyrants: Minoans and Mycenaeans in literature in English after Evans and Schliemann', in *Archaeology and European Modernity*, Hamilakis and Momigliano, eds., 197 – 207. For a more specific focus on Evans and his determination that Linear B writing not be associated with the Greek language (and thus give precedence to the Mycenaeans), see Margalit Fox, *The Riddle of the Labyrinth: The Quest to Crack an Ancient Code* (Ecco, 2013).

⁹⁷Duke, *Tourists Gaze*, 97.

⁹⁸ Cathy Gere, *Knossos and the Prophets of Modernism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009), 14.

⁹⁹'The Palace of Minos', *Monthly Review* (March 1901): 12, cited in Gere, *Prophets of Modernism*, 67.

¹⁰⁰Anna Simandiraki, 'The "Minoan" experience of schoolchildren in Crete', in Hamilakis and Momigliano, eds., *Archaeology and European Modernity*, (2006): 272.

¹⁰¹Anna Simandiraki, 'Minoan archaeology in the Athens 2004 Olympic games', *European Journal of Archaeology*, 8 #2 (2005): 172.

Acknowledgment in class of such complicated relationships can foster insights, including how apropos 'Minoan' was for specific political circumstances and desires.

Consider: label of 'Minoan' as 'European'

Besides its identification as a precursor of Greece, another outcome of the label 'Minoan' helps uphold Crete's position as 'European'. The story of Minos, as the son of the importantly named Europa -- thereby suggesting the mother of Europe -- implies pushing back the dates of the illustrious Greek/European civilization to a more ancient time.¹⁰² For a doggedly Victorian gentleman (reportedly roaming the excavation sites in proper attire with jacket, polished boots, and homburg),¹⁰³ Evans considered of paramount interest an ancient *European* civilization that could legitimately rival the cultures of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. His decidedly interpretative fieldwork tended to discover what he wanted. As early as 1909 he boasted: 'The recent discoveries in Crete have added a new horizon to European civilization.... This revelation of the past has thus more than an archaeological interest. It concerns all history and must affect the mental attitude of our own and future generations in many departments of knowledge'.¹⁰⁴ Within the first paragraph of his 1921 first volume of *Palace of Minos*, Evans declared bluntly: 'For the first time there has come into view a primitive European civilization, the earliest phase of which goes back even beyond the days of the First Dynasty of Egypt'.¹⁰⁵ He continued later: 'In other words, this comparatively small island ... was at once the starting point and the earliest stage in the highway of European civilization'.¹⁰⁶ As contemporary scholars have noted, Evans accordingly provided the 'politically dominant Europeans of the early twentieth century a noble ancestry'.¹⁰⁷

Thus his Minoan archaeology has been used to explain European civilization, from its beginnings but especially in contemporary times. Writers of the anthology edited by Yannis Hamilakis and Nicoletta Momigliano examine how the Minoan was produced and consumed to shape and justify European modernity.¹⁰⁸ According to Hamilakis: 'The remnants of the Cretan Bronze Age were recast, reordered, recreated, and forged to produce a world of objects, sites, and images that would satisfy the Eurocentric colonial imagination and its territorial aspirations as well as the national project of the Cretan intellectuals'.¹⁰⁹ As Gere

¹⁰² See Papadopoulos, 'Inventing the Minoans', for a good argument for this interest.

¹⁰³ Horwitz, *Find of a Lifetime*, 1.

¹⁰⁴ Arthur Evans, preface to *Crete: The Forerunner of Greece* by Charles H. and Harriet B. Hawes (1909): vii, cited in Lapatin, *Mysteries of the Snake Goddess*, 156.

¹⁰⁵ Evans, *Palace*, vol. 1, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Evans, *Palace*, vol. 1, 24.

¹⁰⁷ Papadopoulos, 'Inventing the Minoans', 126.

¹⁰⁸ Hamilakis and Momigliano, eds., *Archaeology and European Modernity*.

¹⁰⁹ Hamilakis, 'The Colonial, the national, and the local', 145.

notes, the result has proven to be 'an idiosyncratic and subjective vision, a Minoan world that ... answered to the political and cultural imperatives of the twentieth century'.¹¹⁰

Of course the concept of 'European' is in itself not absolutely fixed, and the asserted certainty of Crete's place in Europe can provide yet another quirk to explore in the construction of history. As a look on the map clearly shows, Crete may lie only some 70 miles off the Greek mainland, but it is also only about 150 miles from the Asian continent and some 200 miles across the Mediterranean from Africa. Evans in fact did often mention possible influences from the Eastern Mediterranean or Egypt. It is pertinent for students to explore the irony of how the purported lynchpin in the construction of a notable European heritage would have been just as likely to have experienced and been influenced by such a broad range of *non-European* traditions and cultures.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the twentieth century Sir Arthur Evans created a paradigm of Cretan archaeology and history that is largely still promoted today in popular histories. Indeed, the intriguing terminology introduced by Evans has become so commonly used over the years, it is difficult to abandon. Yet almost all aspects of his 'Minoan' can be questioned. Much of what is recognized about this culture is based on his modern re-creations, restorations, reconstitutions. There is very little about the general presentation such as in in general education books or popular culture that escapes the ambivalences that are a part of the formulation of histories. Consequently in textbooks, for example, even if the analyses expressly acknowledge some of the ambiguities involved in the information, the presentation -- with its reproductions clearly labelled 'Snake Goddess', or 'Toreador Fresco', or 'Palace of Minos' -- implies a certainty that it is easy for both non-expert instructor and learning student to accept and, by doing so, help to promote.

Fortunately it is not necessary here to come to any definitive decision regarding terms such as Snake Goddess, Palace of Knossos, Temple Repositories, Minoan. It is enough to recognize how quickly Evans adopted these labels for the Knossos site, how pervasive they have remained in discussing the findings, and how significant they have been in establishing popular interpretations of the artefacts found there, including of the female faience figurines. This does not mean that Evans's ideas are all pure fabrication and falsehood, but history in general -- and without doubt Minoan history -- is not as definite and absolute as generally presented. It is a key responsibility of instructors to help students realize this very pertinent aspect of the creation of history.

I wanted to suggest here how the Minoan can become much more of a teaching tool. Key artefacts like the Snake Goddess figurines, such popular and

¹¹⁰ Gere, *Prophets of Modernism*, 49.

quintessential representations of the Minoan, provide superb occasions for students to explore the often very heavy-handed fabrication of history. They offer the opportunity to exercise critical thinking and consequently active learning, and thus to recognize the uncertainties, oddities, and doubts that are often so integral in the construction and understanding of all histories.

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