Dis-Eur-Crete-Minoan snake goddess-Witcombe-2006

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Women in the Aegean   
Minoan Snake Goddess

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**1. DISCOVERY**

The faïence figurine identified as a "Snake Goddess" was discovered in 1903 by the British archaeologist Arthur Evans (Sir Arthur Evans after 1911) in the so-called [Temple Repositiories](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/repositories.html) on the site of the "palace" of Knossos on the Aegean Island of Crete.

  
Sir Arthur Evans (1851-1941)

Evans first published the figurine as part of a report of his excavations in the *Annual of the British School in Athens* in 1904 [see [BIBLIOGRAPHY](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/bibliography.html)]. However, it was not until after the publication of the first volume of Evans' *The Palace of Minos* in 1921 [see [BIBLIOGRAPHY](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/bibliography.html)], in which much of the earlier report is repeated, that the "Snake Goddess" came to wider attention. The figurine has since acquired canonical status in art history books, and stands out in our minds as an object central to our understanding of Minoan culture.

**2. The Votary**

The faïence figurine known today as the "Snake Goddess" was originally identified by Evans as a "votary". When found it was missing its head, most of its hat, the right arm, the lower part of the snake held in the right hand, and large segments of the skirt.



The partial reconstruction in the photographs above was eventually completed with the addition of the left forearm, a hand holding a purely conjectural snake, and the head.

Fragments believed to be part of the hat enabled its reconstruction, but it was not until a few years later that Evans came to believe that the little faïence figure of a seated cat, which he identified as a lioness or spotted pard, found nearby in the repository, was originally placed on top of the hat (a rivet hole in the base of the cat and another in the top of the hat suggested the connection).

The skirt worn by the figure is comprised of seven overlapping flounces; a flounce being a strip of cloth gathered and sewed on by its upper edge only. The lower edge of the first six flounces overhang the upper edge of the one below. The bottom edge of the lowest touches the ground, concealing the figure's feet.

Each flounce appears to be made of a series of square panels, each about 12-15 centimetres square on a full-size example, sown together in a horizontal strip, with a panel of solid colour alternating with a panel decorated with two vertical stripes. These laterally alternating panels are then made to alternate in a vertical pattern - solid panel, patterned panel, solid panel, and so on - from flounce to flounce, producing a checker-board effect.

The flounces would appear to be fairly thick, judging by the roof-tile-like overhang of the profile, and were probably made of wool, which was the main cloth-making fibre of the Minoans. The skirt flares out from the hips to the ground.

Over the hips and falling to the front and to the back is a tongue-shaped double-apron or "polonaise" bordered with stripes and patterned with a simple diagonal grid of lines with a single pair of horizontal lines across the upper portion of each lozenge.

The skirt and apron are secured at the waist by some sort of wide belt or girdle, perhaps fastened at the back (and hidden under her hair), and decorated with vertical lines. The belt or girdle, which Evans thought was perhaps made of metal, emphasizes the figure's slender 'wasp-waist' and accentuates the curve of the hips.

The girdle, as an article of clothing, evidently had a special ritual significance. Among the items found in the Western Repository were two faïence double girdles (and the fragment of a third), one of which is decorated with a saffron-flower pattern.

[The girdles, which can be seen placed on the ground in front of the two figurines in the photograph of Evan's tentative reconstruction of the "Snake Goddess" shrine, are discussed in [The Temple Repositories](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/repositories.html)].

The girdle may have some relation to the charmed girdle worn by Aphrodite and which the goddess lent to Hera when she wished to seduce Zeus and thereby distract his attention from the Trojan war (incidentally, the seduction took place on Mount Ida on Crete).

According to Homer (**Iliad,** Book XIV), Aphrodite "loosed from her bosom the curiously embroidered girdle into which all her charms had been wrought - love, desire, and that sweet flattery which steals the judgement even of the most prudent."

It will be seen that the Minoan "Snake Goddess" may be indirectly linked through the Egyptian goddess Wadjyt with the Greek Aphrodite [see [Snakes, Egypt, Magic, and Women](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/snakesegypt.html)].

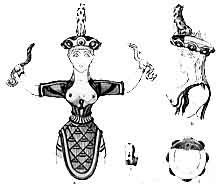
The bodice, which seems to be made of a plain material, fits tight over the figure's torso and over the upper arms to just above the elbow. It is decorated with dark broad wavy lines tapering down to points at the line of the belt or girdle. A rope-like border runs round the edge of the jacket and also round the edge of the sleeves.

