



## THE INDEBTEDNESS OF MINOAN RELIGION TO EGYPTIAN SOLAR RELIGION: WAS SIR ARTHUR EVANS RIGHT?

Nanno Marinatos  
University of Illinois at Chicago

### ABSTRACT

*Sir Arthur Evans believed that Minoan religion was highly indebted to Egyptian thought. He saw that the two cultures shared a solar theology expressed via similar iconographical schemes, such as the heraldic arrangement of lions on either side of a column and the astral associations of the goddess known to the Egyptians as Taweret and transmuted by the Minoans into leonine “genii.” Evans’ solar theory was not systematically developed and has scarcely been considered since. Yet it is worth reviving in view of recent finds, especially the excavations of Manfred Bietak at Tell el Dab’a, which prove that contact between the royal courts of Egypt and Crete was close indeed.*

Minoan civilization owes more than its name to the excavator of the palace of Knossos. Sir Arthur Evans is responsible for the Minoan cultural profile as we know it. His unique understanding was due first and foremost to his direct knowledge of the material, but also to his considerable erudition in the fields of comparative religion, Egyptology, and Biblical studies. Evans believed in “Mediterranean religion”: over many centuries, ideas flowed back and forth between the Aegean, Anatolia, and Egypt, and these mutual influences had resulted in a *koine* that could best be understood through a comparative approach.<sup>1</sup> In particular, Evans felt that Crete was, throughout its history, indebted to Egypt above all the other cultures. He was in a good position to appreciate this, since he had a good knowledge of Egyptology himself and extensive interaction with Egyptologists like Sir Alan Gardiner, the de Garies Davis couple, and J. Griffith.<sup>2</sup> Though the connection has been poorly explored since Evans’ time, it was clearly a topic dear to his heart.

Consider first Evans’ choice of the term “Minoan.” In 1901, when he wrote his seminal article about Minoan religion (discussed below), the term was as yet unminted, so Evans used the word “Mycenaean” to describe the culture he had just begun to unearth. That term had been invented by the Greek archaeologist Christos Tsountas to describe a particular period of the Bronze Age. Though Evans used it at first, he later found it to be too Hellado-centric in its exclusion of Crete (which, in his opinion, had produced the older and aesthetically superior culture). Recent research has shown that Evans did not coin the term “Minoan,” but he must certainly be given credit for using it in singular way to designate a cultural identity rather than a historical period.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in his choice of that particular term, he had Egypt in mind as a model. Evans himself explains that he conceived of *Minos* as being a kingly title equivalent to “pharaoh” or “Caesar.” Thus “Minoan” was a dynastic

term intended to reflect the history of kingship on Crete on the model of royal Egypt.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, Evans’ entire understanding of Minoan history was constructed by reference to Egypt. His division of Minoan chronology into the Early, Middle, and Late periods should not be chalked up to outdated Victorian developmental views about the growth of culture from infancy to maturity; for Evans, development was not always progressive. His foremost concern was that Minoan chronology should *reflect and match* the division of Egyptian history into the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms. If Minoan history were synchronized with that of Egypt, it could be situated in a definable chronological context, and the story of Crete could be tied to that of Egyptian dynasties.

In 1901, as the excavations at the Palace of Knossos had barely begun, Evans wrote a monograph entitled “Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult.”<sup>5</sup> This work is not often cited in our days and even more rarely read. However, some of the observations it contains concerning the closeness of Minoan and Egyptian religions have stood the test of time and are now proving to have foreshadowed future finds. Concerning the religion of Crete, Evans advances the hypothesis that there existed aniconic cults on the island for which parallels are to be sought in other Mediterranean religions but which are most indebted to Egypt.

