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LIFE AMONG THE ANIMALIAN IN BRONZE AGE CRETE AND THE SOUTHERN AEGEAN

INTRODUCTION

The sociocultural spaces of the “Minoan” Aegean were teeming with animal bodies. These bodies – the tiny and the massive, the watchful and the hunted, the engaging and the aloof, the human and the nonhuman – invigorated Aegean contexts in complex and particular ways. Many of these animals were alive, but many were not – and never had been. It is the latter that are our focus here. These fabricated Aegean animals have traditionally been described as “representations” and have long been celebrated in this capacity, but their relationship to living beings was not limited to a role as imitative depictions. Through remarkably dynamic renderings, realized across a range of media, such as zoomorphic vessels, wall paintings, engraved seal stones and amulets, animals’ bodies took on a rich diversity of material and spatial qualities that could afford distinctive interactive experiences; worn objects prominently fashioned of animals’ teeth and skins further blurred the distinction between the biological and the artificial, and the human and nonhuman. By recognizing both biological and fabricated entities as *real* embodiments of animals, which could coexist and interact in Aegean spaces, the nature of our discussion changes. We see that the dynamics of representation were caught up in a much wider field of relationships that involved these bodies and characterized their engagements with people. Doing so moves us beyond questions of signification and intentional design, and toward a fuller recognition of people’s actual experiences of animalian bodies. Looking closely at a variety of venues,

ranging from palatial courts to a modest bench in the corner of a house, our focus thus can turn to how the world of *animalian things* was a crucial part of social life in Bronze Age Cretan and Aegean spaces, and how direct interactions with these other animal bodies were a central, yet often overlooked and minimized, component of human relations with nonhuman beasts. These fabricated creatures brought a wealth of new character to the identities of species in Crete and the southern Aegean – and to the active place of animals in Aegean social experience.

Beyond a “Brilliant Naturalism”

Vibrant renderings of animals have long been hailed as a defining element of Minoan creative culture, distinguishing its identity amid its contemporaries within the eastern Mediterranean. The handling of animals’ bodies, and especially the conveyance of movement and feeling, have been considered integral to the broader “brilliant naturalism”¹ of Minoan visual and material cultures, which also involves striking engagements with other elements of the natural world, from plants and water to stone. Each of these entities of the natural environment – animalian, floral and geological alike – can be rendered in vivid detail, texture and color, both as subjects of individual studies and as elements of complex compositions and scenes; this is especially apparent in the extant evidence of the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. Animals and the natural world are also extensively represented in the traditions of other Bronze Age societies within the greater eastern Mediterranean and the Near East, and the evidence of exchange and cultural sharing is strong. Contemplations of this sharing played an important part in the modern establishment of Minoan archaeology, when the identity of the ancient Aegean culture was, in some senses, first construed.² Arthur Evans made extensive arguments for seeing substantive relations with the art of these neighboring societies, while also specifically asserting that naturalism and certain types of technical prowess distinguished Minoan works. Regarding Egypt, for example, despite detailing many aspects of Crete’s “indebtedness” to the grand culture to its south,³ Evans posed its influence as ultimately running counter to and potentially stifling Crete’s unique artistic sophistication, writing that “too direct reproduction of Egyptian models had a deadening effect on Minoan Art. It may, indeed, be truly said that the epochs in which that Art showed its purest naturalism and freedom were coincident with periods when the connexions with Egyptian civilization were at their weakest.”⁴ Hence, we can see that the notion of a Minoan naturalism is coeval with the modern discipline of Minoan archaeology itself in the early twentieth century CE. And because its visual and material cultures have been a principal means through which scholars have differentiated Minoan culture from its contemporaries in the Near East and Egypt, representations of animals, as frequent foci of its celebrated naturalism, have been central

elements – even icons – of the identity articulated for Minoan Crete as a distinct (and by some arguments, distinctly European) ancient cultural entity.⁵