At a point below the breasts, the bodice appears to be clasped or laced across the open gap. A loop which extends vertically above a "knot" at this point between the lower part of the breasts of both figurines may be symbolical.

The bodice is collarless and open in the front down to where it is tucked into the belt or girdle. It has been suggested that the bodice has been deliberately pulled open to reveal the breasts, and what could be interpreted as folds in the cloth, painted in dark glaze, to the sides of each breast lends support to this interpretation.

When seen in profile, the full, rounded breasts, coloured white and with dark-coloured erect nipples, protrude significantly. The wide belt or girdle must also serve to pull in the rib cage, forcing the chest out and adding to the projection of the breasts. Although they might be partially supported by the pulled-back sides of the tight bodice, their firmness and lack of any indication of sagging would suggest that the woman not only is young but also has not yet had any children.

The neck and head of the figurine is a reconstruction, presumably based upon the head of the other ["Snake Goddess"](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/evansgoddess.html) and from the numerous examples of women's heads and faces painted in Minoan frescoes. The headpiece is also a reconstruction, based largely on a fragment of the front part which included a series of three dark-painted, raised medallions (see the following illustration).



However, I must admit to having serious reservations about Evans' claim that this fragment is part of a headpiece, and that the headpiece belonged to this figurine. If the reconstruction of the headpiece is incorrect, then so too is the spotted cat sitting on top (although the cat may well have sat originally on this fragment).

As was mentioned above, the left forearm with the snake being held in the left hand is also a reconstruction. The right arm and hand, the flesh of which is white like the breasts, extends out and up away from the body. On the wrist is a thin bracelet.

Only the tail of the snake, which protrudes above her fist, is original; the portion below the wrist, with the head, is a reconstruction. The snake, which would appear to be only about 18 inches long, is shown with a single continuous stripe spiraling its body.

The "Snake Goddess" was one of three figurines discovered amidst a cache of broken and discarded cult objects in what was subsequently called the Temple Repositories at Knossos.

Besides the "Snake Goddess", numerous other items were also excavated at the same spot, including the figure called by Evans [the "votary"](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/votary.html).

**3. The Temple Repositories**

Evans began excavations on the Kafala Hill, the site of the "palace" at Knossos, on 23 March 1900. During the next few months, he unearthed about two acres of the site, uncovering rooms along the west side of what later came to be known as the Central Court.

An early discovery, made on 30 March, was a hoard of clay tablets inscribed in Linear B script in the Room of the Chariot Tables. The most dramatic discovery, though, was the Throne Room complex, excavation photographs of which were used to illustrate a brochure issued by The Cretan Exploration Fund appealing for donations of money to support Evans' work.

Also uncovered during this first season was the area between the Throne Room and the Room of the Chariot Tables which included the Room of the Tall Pithos and a small room with two open, and empty, cists or vats in its floor. At the time of their discovery, the cists were of little interest.

Three years later, in 1903, it was noticed that the pavement around the cists was sagging and upon investigation, two much larger stone-lined cists, or repositories, were discovered beneath the floor.

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| http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/images/knossos1900repositories.jpg image source: [Brown, 1983](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/bibliography.html) | **The two cists in 1900**  In 1900, in the floor of a small room next to the Room of the Tall Pithos, were found two open (and empty) cists or vats. The upper borders of each were cut so that lids could be fitted and secured. They were evidently used for storage. |
| [http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/images/knossos1903repositories2.jpg](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/images/knossos1903repositories.jpg) image source: [Brown, 1983](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/bibliography.html) | **The two earlier cists discovered in 1903**  In 1903, it was noticed that the floor in the room was sinking. Beneath the paving were discovered two stone-lined cists or repositories. It was possible to leave one of the later cists in position as it lay directly above the partition between the two earlier cists. |

In the upper part of both were a large quantity of vases. Below the layer of vases was found a variety of small objects including a clay tablet and three disks inscribed with Linear Script A, a hoard of 150 clay seal impressions, ivory and bone objects, bronze clamps and handles (of wooden chests), crystal petals and disks, gold leaf, Libation Tables carved from steatite, heaps of painted sea-shells, a marble cross, and a number of faïence objects.