The most obvious clue was the ankh Evans noticed on the upper field of a gold ring from Vapheio (Figure 1). It was a bit transformed because it was combined with the Minoan double axe, but the knob on the upper side of the pictogram was the same as the loop of the Egyptian ankh. He also found the ankh on a seal from Rhodes engraved below two bovine animals that flank a palm tree. This last piece was important for chronological reasons: it was found together with an Egyptian scarab bearing the cartouche of Thutmose III, and so could be synchronized with Egyptian history. “In other words,” Evans wrote, “the Mycenaean symbol is a direct derivative of the Egyptian ankh.”<sup>6</sup>



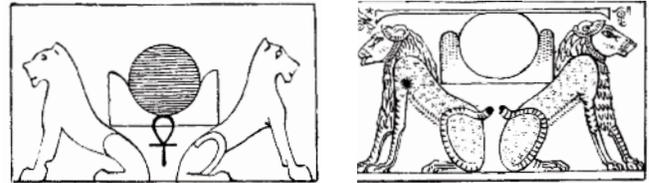
Figure 1. Vapheio Ring. CMS I. 219.

As he saw it in 1901, the ankh was a symbol of life and divinity that originated in Egypt and spread to Crete, Syria, and Anatolia, eventually becoming part of a Mediterranean *koine* of symbols. Evans was entirely right, although later he was to change his mind about the ankh, as we shall see.

Another observation in “Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult” concerned the sacred animals of Minoan imagery: lions, griffins, and sphinxes. Their function was to guard deities or their aniconic manifestation, the sacred pillar. In Egypt, the function of lions was to guard the gates of the sun between the two mountains of the horizon (Figures 2A & 2B). There was an obvious parallelism between Minoan and Egyptian imagery in that, in both cases, the scheme was heraldic. But Evans saw more to the parallelism than formal characteristics: Egypt’s twin lions flanking the sun disc were paralleled by Minoan lions flanking the sun on a seal from Crete (Figure 3A)<sup>7</sup> A seal impression with the same theme was found later at Knossos by Evans (Figure 3B). The drawing of the latter reproduced here is taken from a work that suggests the two animals are dogs rather than lions.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the heads and snouts look distinctly leonine.

If lions are depicted flanking the sun disc, could there have been sun worship in Crete? Evans thought so. The Minoan female deity was akin to solar Hathor, whereas the male deity was also a solar one, having affinity with Ra and Horus, both of whom were warrior sun-gods. “The surviving attachment of some of these solar monsters to certain later divinities bears out this conclusion,” Evans wrote. “The griffin and the lion remained in the service of Apollo.”<sup>9</sup> This led to a general conclusion:

[T]he animals symmetrically posed and paired before trees and pillars in these Mycenaean schemes represent a tradition borrowed from Egyptian sources. The attendant monsters and, to a certain extent, the symbolic column itself, are taken from an Egyptian solar cycle, and the infer-



Figures 2A & 2B. Lions of the horizon after Evans 1901, Figure 42.



Figure 3A. Seal from Crete after Evans 1901, Figure 41.

Figure 3B. Seal impression from Knossos. CMS II. 8.326.

ence has been drawn that the aniconic pillars... were identified with divinities having some points in common with the sun gods Ra, or Horus, and Hathor, the Great Mother.<sup>10</sup>

There is, Evans concluded, a “deep underlying influence of Egyptian solar cult which our researches so continuously encounter.”<sup>11</sup> But his much later *Palace of Minos* proves that after some thirty years of study, a scholar may change his mind or shift his emphasis on certain issues. By then, Evans had abandoned the idea that the Minoans borrowed the ankh directly from Egypt. What he had interpreted as the ankh at first, he wrote, was actually an indigenous Cretan symbol he now designated the “sacral knot,” a knotted piece of cloth shaped like a loop (Figure 4).<sup>12</sup> Evans was partly right in correcting himself here, but also partly wrong in that the Minoan sacral knot may indeed be a form of ankh corresponding most closely to the knot of Isis. Evans’ original insight would also seem to be borne out by the presence of the ankh in Minoan hieroglyphics and in the Linear A and B scripts.<sup>13</sup>

Despite this change of opinion, Evans maintained all the other Egypto-Minoan connections he noticed in 1901. In fact, he had formulated a definite sketch of historical relations between Crete and Egypt: contacts began in the third millennium but intensified throughout the New Kingdom, reaching their zenith during the reign of the last Minoan king, who sadly witnessed the final fall of Knossos after a destructive earthquake. This event of momentous importance occurred a little before the reign of Amenhotep III.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the peak of Minoan palatial culture coincided with Egypt’s 18th Dynasty.<sup>15</sup> Was there a lasting



Figure 4. Parisienne fresco from Knossos. After Evans PM IV.

relationship between the 18th Dynasty and the royal house of Knossos? Evans intuited that there was, though of course written documents were lacking.

