

MYCENAEAN TREE AND PILLAR CULT AND ITS
MEDITERRANEAN RELATIONS.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM RECENT CRETAN FINDS.

[PLATE V.]

§ 1.—*Cretan Caves and Hypaethral Sanctuaries.*

AMONG the greater monuments or actual structural remains of the Mycenaean world hitherto made known, it is remarkable how little there is to be found having a clear and obvious relation to religious belief. The great wealth of many of the tombs, the rich contents of the pit-graves of Mycenae itself, the rock-cut chambers, the massive vaults of the bee-hive tombs, are all indeed so many evidences of a highly developed cult of departed Spirits. The pit-altar over grave IV. of the Akropolis area at Mycenae, and the somewhat similar erection found in the Court-yard of the Palace at Tiryns, take us a step further in this direction ; but it still remains possible that the second, like the first, may have been dedicated to the cult of the ancestors of the household, and it supplies in itself no conclusive evidences of a connexion with any higher form of worship. In the great South-Western Court, and again in the Central Area of the Palace of Knossos, have now, however, been brought to light the foundations of what seem to have been two rectangular altars ; and the special relation in which this building stood to the God of the Double Axe makes a dedication to the Cretan Zeus in this case extremely probable.

In Crete indeed we are on somewhat different ground. Throughout the island are a series of caves, containing votive and sacrificial deposits, going back from the borders of the historic period to Mycenaean and still more remote antiquity. The two greatest of these, on the heights of Ida and Dikta, are connected by immemorial tradition with the cult of the ancient indigenous divinity later described by the Greeks as the Cretan Zeus, whose special symbol was the double axe. The colossal rock-hewn altar at the mouth of the Idaean Cave was unquestionably devoted to the service of this God.¹ In the steatite libation-table found at the bottom of the votive stratum of the Diktaean Cave² we have an article of cult the special

¹ F. Halbherr and P. Orsi, *Antro di Zeus Ideo*, p. 3 and Tav xi. ² *J.H.S.* xvii. (1897), p. 350 *seqq.*

significance of which will be pointed out in a succeeding section.¹ The thorough exploration of this cave, now carried out by Mr. D. G. Hogarth,² on behalf of the British School at Athens, has conclusively proved that the old traditions of the birth-place and oracular shrine of the Cretan Zeus attached themselves to this spot. The blasting away of the fallen rocks that encumbered the upper part of the grotto has in fact revealed a rude sacrificial altar and temenos covered with a votive deposit some seven feet deep, while the character of the divinity worshipped was sufficiently indicated by the large number of votive double axes found both here and in the inner sanctuary below. These double axes, as we shall see, may have actually embodied the presence of the God himself. His actual image in anthropomorphic shape was not needed by the religion of that time. The great mass of votive figures found in the sacrificial deposits of these Cretan caves bear no distinctive attributes of divinity. They seem, for the most part at least, to be simply miniature representations of human votaries and their domestic animals, who thus, according to a widespread practice, placed themselves and their belongings under the special protection of the higher powers.

It is possible, as I have elsewhere suggested,³ that in a small building which occupies a most conspicuous position in the great prehistoric city of Goulas, in Crete, we have actually before us the remains of one of these Mycenaean shrines, originally containing a sacred tree. This is a small oblong building, about nine yards long by four wide, with walls originally breast high, consisting of two tiers of large roughly-squared blocks, the upper of which shows externally a projecting border, which recalls on a smaller scale the parapet of a great terrace wall that rises beyond it. The entrance to this low-walled enclosure on the small side to the north has mortised slabs on either side for the insertion of jambs, and must have consisted of a door-way higher than the walls themselves, and which may therefore have served some sacral purpose, the sanctity of the trilith or ritual doorway being widely prevalent in early religious cult, notably among the Phrygians.⁴ Here, as in the case of a Knossian cult-scene, to be described below, the doorway of the enclosure may have had either in it or before it a sacred pillar, while the tree itself stood within the hypaethral shrine, spreading its boughs over its low walls and lintel. In front of this entrance is a large rock-cut cistern, originally no doubt, like other cisterns of Goulas, roofed in with the aid of limestone beams. In this connexion it may be noticed that the ritual watering of sacred trees, either from a natural or artificial source, is a regular feature of this form of worship. In the Mycenaean cult this is illustrated by the Vapheio

¹ See below, p. 15 *seqq.*

² See *Annual of the British School at Athens*, 1900.