The faïence objects (faïence is a pottery glaze technique using ground quartz which can be tinted) included fragments of three figurines, subsequently identified as a "snake goddess" and votaries, as well as votive robes and girdles, cups and vases, shells in the round, quantities of beads, a variety of plaques for inlay, and two small reliefs, one of a cow suckling a calf and another of a wild goat (or agrimi) suckling a kid. Evans believed that most of the objects formed part of a cult shrine which he tentatively reconstructed.

  
Snake Goddess Shrine, as reconstructed by Evans

Most of the faïence pieces were found in the Eastern Repository. However, part of one of the figurines was found in the Western Repository, which indicated to Evans that the contents of the Eastern depository had been considerably disturbed at some period, probably by plunderers at the time of the destruction of the "palace" by an earthquake around 1600 BCE. Evans' implies that the faïence objects were broken at this time and most of the fragments swept into the Eastern Repository when the palace was rebuilt. Though the figurines must have been in existence before then, they are usually dated to the time of their destruction, around 1600 BCE.

**4. Evans's "Snake Goddess"**

The figurine usually identified in art history books today as the "Snake Goddess" was originally identified by Evans as one of her votaries. The figurine Evans believed to be the actual "Snake Goddess" stands 131/2 inches tall (34.2 centimetres) in its reconstructed state.



She wears a tall hat of a purplish-brown colour with a white border and stands with her arms extended out and down before her with the palms up. In her right hand she grasps the head of a long greenish snake spotted with purple-brown the body of which winds up the upturned flat underside of her forearm, over her right shoulder, down one side of her back, over her buttocks, up the other side, over her left shoulder, and down her right arm.

A second snake has its tail looped over the right ear of the Goddess from which it winds down frontwards over her right shoulder follows the curve of her exposed breast. It continues down below her waist, then loops back up the left side of her torso, up in front of her left ear, and up her tall hat to the summit.

It would appear that a third snake entwines her waist, its body forming a knot in the front. Evans describes the general ground colour, including the flesh tint, as being of a milky white, with the various details in purple, purplish-brown, or black.

Large portions of the figurine seen today are reconstructions. Of the original figurine, only her torso, right arm, head, and her hat (except for a portion at the top) were found. It not at all clear, for example, that it is one single snake that has its head in her right hand and its tail in her left.

**5. The Snake Goddess in Minoan Culture**

Part of the attraction of the figurines is that they can be interpreted as embodying many of the perceived, and admired, characteristics of the Minoans: their elegant, fashionable costumes, their physical gracefulness, their sensitive yet forthright personalities, their sophisticated tastes and love of luxury, their refined manners and worldly ways, their seemingly high intelligence combined with an endearing forthright innocence, and their apparent love of beauty, nature, and peace.

Lacking written sources (or at least written sources which provide any real insight into the culture) there is little in the archaeological record to contradict these fondly-held impressions which are derived largely in response to what we see in the physical remains of the Minoans - in statuettes such as the "Snake Goddess", in the frescoes and painted pottery, and in the architecture - and also what we don't see.

Conspicuous in their absence are the usual signs of a male-dominated society common to the Eastern Mediterranean in the second millennium BCE: no walled citadels, no fortifications, no temples to the gods, no large public sculpture, no clear evidence of a hierarchically structured society ruled by kings and priests, no boastful inscriptions.

Possibly when the Minoan script Linear A is deciphered a different view on the Minoan civilization will emerge, but until then the visual evidence alone describes an attractive, easy-going society centered on large labyrinthine palace-like buildings which seem to have served primarily, judging from the huge storage areas, as collection and distribution centers for a well-organized system of local agricultural production, and as the residence of local leaders and, possibly, artists and craftspeople. Who the leaders were is unknown, but circumstantial evidence indicates that women played a dominant role in Minoan religion and perhaps also in Minoan society.

One of the prime pieces of evidence in support of the view that women dominated Minoan culture is the "Snake Goddess." The grounds for this view were laid by Arthur Evans himself. It is clear from the model of Minoan religion constructed by Evans that he was influenced by the theories put forward by James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (first published in 1890) that prehistoric religion centred on a dominant goddess of fertility whose young male consort's annual death and rebirth symbolised the decay and regrowth of vegetation.

Evans certainly supported prevailing views about the existence in the prehistoric period [see [Earth Mother — Mother Goddess](http://arthistoryresources.net/willendorf/willendorfgoddess.html)] of a Mother Goddess (identifying as such several Neolithic clay figures found at Knossos) and so, when the "Snake Goddess" came to light in 1903, he not only identified her as a "goddess" but also claimed that she was worshipped by the Minoans as an aspect of the Mother Goddess. Evans thereby provided the basis for the argument that Minoans lived in a matrilineal, or even a matriarchal, society.