There was, in any case, during this period an unprecedented flow of religious and pictorial motifs from Egypt to Crete, and perhaps also the reverse. Here Evans spoke of religious syncretism: there was such a fusion of forms that it was sometimes difficult to say in which direction influences had gone. The Egyptian griffin acquired wings, possibly under Minoan influence (we now know that Syria was one of the breeding grounds for the galloping griffin, but Evans did not know it at the time).<sup>16</sup> The Minoans for their part adopted the Egyptian *waz*-plant, the cow-and-calf motif, the palm tree, and other symbols of the goddess Hathor. In the field of official art and ideology, Egyptian influence was manifest in the iconographical program of the last phase of the palace of Knossos, with Egypt furnishing the prototypes for the grand processions.<sup>17</sup>

Above all, Evans remained convinced that the Minoan goddess was indebted to Hathor, mother of Horus. Both deities were depicted as cows suckling their calves.<sup>18</sup> Both of them were protective mothers, he wrote: “The cow-and-calf motif had a religious significance in Crete, and the Palace Cult had a direct relation to that of the Delta Goddess Wazet, a form of Hathor.”<sup>19</sup>

In 1932, in the third volume of *Palace of Minos*, Evans went on the offensive to defend the connection between Egyptian and Minoan religion. He was evidently reacting to Martin P. Nilsson’s *Minoan Mycenaean Religion and its Survival into Greek Religion*, which had appeared in 1927. Nilsson had minimized the conceptual affinities between Cretan and Egyptian symbolism. He was much more eager to regard the Minoan deities as prototypes for later Greek gods—seeking, as it were, the origins of Greek polytheism in Crete. Evans had been arguing for an essentially monistic religion



Figure 5. Tiryns ring CMS I. 179.

with a female deity at its center, while Nilsson denied this. Evans responded that it would be impossible to understand Minoan religion without reference to Egypt.

Two major insights demonstrate Evans’ sustained interest in the Egyptian solar elements in Minoan religion in the Palace of Minos. The first concerns certain mythological figures discernible in Minoan imagery. Called “genii” by Evans, they look like lions with spiky overcoats girt tightly around their waists (Figure 5). Their function varies: sometimes they flank deities or approach them in procession, but more commonly they carry spouted jugs as if to water a plant. They are also shown hunting ungulates or carrying them on their shoulders. These multifarious roles had been noticed by Evans already in 1901; at that time, because of their frequent representation carrying spouted jugs, he interpreted the creatures as rain-bringing fertility demons. In this, he was influenced by E. B. Tylor’s explanation of the function of analogous Assyrian demons pollinating palms. But Evans was not swayed by the obsession with fertility so characteristic of Victorian anthropology of religion. He accepted the proposition made by another of his colleagues that the genii were reminiscent of the hippopotamus goddess Taweret, and thinking further along these lines, noted the Minoan genii’s affinity with Taweret’s stellar aspect. This fit well with the other solar elements Evans had spotted in Minoan imagery:

The female hippopotamus Ririt, the image of a constellation... is the fitting companion of the solar lions, griffins, sphinxes, and krio-sphinxes which we have already recognized among the supporters of the Mycenaean pillar images.<sup>20</sup>

All that had been said in 1901, but in 1935, Evans returned to the subject of the “Minoan genius.” He argued that the hybrid creature could not be interpreted through the tortuous template of Greek mythology. Although the genii were distinctly Minoan creations, their affinity with the Egyptian Taweret was nevertheless unmistakable (e.g., the Egyptian goddess carries a crocodile, and the Minoan equivalent carries a horned animal in the same manner). The iconographical comparisons are reproduced here