Such characterizations of Minoan naturalism, including the appropriateness of the terms “Minoan” and “naturalism” themselves, have been variably challenged, embraced, plainly rejected, further developed and reconceived over the years.⁶ Likewise, Evans’ ambivalence toward cultural connections with societies beyond Crete, especially those to its east and south (an ambivalence surely steeped, in part, in the sociopolitical context of Evans’ day, as he explicitly posed Minoan Crete as the “cradle of European civilization”),⁷ have continued to charge scholarship of the Bronze Age Aegean, both on the surface and below. While we have for the most part moved away from ascribing “genius” to a sociocultural formation, or discussing differences in style as matters of “ability,”⁸ we remain fascinated with the strikingly animate renderings of nature, including animals, that were crafted and experienced in Crete and the southern Aegean during the centuries of the late third through mid-second millennia BCE. Further discoveries have both enhanced our interest in Aegean renderings of the natural world and forced us to rethink its identity. From the beginning, objects diverse in both scale and medium have been drawn on to demonstrate the distinctiveness of Minoan handling of natural forms, but of particular early importance were discoveries of wall paintings from Knossos and other “palatial” sites on Crete that embody animals and plants in lively color and seemingly in the midst of movement, their forms relating a keen sense of animation and dynamism.⁹ In the 1960s to 1970s, excavations at the site of Akrotiri on the island of Santorini (Thera), some 100 km north of Crete, revealed a host of wall frescoes preserved by ash from a major volcanic eruption in Late Bronze I, which included numerous remarkable renderings of animals.¹⁰ Deposits at Akrotiri also contained a wealth of other animalian objects, such as zoomorphic rhyta and seals. This material, as well as rich finds from other Cycladic sites, made clear that the vibrancy of Minoan renderings of the natural world did not originate in Crete alone; indeed, they have forced us to fluidly expand the contours of the modern notion of “Minoan” to include a plurality of sociocultural spaces.¹¹ Meanwhile, strong affinities between the animal imagery of objects from the early Mycenaean mainland and ones from Crete and the islands brought further complexity to the picture. With this, consideration of Aegean engagements with representational traditions across the eastern Mediterranean during the first half of the second millennium BCE has coexisted with scrutiny of the Aegean itself as a dynamic field of sharing and innovation.

Decades of further discovery and investigation in the Aegean, including important developments in the methods of scholarly analysis, have brought more depth and scope to our characterization of the representation of the

animalian world during the Bronze Age. Certain trends can be seen as running through studies that have dealt with material from a range of sites. One has considered the symbolic roles of renderings of animals in Aegean visual and material cultures. In this light, animals have often been discussed as religious icons or conventional means of metaphoric illustration. Species both “real” and “fantastic” have been approached in this way – ranging from bulls, to birds, to griffins and so on – and interpreted as signifying a host of cultural and religious content. Scholarship has varied both in the formality with which it posits codified roles for animals and in the theoretical approaches employed. On one end are studies that treat animal imagery as something of an iconographic subsystem in itself, such as Marinatos’ argument that there existed in Minoan symbolic culture a formal hierarchy of beasts, each occupying a distinct level of relation toward the divine.¹² Meanwhile, other scholars have investigated the significations of representations of particular animals embedded within contexts of ritual activities, such as Rehak’s valuable examination of frescoes depicting monkeys at Akrotiri.¹³ In yet more cases, the treatment of animals as symbolic entities does not constitute the principal focus of the study but explicitly or implicitly forms a crucial part of the analysis.¹⁴

A related approach, also frequent in analyses of Minoan animal representation, can be described as taxonomic. I include here both efforts to associate depicted animals with regional biological species evidenced through faunal data, as well as discussions tracing the origins and distribution of particular iconographic types. Concerning the former, much attention has been paid to the abilities or desires of Cretan artists to depict the idiosyncratic attributes of specific animals, a matter scholars often relate to the sophistication of the Minoan naturalistic style. In terms of iconographic taxonomy, generations of scholars have been concerned with the speciation of distinct formal attributes in the repertoire of animal representations throughout the broader Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean, seeking to chart geneses, trajectories, mutations and amalgamations in the particular renderings of a beast over time and space. Often these efforts are part of larger projects that assess systems of sociocultural interaction and networking. Discussions of the griffin, for example, have closely parsed the characterization of wings, beaks and pose in an effort to establish the origins of the beast within the broad eastern Mediterranean and the specific trajectory of its evolution between cultures therein; these considerations of the creature’s iconography and bodily composition are laced with implications of sociocultural sway between social formations.¹⁵

Each of these lines of analysis has borne important fruit for the field and contributed to our consideration of how renderings of animals were part of sociocultural life in the Aegean. At the same time, each can involve a necessary abstraction from the specific example of an animal representation for the sake of the appraisal of a broad cultural phenomenon, with the risk that the individual

instance ultimately becomes but an iteration of a type or phase. The present project tackles this loss directly by fundamentally realigning the means and focus of inquiry. Drawing together recent work in the areas of material culture and animal studies, I problematize first and foremost the actual object-manifestations of animals. I recognize each as being a true physical embodiment of an animal and, with this, as tangibly contributing to the species' identity within its lived sociocultural context. I also consider a group of unique Aegean objects that are distinctly animalian in aspects of their substance and character, although they do not take the overall form of a creature's body.