**6. Snake Goddesses on Crete**

Maybe because Minoan Crete is singularly lacking in any artistically interesting sculpture, art historians have tended to single out the "Snake Goddess" for particular attention, causing us thereby to perceive it as being perhaps more important, and as occupying a more significant place, in Minoan culture than it warrants.

In the same way that the "Venus" of Willendorf, has come to epitomize Palaeolithic sculpture [see [The Venus of Willendorf](http://witcombe.sbc.edu/willendorf/)], so the "Snake Goddess" is today regarded as a particularly important manifestation of Minoan religion, art, and society.

However, despite the attempts of Evans and later researchers to provide a satisfactory religious context for the figurine, the fact is that there is little (archaeological) evidence to support the existence in the Minoan religion of a "snake" deity. Around the time of Evans' discovery other finds of figurines made elsewhere on Crete were identified as, or associated with, the "snake goddess," but these are not always convincing.

The discovery made a year or two earlier by the American archaeologist Harriet Boyd of a crudely made terracotta female figurine with a snake wrapped around her body, right shoulder, and arms in a shrine at Gournià, dating to 1350-1200 BCE, was subsequently identified, following Evans' discovery, with the snake goddess, as were the fragments of five or so female figurines discovered by the Italian excavator Federico Halbherr in the cemetery at Priniàs near Gortyna, which showed, in some cases, a snake represented in relief on the lower arm (first published by Sam Wide in 1901 [see Sam Wide in the [BIBLIOGRAPHY](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/bibliography.html)]).

A vase with the forms of a woman found at Koumasa (now in the Archaeological Museum, Herakleion) with a rope-like attachments marked with horizontal lines and circling the neck like snakes dating to around 2600-2200 BCE has been put forward as the prototype for the "snake goddess." The striped attachments, however, might be arms and a necklace rather than a snake.

In the case of the Koumasa vase, Evans' discovery may be said to have influenced the interpretation of the forms and shapes and enabled the identification of the piece as a "snake goddess."

A similar situation applies to the four clay female figures in long skirts unearthed at Palaikastro and now in the Archaeological Museum, Herakleion. Three of the figurines hold their arms outstretched while the fourth, according to R. M. Dawkins, holds a striped snake in her arms [see Dawkins in the [BIBLIOGRAPHY](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/bibliography.html)].

Largely on the basis of Evans' find, the group was enthusiastically identified as the "Snake Goddess" attended by three votaries. A more judicious examination of the figurines, however, suggests that the central figure, around whom the three other figurines can be joined as in a circle dance, is holding not a snake but a lyre.

Among the many examples of cult objects such as the double-axe, the sacral knot, the sacral horns, sacred pillars, sacred trees, birds (doves), and beasts (bulls, lions, goats) seen painted in frescoes or on pottery, sculpted in reliefs, and engraved in seals, the snake appears only rarely.

Evans interpreted the snake as a form of the spirit of the Nether World and therefore identified the goddess as a chthonic deity. However, despite this underworld association, Evans maintained that the snake, and the goddess, should not be invested with any malignant significance. On the contrary, he argues that the snake has a friendly and domestic aspect. Lacking entirely any archaeological evidence in support of this view, he cites the European tradition among peasants of treating the snake as a benign household genius which in Herzegovina and Serbia was fed milk and treated as a domestic pet.

However, Geraldine Gesell argues that the snake goddess was not a household goddess as no snake goddess has ever been found in a true domestic context. Rather, the "Snake Goddess" had the broader function of universal Mother or Earth Goddess and was thereby principally a fertility deity

**7. Fertility Deity?**

Having identified the "Snake Goddess" as a "fertility deity" associated with the Mother Goddess most archaeologists and art historians seem content to leave it at that, as if the term "fertility deity" somehow explains the meaning of the figurine.

It is unfortunately too often the case that almost every nude or semi-nude image of a female belonging to the prehistoric period is interpreted as a "fertility" figure. Moreover, the idea of fertility which the figure represents or is associated with is usually the fertility of the land, the growth of crops, or less frequently of animals. On Minoan Crete, a fertility deity would presumably be invoked to ensure abundant crops, or the plentiful production of lambs and kids among the herds of sheep and goats.