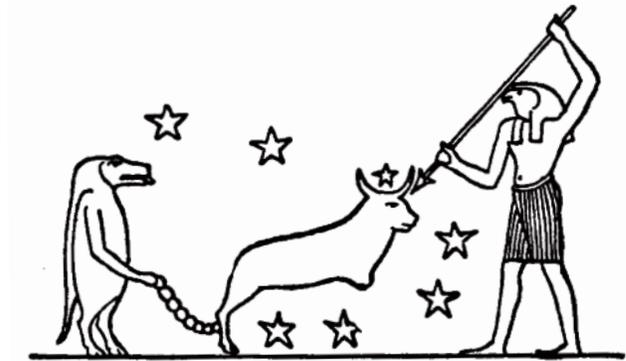
Figures 6A & 6B. Minoan seal from Phaistos and Egyptian Taweret. After Evans PM IV, Figures 358A & 358B.

(Figures 6A & 6B), and they demonstrate that Evans had perceived not only a visual similarity between the demons of Egypt and Crete, but had assigned to them similar mythical roles:

That one design is closely related to the other is impossible to doubt. The conformity extends to the carrying of a young animal—in one case a crocodile, in the other a kid.... My own belief... that these daemon types were essentially rooted in that of the Hippopotamus goddess has only been strengthened by the materials since accumulated, and the suspicion... of a surviving astral element in the Minoan Genii has received some suggestive illustration.<sup>21</sup>

Evans goes on to suggest that the key to proper interpretation of the genii is to understand that Taweret was the guardian of the young Horus. This is how she is represented in astronomical ceilings: supporting Horus, restraining his enemies, and chaining his adversary, Seth. By the 18th Dynasty, the symbol of sinister Seth was an ox-leg, the constellation *msktyw*, the club of the striker. Taweret made a clear place in the heavens for the birth of Horus; something similar could perhaps be claimed for her Minoan counterpart.<sup>22</sup> On a Cretan lentoid, Evans found more evidence for the astral connections of the Minoan genius, there depicted carrying a stag and flanked by two stars (Figure 7A). To further his claim, Evans adduced an illustration of a sealing from Knossos in which the Minoan genius is associated with two ox legs (Figure 7B). What could the latter be but allusions to the sign of Seth?<sup>23</sup> To Evans' mind, this proved beyond reasonable doubt that the Minoan genius was derived from Taweret (Figure 7C).

Clearly, Evans made a breakthrough in deciphering Minoan imagery through an Egyptian template. The Minoan genius was not a mere fertility and vegetation deity, but one that regulated the solar and astral order of the universe. Moreover, it was linked to the great goddess of Minoan Crete and her son, the young god. Evans' brilliant solar/astral



Figures 7A & 7B. Comparison of Cretan lentoid and a Knossos seal impression. After Evans PM IV, Figures 364 & 365.

Figure 7C. Taweret and Leg of Seth from ceiling of tomb of Senmut. After Evans, PM IV, Figure 437.

hypothesis is the only one to explain images that are otherwise incomprehensible. Yet with few exceptions, it has been practically ignored.<sup>24</sup>

Evans' second major insight in the Palace of Minos concerns the image of a goddess found on a mould in East Crete. Although not of great artistic merit, this piece offered evidence about how the Minoan goddess was conceptualized: she had a large rayed sun disc to her left and a smaller disc in the shape of an idol to her right (Figure 8A).<sup>25</sup> The large disc was unquestionably the sun, but Evans had the additional idea that the smaller disc was the moon, which represented the nocturnal aspect of the sun: "The smaller symbolic disk, as contrasted with that of the rayed solar emblem, must be taken as symbolic of the Great Goddess as Queen of the Underworld and of the starry vault of Night."<sup>26</sup> He made similar comments in 1901 when discussing the ring of Mycenae on which sun and moon appear simultaneously (Figure 8B).<sup>27</sup>

Evans' interpretation of the sun/moon relationship is based on two premises. First is that day is symmetrical to night, sun to moon, sky to underworld; the diurnal sun disc is thus equivalent to the nocturnal moon, the discs symbolizing the sky and the netherworld, respectively. The second premise is that the duality sun/moon and day/night is both antithesis and unity. Although each disc represents a distinct sphere, the two together were embodied in the same goddess. I have tried to show elsewhere