My analysis works through a series of case studies that draw out distinctive dynamics at work in Aegean fabricated embodiments of animals from the late third to mid-second millennium BCE, with a primary emphasis on the socio-cultural spaces of Crete and their interconnections on and beyond the islands; evidence from Akrotiri on Thera provides another principal focus of my discussion of the later Middle Bronze Age (MBA) to Late Bronze I (LB I). These case studies follow chronological waves through and across the chapters, beginning with clay vessels of the Cretan Prepalatial era and ending with wall paintings of the Neopalatial and early Third Palatial periods. The subjects of the case studies have been selected in order to explore a variety of species,¹⁶ media, materials and settings. With this, my focus encompasses the particular relations and spatialities that these things contributed to as parts of different lived contexts and, through this, how they may also show, on certain levels, areas of overlap or persistence in the dynamics of Aegean animalian things, both within and over time. Thus, the aim of my study is not to be exhaustive – the sheer plethora of animals within the material and visual cultures of these periods would make that an overwhelming and unwise task. Instead, my intention is to draw out specific indications of how fabricated animals could bring novel dynamisms to the identities of nonhuman creatures and to people's experiences of them. As such, these object-embodiments invested distinctive animal presences in the thick of Aegean sociocultural life.

Embodiments of Relation

Fundamental to my approach to Aegean fabricated animals is an appreciation that their status as objects is not extraneous to their identity as embodiments of animals: both the animalian and the thingly are essential and coterminous aspects of these entities. This brings an integrative character to the core of their statuses, which can be further developed in a wealth of specific ways. The case studies indicate that these Aegean animalian things could be especially extraordinary in their realization of relations between species and between bodies. With this I have in mind the cosenses of “realize,” both to apprehend and to actualize; that is to say, these things were, at the same time, responsive

and generative in their embodiment of relations. I draw out how, in one aspect of this, the objects could cultivate similarity between the forms of different animals, or between those of an animal and a nonanimalian entity. I refer to this as *formal assonance*. We see such, for example, in vessels that bring together the swelling bodily contours characteristic of an upright bird, a woman and a jug; or in a painting that juxtaposes an animal and a plant in a frieze and describes each with the same outlines and textural details, both rendered in the same manner. Such formal assonance lays the ground for comparisons that could wed a host of associations surrounding each of the related entities, thus imbuing the animalian body with dynamic cultural and formal novelty. In some cases, it was not form, but position and role that asserted comparability. This occurs, for example, between lions and humans. Over centuries in the Aegean, lions were consistently experienced as bodies set side by side with persons, as seal stones engraved with the feline beasts were worn strapped against the skin of human seal owners; in much of the Bronze Age Aegean, especially Crete and the islands, this was essentially the only way in which lions were met in physical embodiments. Through close examination of such relations, interspecific and intercorporeal dynamics emerge as distinguishing facets of the Aegean animalian objects, realized in potently particular manners.

Connected to the relational complexity of these Aegean animalian things was their distinctive affordance of space. Space was created in a variety of ways by these object bodies and arose from their involvement with other entities and contextual circumstances, including the sociocultural and environmental. We will see how such matters as their size relative to human bodies, dimensionality, texture, layering, stance and implication of depth made for powerful and often tense spatialities. This also carried temporal weight. Such is at play, for example, in an anthropomorphic vessel's ability to sit and hold liquid on its own while gazing into the room of a house, creating an indefinitely ongoing aura of pregnant bodily presence, as part of the place.

In the chapters ahead, we will radically rethink, from the objects up, a range of entrenched categorizations that often structure discussion of renderings of animals in the Bronze Age Aegean. These include classifications that pertain to the traditional partitioning of the human from the nonhuman, the real from the fantastical and the animate from the inanimate; as well as those concerning the nature of composite or hybrid creatures, and the otherness of exotic beasts. Much of this rethinking arises from consistently bringing new focus to people's experiences of animalian things as opposed to concentrating on matters of intention and signification, which tend to consume analyses of "representations." It is not that intentional design is not relevant in our consideration of these objects, but it is but a strand of how they were actually engaged with by people in the social spaces of the early Aegean. By ultimately stepping away from aspects of conventional classification, we will freshly recognize a host of

other dimensions that were at work in people's interactions with these embodiments of animals. This permits us to newly recognize the unique ways in which these animals were present and active in the practical and emotional fiber of sociocultural life – from the daily movements of hand-to-hand exchanges to the creative weaving of oral culture, from the vigor of overseas travel to the pains of battle and in both heightened moments of public ceremony and the intimate motions of familial death.