³ See my letter to the *Academy*, July 4, 1896, p. 18, and 'Goulas, the City of Zeus' (*Annual of the British School at Athens*, 1896). The recent French excavations on this site,

conducted by M. De Margne, have shown that a part of it at least was occupied by the inland Latô. But the fact remains incontestable that the overwhelming mass of existing remains belongs to the prehistoric period.

⁴ See below, p. 83.

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Excerpt

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gem, representing two lion-headed daemons, who have filled two high-spouted vases from the basin of a fountain, and raise them above what appears to be a nurseling palm-tree¹ (Fig. 1). It may be noted that this religious cultivation of the young palms—then no doubt being largely introduced on to Greek soil by the cosmopolitan taste of the Mycenaean rulers—finds a later parallel in the Assyrian representations, first explained by Dr. Tylor, of winged genii fertilising the adult palm with the male cones. The parallelism is very suggestive.

It is not necessary, indeed, to suppose that the sacred tree enclosed *ex hypothesi* in the Goulas shrine was a palm. A palm column, it is true, appears on a gem from this site² with two deer as supporters, in a scheme to be described below. But in Crete, as elsewhere in the Mycenaean world, there seems to have been a considerable variety of sacred trees. We recognise the pine and the cypress; and the abiding traditions of Knossos and Gortyna show how intimately the plane tree, which so often marks the presence of a spring, was bound up with the cult of the Cretan Zeus. The globular bunches of the tree, beneath which the Goddess sits on the signet from the Akropolis Treasure at Mycenae, have naturally suggested a vine. It will be seen from an interesting fragment from the site of Knossos that the fig must also be included among the sacred trees of the Mycenaeans.



FIG. 1.—GEM FROM VAPHEIO TOMB: DAEMONS WATERING NURSELING PALMS.

§ 2.—Sacred Fig-Tree and Altar on a Pyxis from Knossos.

The object in question (Fig. 2) is a portion of a cylindrical vase or pyxis of dark steatite, decorated with reliefs, found on the slope of the hill known as *Gypsades*, which rises opposite to that on which the Palace of Knossos stands.³ A remarkable feature of this fragment is that its lower margin is perforated by a rivet-hole, and shows other traces which indicate that the bottom of the cup was in a separate piece. The fact that at Palaeokastro, in Eastern Crete, an intaglio exhibiting dolphins and rocks in the same dark steatite, originally the bezel of a Mycenaean ring, was found covered with a thin plate of gold beaten into the design, suggests that in this case too the dull-coloured core may have been coated with the same brilliant material, and that the rivet holes may have partly served to attach the gold plate. It can be shown that the returning spiral designs of the oldest Mycenaean gold work are

¹ Apparently in a large pot: recalling the culture of nurseling palms at Bordighera, where they are largely cultivated for religious purposes, owing to a special privilege from the

Pope.

² See p. 56, Fig. 32.

³ It was obtained by me on the spot in 1894.

simply the translation into metal of the much more ancient steatite reliefs representing the same ornamentation. We may well believe that the steatite reliefs, like those of the fragment before us, gave birth in the same way to the figured designs in repoussé work, such as those that decorate the Vapheio vases, and that we here in fact see the intermediate stage of soft-stone carving, originally coated with a thin gold plate, which led up to more perfected art.

The design itself, so far as it is possible to study it in its fragmentary condition, presents so much naturalism and spirit that we may well believe that had the whole been preserved to us it would have afforded the nearest parallel to the marvellous gold cups from the Spartan tomb.