The "Venus" of Willendorf [see [The Venus of Willendorf](http://arthistoryresources.net/willendorf/)] is also commonly identified as a "fertility" figurine, though she is different in almost every respect from the "Snake Goddess". These images are regarded not so much as representations of women per se but as allegorical figures or personifications of the idea or concept of fertility. The woman herself is unimportant; it is what she represents that is significant. And, although women also benefit from a land kept fertile, the fertility deity is there to serve first the needs of men. Consequently, it has generally been assumed that the "Snake Goddess" existed primarily in a male context.

To identify the "Snake Goddess" as a fertility deity is to impose upon it an interpretation that is so broad as to be virtually meaningless. At the same time it also effectively stifles consideration of it having a more specific meaning and functioning in a more specific and possibly non-male context. It is a general patriarchal bias to perceive the world and all that is in it from a male point of view. This view tends to eliminate any thought of the possibility that a demonstrably female figurine such as the "Snake Goddess" might have been made specifically for and have had particular meaning for women.

Once the possibility is raised, however, almost immediately there springs up around the figurine evidence to support an interpretation of the "Snake Goddess" as serving a particular role in connection with women.

**8. Snakes, Egypt, Magic & Women**

Following his discussion of the snake as a household deity, Evans comments on the similarity in the position of the snake raising its head above the hat of the principal "Snake Goddess" (Evans here ignoring the fact that this particular detail of the figurine is his own reconstruction - see [Evans's "Snake Goddess"](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/evansgoddess.html)) and that of the Egyptian **uraeus** (rearing cobra snake) on the head of Hathor and other Egyptian goddesses. In particular, Evans tentatively links the "Snake Goddess" with the Egyptian Goddess Wazet (i.e. Wadjyt), the snake goddess of the Nile Delta, but does not pursue the connection.

It is clear that the Minoans borrowed much their culture and various cult practices from Egypt. Numerous Egyptian objects of one kind or another were found by Evans at Knossos. The most spectacular discovery was the lower part of diorite statue of a seated Egyptian figure identified from the hieroglyphic inscriptions as a priest of Wadjyt (or Wadjet; written as Wazet by Evans; and as Uatchet, or Uatchit, by Budge [see Budge in the [BIBLIOGRAPHY](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/bibliography.html)]).

As was noted above, sacred to Wadjyt was the cobra snake which in the form of the **uraeus** became the distinctive emblem of the Kingdom of Lower Egypt and the Egyptian royal house. Wadjyt was principally the snake goddess of Buto, or Pe, her ancient sanctuary in the Nile Delta. She was also associated with the city known to the Greeks as Aphroditopolis (the city of Aphrodite; the signs of the nome of Aphroditopolis were a snake and a feather), with whom Wadjyt was identified. Like Aphrodite, Wadjyt was a goddess of fertility. Later, she was assimilated with Isis.

In her snake form, Wadjyt is sometimes identified as Weret-hekau, "Great of Magic", who, as the **uraeus,** a manifestation of the solar eye, rises from the forehead of Horus (the pharaoh). As the **uraeus**, Wadjyt and Weret-hekau were identified with the eye of Re. The Goddesses Tefnut and Bastet were also identified with the eye of Re. As both were commonly shown lioness-headed, so Wadjyt and Weret-hekau were also sometimes represented with lioness-heads. This has sometimes caused all these goddesses to be identified with the lioness goddess Sekhmet.

Originally simply an epithet applied to goddesses, crowns, and *uraeus,* Weret-hekau was also a goddess in her own right. Her principal tasks were to protect the creator sun god and to act as foster-mother to the pharaohs. Weret-hekau's name, together with snake decoration and solar eyes, occasionally appears on magical implements such as model throwsticks (used by the deceased to defend themselves against malevolent spirits and demons), and apotropaic wands (or 'magic knives') made of ivory which seem to have been used to protect women, especially pregnant or nursing women, and women with children. Among the papyri found in a cache of magical objects in a tomb under the Ramesseum (see below) is one devoted to spells for women and children.

Magic was a beneficial force in Egypt and was used widely in all periods. The earliest attested magical texts are in the Pyramid Texts composed late in Dynasty V and Dynasty VI in the Old Kingdom. The god of magic, Heka (*heka* is also the Egyptian word for 'magic'), to whom shrines were dedicated in Lower Egypt, was depicted in human form (sometimes with a snake head) holding a snake-shaped wand in each hand. The snake wand, which was also used by magicians, probably represented Weret-hekau.