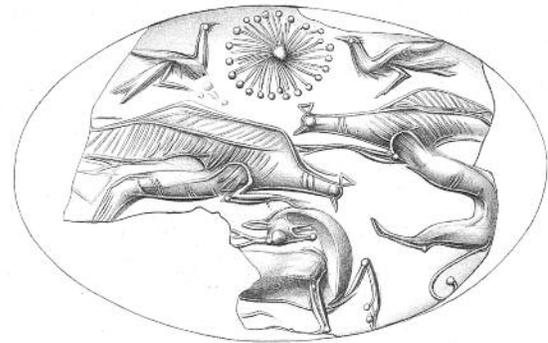
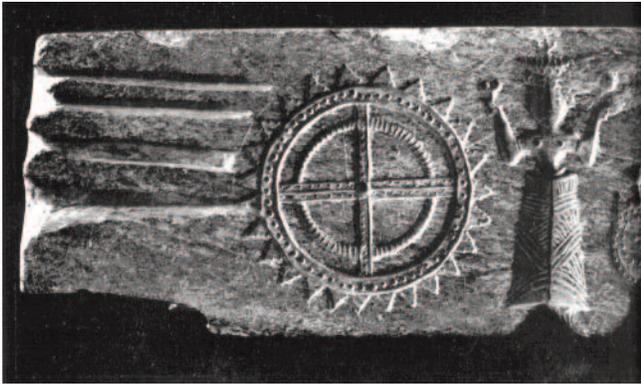


Figure 9. Ring impression from Knossos. CMS II. 8. 192.



Figures 8A & 8B. Mould from Siteia and Mycenae ring. CMS I. 26.



Figures 10A & 10B. Seal from Knossos (CMS II. 8. 307) compared with Egyptian lion.

that this monistic view of the universe is the key to Evans' conception of monotheism, a theory that was inspired by the Egyptian model.<sup>28</sup> In Egypt, the goddess Nut both swallowed and gave birth to the sun, and was thus both day and night. What Evans never articulated (although he came close) is that the Minoan goddess might have been the female equivalent of Ra. In Egyptian mythology, lunar Khons was considered the double of Horus or Ra. Consider a passage from the *Prophecy of Neferti*, where it is stated that Ra will appear as the moon:

As for Re, he has withdrawn himself from men. He will rise at the appointed time, but none will know when noon has come. None will behold his shadow, none will rejoice when he is seen. No longer will the eyes stream with water, for he will be in the sky only like the moon.<sup>29</sup>

In my view, evidence that has come to light since Evans' death has confirmed his solar hypothesis.<sup>30</sup> Ingo Pini published a new restored drawing of a ring impression from Knossos depicting two griffins below a huge solar disc (Figure 9). Evans thus correctly conjectured that griffins were the guardians of a solar deity.

Evans' comparative table between Egyptian and Minoan leonine schemes also benefits from more recent evidence: in 1986, Pini republished another sealing from Knossos featuring a lion with a rayed star (or sun disc) on its shoulder blade (Figure 10A).<sup>31</sup> Pini notes that the motif has east Mediterranean parallels, but most important for our case is the fact that the star on the lion's shoulder blade corresponds exactly to the star sign on the shoulder blade of Egyptian lions (Figures 2B & 10B). Richard Wilkinson has argued that this star is Regulus, the brightest star in the constellation Leo, and that Regulus was an analogue of the sun. For the latter idea, he offers two points of evidence. First, Regulus is a star of first-order magnitude, so its brightness makes it a sort of nocturnal sun. Second, it rides on the ecliptic, the sun's course in the sky.<sup>32</sup> Wilkinson traces the earliest known Egyptian images of lions with shoulder-stars to the Sixth Dynasty; the rayed star (or night-sun) on the shoulder of the Minoan lion is thus not likely a coincidence, nor can it be explained away as a stylistic detail of trivial importance. It seems Minoan solar religion was following the Egyptian template even in esoteric details, and that Evans had made these observations already in 1901 is quite remarkable.