In the lowest zone of the composition, or, as we may call it, the foreground, appear parts of two male figures. The foremost of the two is in violent action, his right arm raised and his left thrown behind him. He is clad in the Mycenaean loin-clothing, and his feet were apparently swathed in the usual manner. Under his left shoulder fall long tresses of hair, recalling those that appear in the same position on the figures of the Vapheio cups and those of the Kefti tributaries on the tomb of Rekhmara. The prominent treatment of the sinews and muscles resembles that of the leaden figure from Kampos.¹

Behind this is a second male figure, who appears to be kneeling on one knee, and holding his right arm forwards, with his fingers and thumb together, as if in the act of sprinkling grain. Immediately behind him is a square block of isodomic masonry, with coping at top, which, from the two-horned object above it, is evidently an altar. It will be shown in the course of this study that this horned adjunct is a usual article of Mycenaean altar furniture.²

The altar, with its regular isodomic structure, recalls the limestone walls of some of the better constructed parts of the Palace at Knossos. It probably reproduces the original form of the rectangular altars in its Courts already referred to, of which only the bases now remain.

In striking contrast to the isodomic construction of the altar are the two low walls of the enclosure represented above. Here we see a series of irregular, mostly more or less diamond-shaped, blocks, which may be taken to represent the earlier roughly polygonal style of wall building. It is not possible, however, to be sure whether we have here a rustic survival of the older style, or whether the irregular character of the masonry is intended to indicate that it is of more ancient date than the altar outside. If, as I venture to believe, we have here to deal with the temenos of a sacred grove, the latter hypothesis may appear the more probable.

The tree within is certainly a fig-tree, the characteristic outline of the leaves being clearly defined. On a signet-ring, to be described below,³ also found on the site of Knossos, a group of sacred trees is seen within the temenos wall of a sanctuary which, from the trifid character of their foliage,

¹ Tsuntas, *Μυκηναί*, Pl. XI.

² See below, p. 37 *seqq.*

³ See p. 72.

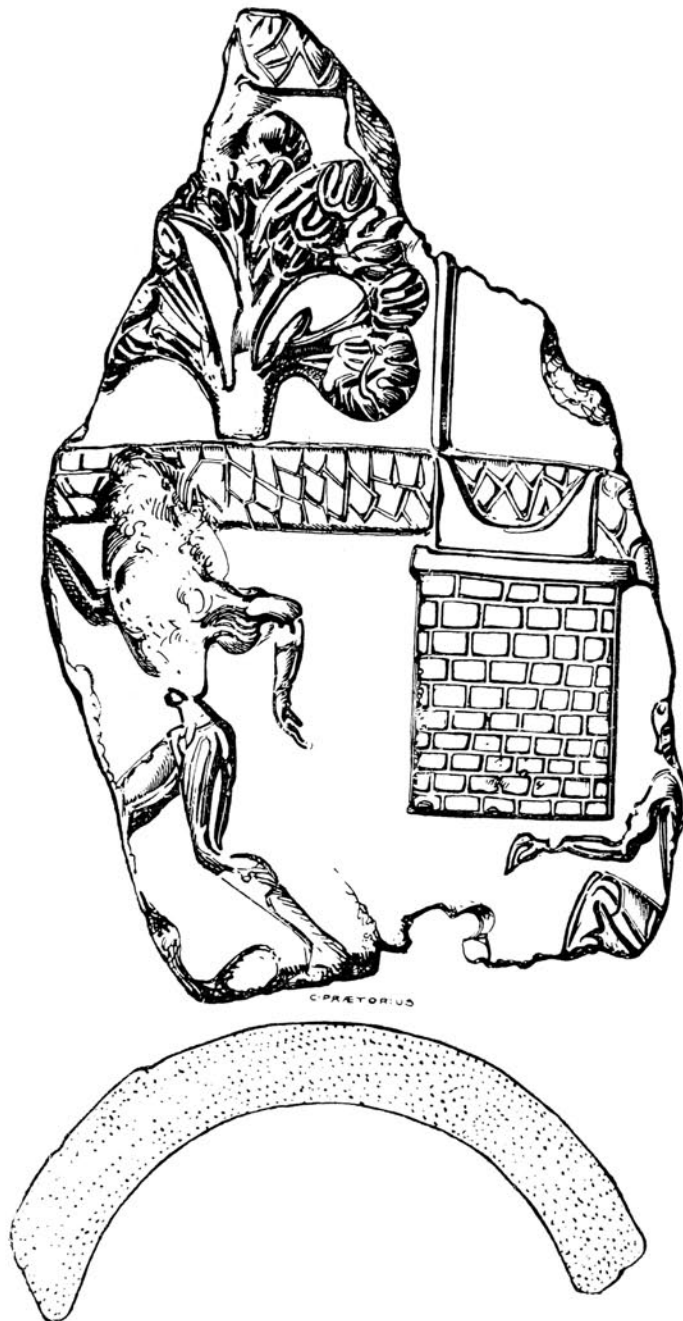


FIG. 2.—FRAGMENT OF STEATITE PYXIS—KNOSSOS.