Drawing these aspects of my approach together, I propose that our examination proceed on the basis of four fundamental and interrelated reconceptions concerning how to approach the Aegean animalian things:

1. They are real embodiments of the animal and, as such, their qualities and capacities would have been part of what the animal or species was within a lived Aegean context, contributing along with biological embodiments.
2. We need to approach the work of these bodily things beyond the confines of representation, to take in the far greater diversity of affordances, contributions and relations that they brought to the table and through which they enriched the identity of animals in Aegean culture.
3. These embodiments of animals were creative in their essence. This creativity concerns not only their design and manufacture, but also how each of the objects stood as a distinct realization of physical coincidence between the characters of animals and of things and, furthermore, how they engendered suggestive relations between different species and bodies.
4. In diverse ways, the animalian things had dynamic potentials that enhanced and complicated their spatial and temporal presences. With this, they sometimes challenged the boundaries of their media and uniquely contributed to the unfolding of broader sociocultural contexts and moments.

THE CASE STUDIES

My analysis works through five case studies, each of which focuses on a particular type of animalian object from the early Aegean and examines its distinguishing character, relations and involvement in people's experiences as part of Cretan and other Aegean social spaces. The case studies arise from different time periods between the late third and mid-second millennia BCE and consider a diversity of species, media and contexts. In each instance, the objects are my starting point. These embodiments of animals reveal themselves to be highly dynamic and engaging, each in very specific ways that would emerge through their distinctive qualities and interactions. Because of the engaging characters of these things, my discussion necessarily integrates close consideration of recent research concerning the social and cultural ecologies of Bronze Age Crete and the southern Aegean – including the nature of interactions

occurring both within and between Aegean communities, over land and sea, and farther afield, through involvement with people and material across the broader eastern Mediterranean.¹⁷ By approaching such contexts of interaction primarily through people's experiences involving the animalian objects, we are able to move beyond traditional assumptions concerning influence and motivations, to think innovatively about how engagements with these creative embodiments of nonhuman creatures provide new perspectives on the actual, lived nature of sociocultural interconnections, extending near and far, during the Bronze Age.

In Chapter 2, I begin with a group of extraordinary body-form vessels from Prepalatial Crete (ca. 2300–1900 BCE). While these have typically been described as anthropomorphic, I argue that we do better to appreciate their unique identities as surpassing this category. These corporeal vessels are distinctly animalian, yet they decidedly do not conform to a particular species, and their affordances as objects that can hold and pour liquid are equally integral to what they are and how they were experienced. By taking these aspects together, focus can turn to how these peculiar vessel bodies are distinguished by a marked autonomy: not only do they defy the grip of simple classification, each can sit attentively on its own, with liquid held in its clay belly, and, even as each can itself be described as a vase, the role of living humans in producing liquid by manipulating the objects is concealed through particular physical qualities. Instead of highlighting the agency of the biological person, the bringing forth of liquid seems to occur in the hands of the small clay bodies themselves, in some cases through their pierced breasts, and in others through a miniature jug held by the figure, which communicated with the main vessel's hollow body through a hidden opening in its interior. With this, I argue that the clay figures could have been experienced as possessing their own productive agency.

The autonomous disposition of these unique animalian objects made them remarkable fabricated bodies. They could engage and perform – in their own right – as elements of early Cretan social contexts that also involved other bodies. Careful consideration of the clay figures' depositional circumstances allows us to investigate how their distinct bodily presences would have contributed to situations of social experience in Prepalatial Crete. I examine the complex spatialities of the clay bodies, which may have participated in creating community social space as they were moved between tomb and settlement. In this dynamic position, the body vessels could have been part of a range of collective actions involving living and dead humans who were in their company. I consider the evidence in light of recent problematizations of Prepalatial social structure, including arguments that early Crete was characterized by “house societies.”¹⁸ Recognizing the clay figures as members in-corporate of

their communities, experienced as productive bodies, allows us to freshly interrogate their involvement in microcontexts of Prepalatial social life.