  
Wooden statuette of a woman holding metal snakes  
Dynasty XIII (1786-1633 BCE)   
(The Manchester Museum, University of Manchester, England)

The combination of snake wands and the lioness head is seen in a wooden statuette of woman with movable arms found in 1896 by James Edward Quibell in a cache of magical objects in a tomb dating to Dynasty XIII (1786-1633 BCE) discovered under the Ramesseum, the mortuary temple of Ramesses II (1290-1224 BCE), at Thebes. The statuette, which holds a metal snake-wand in each hand, is thought to represent a female **sau**, a type of magician, who could supply magical protection (the Egyptian verb *sa* means "to protect") both by making charms and amulets, and by using spoken and written charms.

Besides the statuette, the cache also included some magico-medical papyri and a twisting bronze snake wand (now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) which was evidently intended to be held in the middle where its body flattens out. It is approximately twice the size of those held by the wooden figurine. Possibly the Minoan votary is also holding snake-wands.

The **sau** statuette is usually described as representing either the beneficent lion-demon later known as Bes (a god often called upon to protect women in childbirth and their infants), or a woman playing the role of the demon in a magical rite. However, the combination of lioness mask and snakes also suggests that she might be representing or serving in some way, perhaps as a votary or a priestess, the goddess Wadjyt. Her nudity may indicate a connection with fertility figurines (a group of which were found in the same cache), or that she is a religious dancer who helped in the protective rites.

An interesting feature of the Egyptian statuette is its moveable arms which could be raised so that the metal snakes in each hand are held up in a manner reminiscent of the Minoan Snake Goddess.

**9. Snake Charmers**

In 1906, within a few years of Evans's discovery of them, it was suggested that the figurines represent not a goddess and her votaries but snake-charmers brought over from Egypt for the amusement of the palace at Knossos.

While Evans acknowledged that they may be snake charmers, he believed the figures to be the central objects of a religious shrine and so regarded "snake-charming" not as some form of sport or palace entertainment but as a part of their priestly function. Evans does not inquire further into their function, but I suspect that it is in this role, as snake-charming priestesses, that the original purpose and meaning of the figurines may be discovered.

When considered in conjunction with the almost contemporary Egyptian magical objects, it may be suggested that the figurines found by Evans in the Temple Repositories functioned as charms in magical rites performed before shrines, and that, more specifically, these magical rites had to do with the particular concerns of women, among which were fertility, menstruation, conception, and the supply of breast milk.

Fertility, menstruation, and conception were all necessarily connected. The onset of menstruation initiated fertility (the ability to reproduce), which was confirmed through conception. Conception was indicated by the cessation of menstruation. Menstruation was the key and great importance and power was therefore given to menstrual blood.

From the fact that women could conceive only after the onset of menstruation, and that menstruation ceased when pregnant, it was easily concluded that menstrual blood was involved in the creation of life. It is also the case that if a mother breast-feeds her baby, menstruation may not recur for as long as six months, and so menstrual blood was also closely connected with breast milk.

However, as the Greek physician **Hippocrates** (c. 460 - c. 377 BCE) observed, menstruation caused most women discomfort and some pain. Before the onset of a period, women may experience discomfort in the pelvic area, soreness of the breasts, emotional tension, or tension due to fluid retention in the tissues which also causes bloating.

Moreover, according to Hippocrates, matters could be made worse if menstruation did not take place, for the menstrual blood, rather than being discharged through the vagina, would flow out of the womb and collect in parts of the woman's body causing a variety of illnesses. In particular, Hippocrates regarded accumulated menstrual blood as the cause of potentially life-threatening aberrant behaviour, especially among young virgins whose cervixes had not yet been stimulated to open through sexual intercourse.

These physical and emotional symptoms of what is known today as "premenstrual syndrome" (a term first used by British physician Katharina Dalton in the 1950s), were alleviated as soon as menstruation took place. Besides PMS, cramps, and painfully heavy menstrual flows, women also suffered from irregular periods.

In Egypt, it would appear that spells could be invoked against heavy periods, two of which involved also inserting a knotted cloth (an "Isis-knot"?) into the vagina, while a woman suffering from irregular periods was instructed to recite certain magic words while taking a herbal remedy.