may also with some probability be recognised as fig-trees. This analogy, coupled with the walled enclosure and the altar in front of it, leads to the conclusion that here too we see before us one of a grove of sacred trees within its sanctuary wall. It is probable that the gold plates in the shape of fig-leaves found in the Acropolis tomb at Mycenae¹—the thin foil of which proclaims their connexion with funereal cult—are also connected with the special sanctity of this tree.

The traditional sanctity of the fig-tree is well marked in the later cult of Greece. The Sacred Fig, the gift of Demeter, is well known, which stood on the Eleusinian Way beside the tomb of Phytalos, and gave his spirit an undying habitation.² Fig-leaves as religious types appear on the coins of Kameiros in Rhodes and of the Carian Idyma. In Laconia Dionysos was worshipped under the form of a fig-tree.³ A fig-tree is said to have sprung where Gaia sought to ward off the bolts of Zeus from her son Sykeas, and the prophylactic powers of these trees against lightning were well known.⁴ The sanctity of the fig-tree among the primitive elements of the Peloponnese, as well as in Mycenaean Crete, will be shown to have a special value in relation to the *Ficus Ruminalis* at Rome.⁵ Both on the score of fruitfulness, and from the character of the spots where it is found, the fig-tree may well have inspired a special veneration in primitive Aegean cult. In Crete it still grows wild where no other tree can fix its roots, at the mouth of the caves of indigenous divinities and in the rocky mountain clefts beside once sacred springs.

The post-like object to the right of the fig-tree in the steatite relief fragment remains enigmatical. It may well be some kind of sacred post or 'Ashera'—perhaps the sacral object which recurs with religious subjects on several Mycenaean gems⁶—an upright post impaling a triangle. The attitude of the man apparently engaged in sprinkling grain in front of the altar seems capable of a very probable explanation. When we recall the fact that the altar, with the same horn-like appendages, that surmounts the small gold shrines from the shaft-graves at Mycenae, is accompanied on either side by two figures of doves, and that the shrines themselves stand in close relation to small gold images of a naked Goddess with doves perched on her head and shoulders, it becomes highly probable that the kneeling man on the cup is engaged in sprinkling grain for sacred birds of the same kind. That the dove had become domesticated in Crete before the great days of Mycenae appears probable from the discovery which I made in an early house beneath the Palace at Knossos of a painted vase in the form of a dove, belonging to the prae-Mycenaean or Kamares class of pottery.

¹ Schliemann, *Mycenae*, pp. 191, 192, Figs. 290, 291. These form part of a cruciform ornament. Schliemann did not notice that they were fig-leaves, but their outline is quite naturalistically drawn.

² Paus. i. 37.

³ *Athenaeus*, iii. 14: Διόνυσος Συκίρης. Cf. Bötticher, *Baumkultus*, p. 437.

⁴ See Bötticher, *op. cit.* p. 440.

⁵ See below, p. 30 *seqq.*

⁶ See below, p. 56, Fig. 31.

§ 3.—*The Dove Cult of Primitive Greece.*

It must not be forgotten that birds of various kinds play an important part in this early cult of sacred trees and pillars. Among primitive races at the present day the spiritual being constantly descends on the tree or stone in the form of a bird, or passes from either of them to the votary himself in the same bird form, as the agent of his inspiration.