The second half of the chapter looks forward, through the subsequent Protopalatial and Neopalatial periods, to consider how animalian vessels continued to be part of social venues in the island, while subtle changes to *how* they embodied animals implied shifts in their community presence. We will see that across these periods, vessels embodying cows had notable prominence, but that from the late Protopalatial period, a novel relation developed between the vessel bodies and living humans' bodies. At this time, we begin to see rhyta rendered in the form of a bodiless animal head; the majority are bovine. Typically, the secondary opening of these rhyta was positioned in the mouth. Unlike the earlier vessels, the head rhyta could not hold fluids over time on their own – without active human intervention, the liquid would simply run out of the lower mouth hole. Indeed these animalian things would have seemed remarkably dependent on humans. Resting on their own, they would have appeared keenly lifeless and inanimate, as if decapitated heads; yet raised and filled by visible human hands, the heads would have momentarily been dramatically reanimated, as fluid was held in by carefully placed fingers and then permitted to flow out through the animalian mouth. Given the mechanics of the rhyta, these performances would have required considerable skill on behalf of the dexterous humans handling the heads; it was their impressive agency that would have been experienced as causing the liquid's emergence, even though it issued from the bovine's mouth. By shifting to a diachronic view on zoomorphic vessels, it thus becomes possible to appreciate a profound divergence in bodily emphasis in how these animalian things would have been experienced – from the remarkable impression of independent agentive production embodied in the Prepalatial vessels to the dramatic manipulation of a body fragment in human hands in the later head rhyta.

A primary interest of Chapter 2 concerns how movable renderings of animals contributed to developments in sociopolitical experience in Crete during certain moments of the Bronze Age. At the close of the chapter, discussion turns to how apparent changes in interregional dynamics during the Neopalatial period, likely spurred by specific social and climatic matters, may have involved novel claims on contexts of engagement with nonhuman animals, notably cattle, as elements of power grabs on the island. While economic and ritual interactions with cows have typically been separated in scholarly discussions, working in line with Shapland's consideration of "animal practices," I explore how activities involved in the raising and processing of cattle would have naturally crossed such categories and sketch out what a more holistic experience of "cattle culture" on the island may have involved. This approach entails examination of both the distinctive behavioral and environmental aspects of herd maintenance, as well as Cretan renderings of bovine

bodies. Across these phenomena, I focus on aspects of bodily engagement between persons and cows and argue that we may see a distinguishing cultural emphasis on craftiness and quickness surrounding a host of activities and material, including in the unique affordances of certain bovine things. Prepalatial-era renderings of humans grappling cattle indicate that displays of crafty skill around the beasts were a long-standing component of rural agricultural life. During the Neopalatial period, palatial interest in cattle seems to have peaked, given the wealth of elite representations of the beasts, especially at Knossos. Increased environmental pressure on raising cows may have been part of this, with Knossos flexing control over a prominent and valuable crop. But we can also consider that if cattle culture had a somewhat-transgressive characterization in Crete, attempts by the palace to absorb and recontextualize the culture may have been part of a more dynamic sociopolitical interest in the beast during a turbulent moment.

The next chapter (Chapter 3) takes us to the tiny bodies of lions engraved in Aegean seals. Here, I again work from the Cretan Prepalatial period forward, tracing developments in the objects and their Aegean contexts, from their earliest instances in the late third millennium BCE through the LB II. Although the Cretan embodiments of lions were themselves tiny, the emergence of the beast within the material and visual cultures of the island necessitates a partial recalibration in the scale of our analysis, to also consider interactions extending overseas, because biological lions were not a species that lived on Crete – hence, experiences with the living beast were not the basis of its recurrent rendering in the seals. I examine how this situation also has profound implications for the fundamental characterization of the lion in Crete. For centuries, the beast's embodiments in seals and clay impressions were the primary means through which people actually engaged with lions as a physical reality on the island. This fact puts tremendous emphasis on these small, stony and clay-ey Cretan lions, and what they uniquely afforded. The objects' scale, material and formal nature, as well as their spatial dynamics, practical capacities, involvements within sociocultural processes and distinct relationships with other entities, all directly informed what the lion was in Crete, by characterizing how it was experienced. In this context, the bodily juxtaposition of lion and human becomes a crucial matter to consider. Seals engraved with lions were worn strapped against the bodies of their human owners, and the impressions stamped with the seals, which also embodied the lion, worked as distinct, moving objects that nevertheless had a powerful relationship of shared identity with the human seal owner. This meant that from their earliest known appearance in Crete, and for hundreds of years thereafter, lions were known by and large as bodies that physically – and figuratively – paralleled humans.