Evans' views concerning Egypto-Minoan relations have been fully confirmed by stunning new evidence from Manfred Bietak's excavations at Tell el Dab'a. In 1927, Evans had predicted Minoan presence in the Delta under "the sanction of the pharaoh."<sup>33</sup> Bietak found fragments of Minoan paintings within the palatial complex that he now dates to the reign of Thutmose III, the very period Evans designated as the peak of Egypto-Minoan contacts.<sup>34</sup> Not too surprisingly, lions, griffins, and a rayed rosette feature prominently among the Minoan paintings. The rosette may, in fact, be considered an allomorph of the disc, and almost certainly alludes to the cult of the Minoan solar goddess.<sup>35</sup>

The question arises why Evans never developed his thesis more fully and systematically, but the answer is not simple. In my opinion, he was caught between two conflicting paradigms: that the Minoan goddess was a Hathor/Nut figure and that she was akin to Cybele, the great mother of Asia. He was never able to reconcile the two prototypes fully in his mind, and they are indeed incompatible.<sup>36</sup> Regardless, there is much to support Evans' Egyptian solar hypothesis. On no less than four gold rings, the Minoan deities appear with the sun, or with sun and moon together in the same scene (Figures 5 & 8b).<sup>37</sup> Many otherwise obscure features find their rightful place under Evans' schema, such as the association of griffins, sphinxes, and lions with a solar disc or star (one cannot always tell them apart) and the Minoan genius with stars.

"Any criticism," Evans wrote, "which excludes the probable reaction of Egyptian elements on the early Cretan religion stands today self-condemned."<sup>38</sup> Indeed, this is a statement that from today's standpoint may be considered to have been prophetic.

#### NOTES

1. Evans 1901, 131–133.
2. Evans, PM II, xiii acknowledges their help.
3. Karadimas and Momigliano 2004, 234–258.
4. Evans, PM I, 12–19, 13.
5. Marinatos, forthcoming. *Forged Rings and Paradigms: Sir Arthur Evans and Minoan Religion*.
6. Evans 1901, 178–179.
7. Evans 1901, 161–162, Figs. 41 and 42, a–b. Cf. CMS XI, no. 47.
8. Gill, Muller, Pini 2002 in CMS II. 8, 836.
9. Evans 1901, 150.
10. Evans 1901, 161–162.
11. Evans 1901, 173.
12. Evans, PM I, 431. For a review of his opinions, see what he says himself in PM III, 141.
13. Evans PM IV, 762–763, Figure 744.
14. Selopoulo, Tomb 4 LM II: cartouche of Amenhotep III. See Aruz 2008, 236.
15. In Minoan archaeological jargon, MMIIIb-LMII.
16. Tessier 1996; Aruz 2008, 155–177.
17. Evans, PM IV, 880–883.
18. Evans, PM IV, 552–559.
19. Evans, PM IV, 554.
20. Evans, 1901, 169, n. 2.
21. Evans, PM IV, 434–436.
22. Evans, PM IV, 436. Cf. Wilkinson 1991.
23. Evans, PM IV, 441.
24. One exception is Marinatos (Sp.) 1967, 268, who remembers the connection that Evans made with the Egyptian astronomical ceilings but tries to reconcile it with Taweret's role as a rainmaker.
25. Evans, PM I, 515; Nilsson 1950, 282; Goodison 1986, 75.
26. Evans, PM I, 515.
27. Evans, 1901, 108.
28. Marinatos, forthcoming.
29. Simpson ed. 2003, 219.
30. For Egyptian monism, see Hornung 1982.
31. Pini 1986 and 2002 at CMS II. 8. 307 with bibl.
32. Wilkinson 1989.
33. Evans, PM I, 294.
34. Bietak 2007, 26–40.
35. Marinatos in Bietak, Marinatos, Palyvou 2007, 145–150.
36. Marinatos, forthcoming.
37. To the above three rings, we may add a fourth from Poros that will be published by Nota Dimopoulou-Rethemiotakis and George Rethemiotakis.
38. Evans 1932, 254.

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