It is certain that much misconception as to the part played by sacred birds in ancient religion has been produced by the thoroughly unscientific habit of looking for the origin of the associated phenomena through the vista of later highly specialised cults, instead of from the standpoint of primitive ideas. Especially has this been the case with the sacred doves of Greece. Even the dove cult associated with Semiramis was, as has been well pointed out by M. Salomon Reinach,¹ in its origin un-Semitic. Nor in its early stage was there any special connexion with Aphroditê. In the *Odyssey* the dove bears nectar to Zeus.² His soothsaying wild doves at Dodona go back to the beginnings of Hellenic religion. The dove is equally connected with Dionê, who represented the consort of the 'Pelasgian' Zeus long before she was assimilated with Aphroditê. It may be noted that where the sacred doves appear in their simplest European form they are generally associated with a sepulchral cult. It is in fact a favourite shape, in which the spirit of the departed haunts his last resting-place, and in accordance with this idea we see the heathen Lombards ornamenting their grave-posts with the effigy of a dove.³ Nor was it otherwise in prehistoric Cyprus. The figures of doves that adorn the rims of certain vases from the early Copper Age tombs of the island,⁴ accompanied with cone-like figures and small libation vases, are most probably connected with a sepulchral cult.

§ 4.—*The Association of Sacred Tree and Pillar.*

In succeeding sections attention will be called to a whole series of Mycenaean cult scenes in which the sacred tree is associated with the sacred pillar. This dual cult is indeed so widespread that it may be said to mark a definite early stage of religious evolution. In treating here of this primitive religious type the cult of trees and pillars, or rude stones, has been regarded as an identical form of worship.⁵ The group

¹ *Anthropologie*, vi. pp. 562, 563.

² *Od.* xii. 62, 63.

³ Paul Diac. *De Gestis Langobardorum*, v. 34.

⁴ Ohnefalsch-Richter, *Kypros, die Bibel und Homer*, p. 283, Figs. 181, 182, 186. Tombs of the early class in which these vases occur go back, if we may judge from the discovery in one of them of a cylinder of Sargon (3800 B.C.), as early as the fourth millennium before our era.

⁵ For the ideas underlying this widespread

primitive cult I need only refer to Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, ii. p. 160 *seqq.* and p. 215 *seqq.* The spirit is generally forced to enter the stone or pillar by charms and incantations, and sometimes also passes into the body of the priest or worshipper. The 'possession' itself of the material object is only in its nature temporary. 'When the spirit departs the "idol" remains only a sacred object. When a deity is thus brought down into a tree it blends with the tree life.'

is indeed inseparable, and a special feature of the Mycenaean cult scenes with which we have to deal is the constant combination of the sacred tree with pillar or dolmen. The same religious idea—the possession of the material object by the *numen* of the divinity—is common to both. The two forms, moreover shade off into one another; the living tree, as will be seen, can be converted into a column or a tree-pillar, retaining the sanctity of the original. No doubt, as compared with the pillar-form, the living tree was in some way a more realistic impersonation of the godhead, as a depository of the divine life manifested by its fruits and foliage. In the whispering of its leaves and the melancholy sighing of the breeze was heard, as at Dodona, the actual voice of the divinity. The spiritual possession of the stone or pillar was more temporary in its nature, and the result of a special act of ritual invocation. But the presence of the tree or bush which afforded a more permanent manifestation of divine life may have been thought to facilitate the simultaneous presence of the divinity in the stock or stone, just as both of them co-operate towards the ‘possession’ of the votary himself.

In India, where worship of this primitive character is perhaps best illustrated at the present day, the collocation of tree and stone is equally frequent. The rough pyramidal pillars of the Bhuta Spirit, the dolmen shrines with their sacred stones, and many other rude “baetyls” of the same kind, such as those of the Horse God and the Village God among the Khonds, are commonly set up beneath holy trees. In the Druidical worship of the West, the tree divinity and the Menhir or stone pillar are associated in a very similar manner, and lingering traditions of their relationship are still traceable in modern folklore. To illustrate indeed this sympathetic conjunction of tree and pillar we have to go no further afield than the borders of Oxfordshire and Warwickshire. Beside the pre-historic stone fence of Rollright the elder tree still stands hard by the King Stone, about which it is told that when the flowery branch was cut on Midsummer Eve, the tree bled, the stone ‘moved its head.’¹

§ 5.—*The ‘Labyrinth’ and the Pillar Shrines of the God of the Double Axe.*

It will be shown in the course of this study that the cult objects of Mycenaean times almost exclusively consisted of sacred stones, pillars, and trees. It appears, however, that certain symbolic objects, like the double axe, also at times stood as the visible impersonation of the divinity. A valuable illustration of this aspect of primitive cult, which has hitherto escaped attention, is supplied by the subject of a painted Mycenaean vase (Fig. 3), now in the British Museum, found during the recent excavations at Old Salamis in Cyprus.² We see here the repeated delineation of a double axe

¹ See my paper on ‘The Rollright Stones and their Folklore,’ p. 20, *Folklore Journal*, 1895.