That the figurine of the Minoan "Snake Goddess" might be connected with menstruation is suggested first of all by its colour. In its present condition, the dominant colour of the skirt and the bodice is a darkening golden yellow.

  
**Minoan Snake Goddess**

Elizabeth Barber has pointed out that yellow is a woman's colour in the ancient world [see Barber in the [BIBLIOGRAPHY](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/bibliography.html)]. Yellow dye was obtained from saffron (the dried stigmas of the *crocus sativus*), a plant which is shown being gathered by women in the Minoan fresco discovered in 1973 decorating the "lustral basin", a cultic room in which it is thought young girls underwent ritual initiations in connection with menstruation and childbirth, in the building named Xeste 3 at Akrotiri on the island of Thera.

  
**Saffron Gatherers**  
Fresco in the building named Xeste 3, Akrotiri, Thera

Saffron was used medicinally by women to ease menstrual pains. Saffron-gathering is also the subject of a fresco found by Evans at Knossos. As was noted above, saffron-flowers also decorate one of the faïence girdles found with the figurines and also form the central decorative motif on the front of the faïence votive robes (seen hanging on the wall behind the figurines in the photograph of Evans' reconstruction of the shrine).

  
Snake Goddess Shrine, as reconstructed by Evans

In his description of the votive robes and girdles, Evan's comments, without any explanation of what he means, that the "votive articles of attire find an analogy in the 'Sacral Knot'." Numerous examples of "sacral knots" - a knot with a loop of fabric above and sometimes fringed ends hanging down below - survive in ivory, faïence, or painted in frescoes, or engraved in seals. Evans believed them to be associated with the Mother Goddess. An example would appear to be that worn at the nape of the neck of a Minoan woman in the fresco fragment known as "La Parisienne."

  
**"La Parisienne"**  
from the Campstool Fresco, Knossos  
c. 1400 BCE  
(Archaeological Museum, Herakleion)

As Evans notes, a parallel association can be made with the Egyptian ankh. An even better link, however, can be made with the ankh-like symbol **tiet** which, because of its association with Isis (it represents the goddess's genital organs), is also called the "Isis-knot" and "the blood of Isis."

In the latter case, the reference may be to Isis's menstrual blood. With this meaning, the symbol was often carved on red semi-precious stones such as carnelian, jasper or porphyry, or made from red glass or red porcelain, and served as a protective amulet for women, especially when pregnant. It has been suggested that the Isis-knot originally functioned as a sort of tampon inserted into the vagina of Isis when she was pregnant with Horus to protect the child in the womb from the Seth who wished to destroy it. In this respect, the Isis-knot served to protect against miscarriages.

One of the hieroglyphic signs used to write the word **sa**, meaning to protect, is a looped cord made of linen thread or leather. It was suggested above that the looped cord projecting above a "knot" between the breasts of both the "Snake Goddess" and the votary may be symbolical. It may in fact represent a magical knot, or **sa**, to which the Minoan "sacral knot" may be related. The loop of the knot has been identified as a sign of the vulva.

**Sa** was also the name given to the "the blood of Isis." On statues of Isis, or of women dressed as Isis (such as that from the Ptolomaic period in the Staatlichen Sammlung Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich, below), the Isis-knot is shown between the breasts in the same position it appears on the "Snake Goddess" and on the votary.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/images/snakegoddessbb2a.jpg **Evans's "Snake Goddess"**  from Knossos, Crete c. 1600 BCE  (Archeological Museum, Herakleion) | http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/images/isis.jpg **Statue of Isis**  (or a woman dressed as Isis) Ptolomaic period (Staatlichen Sammlung Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich) |

Another magical binding device is the belt or girdle. An Egyptian faïence fertility figurine from Western Thebes, dating to the 19th century BCE, wears a girdle made of cowrie shells (long identified with the vulva, cowrie shells are still worn by Muslim women during pregnancy, and are regarded as amulets against the evil eye).

It was noted above that Evans thought that the girdle worn by the votary was perhaps of metal. A 17th-century BCE Egyptian fertility figurine made of clay has a metal ring made of iron fitted tightly around its thighs. It has been suggested that its purpose was to bind the womb closed to prevent miscarriage in a pregnant woman. However, it might also represent what a menstruating woman might describe as an uncomfortably tight band tied around the thighs.

The Minoan figurine "wears" a knotted snake over the region of her womb which might represent the same effect. The knotted snake may therefore have something to do with premenstrual pain or menstrual cramps; both of which might be eased by the loosening of the knot.