² It is worth noting in this connexion the

appearance of a Zeus Labranios in Cyprus. I. H. Hall, *Journ. American Oriental Soc.* 1883. Cited by O. Richter, *Kypros*, &c. p. 21.

apparently set in the ground between pairs of bulls, which also have double axes between their horns. But this representation contains a still more interesting feature. At the foot of the handle of axe, namely, appears in each case that distinctive piece of Mycenaean ritual furniture elsewhere described as 'the horns of consecration.' It occupies the same position in relation to the double axe as in other cases it does to the pillar or tree forms of the divinity. We have here therefore an indication that the double axe itself was an object of worship, and represented the material form or indwelling-place of the divinity, in the same way as his aniconic image of stone or wood. It is a form of worship very similar to that described by Ammianus as still existing in his days among the Alaus of the East Pontic coastlands, who simply fixed a naked sword into the ground with barbaric ritual, and worshipped it as the God of War.¹ A curious parallel to this is to be found in a Hittite relief at Pterium,² which represents a great sword with the blade stuck in the ground. The handle here has come to life, and portrays the divinity himself and his lion supporters.



FIG. 3.—DOUBLE AXE WITH 'HORNS OF CONSECRATION' BETWEEN BULLS' HEADS WITH SIMILAR AXES, MYCENAEAN VASE, OLD SALAMIS.

The idea of the double axe as the actual material shape of the divinity, the object into which his spiritual essence might enter as it did into his sacred pillar or tree, throws a new light on the scene represented on the large gold signet from the Akropolis treasure at Mycenae (Fig. 4). Here, above the group of the Goddess and her handmaidens, and beneath the conjoined figures of the sun and moon, is seen a double axe, which is surely

¹ Amm. Marc. xxxi. 2, 21. 'Nec templum apud eos visitur aut delubrum. . . . sed gladius barbarico ritu humi figitur nudus eumque ut Martem regionum quas circumcitant praesulem verecundius colunt.' Prof. Ernest Gardner also calls my attention to a

passage of the Schol. A on Iliad A 264; (Καινεὺς) πήξας ἀκόντιον ἐν τῷ μεσαιάτῳ τῆς ἀγορᾶς θεὸν τοῦτο προσέταξεν ἀριθμεῖν.

² Perrot et Chipiez, *L'Art dans l'Antiquité*, t. iv. p. 642 and p. 647, Fig. 320.

something more than a mere symbol. It stands in a natural relation to the small figure of the warrior God to the left, and probably represents one of the cult forms under which he was worshipped. The small, apparently descending, image of the God himself may be compared with a similar armed figure on a ring from Knossos, to be described below, in which the cult form of the divinity is seen in the shape of an obelisk. The tree behind the Goddess on the signet-ring, the small stone cairn on which one of the attendants stands and the double axe probably reproduce for us the external aspect of the scene of worship, into which religious fancy has, here, also pictorially introduced the divine actors. The curious reduplication of the axe blades suggests indeed that it stands as an image of the conjunction of the divine pair—a solar and a lunar divinity. This primitive aspect of the cult, in which the double axe was actually regarded as a pair



FIG. 4.—GOLD SIGNET FROM AKROPOLIS TREASURE, MYCENAE ($\frac{2}{3}$).

of divinities, receives in fact a curious illustration from the human imagery of later Greek cult. On the reverse of the coins of Tenedos, as on so many Carian types, the old double axe form of the divinity is still preserved, while on the obverse side appears its anthropomorphic equivalent in the shape of a janiform head, which has been identified with Dionysos and Ariadnê.¹ It may be noted that in Tenedos Dionysos is the solar Sabazios of the Thracian-Phrygian cult.

With the evidence of this primitive cult of the weapon itself before our eyes it seems natural to interpret names of Carian sanctuaries like Labrandu in the most literal sense as the place of the sacred *labrys*, which was the

¹ Head, *Historia Numorum*, pp. 476, 477.