Although it is difficult to establish a direct link between snakes and menstruation in Minoan Crete, current anthropology also offers the example of the Australian Aboriginal Rainbow Snake ritual complex in which "menstrual synchrony" is conceptualized as "like a rainbow" and "like a snake."

Some cultures believe that the first onset of menses is caused by copulation with a supernatural snake which also renders the woman fertile and help her conceive children.

From the earliest times, menstrual blood has been associated with creation of life. It issues forth in apparent harmony with the Moon, and when retained by the woman "coagulated" into a baby.

Technically, menstruation is the evacuation from the woman's body of disintegrating tissue that had lined the uterus. In one sense, it is a sloughing off of the old, and when complete, after about five days, the woman and her reproductive ability is renewed. Snakes undergo a similar process of periodic renewal, shedding their old skins and emerging as if reborn.

This constant renewal has made the snake appear ageless to many cultures. The Moon, already intimately linked with a woman's menstrual cycle of (usually) 28 days (the sidereal month, which is the time needed for the Moon to return to the same place against the background of the stars, is 27.321 days), is also associated with renewal and thereby with the snake.

If, as is argued here, the "snake goddess" is a deity devoted to the particular concerns of women, it becomes possible to suggest that the exposed breasts may have some connection with breast milk. A good supply of breast milk was crucial to a baby's survival.

Among the many ex-votos brought to some sanctuaries in Etruscan Italy, for example, were anatomical models of breasts. In Egypt, spells sought to ensure the flow of milk by comparing the breasts of the human mother with those of Isis, or with the udders of Hathor, the Divine Cow.

The two faïence plaques found together with the Minoan figurines showing a cow suckling a calf and a goat (*agrimi*) suckling a kid may allude to milk-flow. The milk-white colour of the breasts of the "snake goddess" may also draw attention to their purpose.

  
**"Statuette"**  
from Harbour Town of Knossos  
c. 1600 BCE (?)  
marble  
(Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge)

A marble statuette, of admittedly doubtful authenticity, said to have been found within the area of the Harbour Town of Knossos and now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, shows a women dressed in very much the same way as the faïence "Snake Goddess" with her hands placed on her exposed breasts and holding, or at least touching and covering, the nipples. No snakes are present, but the gesture focusing on the nipples of the breast, and what Evans calls "the maternal aspects," may indicate a connection with lactation.

Attention is again given to the nipples, indicated by little gold studs, of the breasts of the heavily restored ivory figurine in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

  
**"Snake Goddess"**  
from Knossos   
c. 1500 BCE   
ivory and gold, 6 1/2 inches  
(Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

In each hand the figurine holds a gold snake, which appear to be Egyptian hooded cobras, the body of which is wrapped around the lower arms. She also wears a gold girdle with a small gold strip extending vertically above it representing the fastenings of the bodice, and has five gold bands edging the flounces of her skirt, the upper four being V-shaped in front. Gold armlets on each arm mark the embroidered hems of the short sleeves of the bodice. Evidently, gold bands originally also marked the edge of her bodice, passing around the breasts and up to the sides of the neck. Nail holes indicate that she also wore a necklace, a gold-banded headdress, and had a row of seven gold curls on her forehead.

**10. Women in Minoan Culture**

There is plenty of archaeological evidence to indicate that women occupied an important if not dominant position within the practice of Minoan religion.

A principal goddess would appear to have been Potnia ("lady" or "mistress"). The name usually occurs, but not always, with some qualification such as Potnia of Grain, Potnia of Horses, or Potnia of the Labyrinth. Potnia may have been a female form of the male god Potidas or Poteidan, from which was later derived the name Poseidon (a Greek god closely associated with Crete in later times). A female form of Poseidon also occurs in the name Posidaija. Another goddess was apparently named Diktynna and another Britomartis ('Sweet Virgin').

Largely on the basis of what appear to be cult shrines and sanctuaries, the existence of other goddesses have been posited - a goddess of the caves, a tree goddess, a dove goddess, a snake goddess - but it remains unclear whether or not the Minoans worshipped them as individual, specialized divinities or as aspects of a single Great Goddess.

The predominance of goddesses (or of the Great Goddess) is attested to by the dominant role played by priestesses in religious ceremonies and the presence of women in ritual contexts. Women far outnumber priests and male attendants, for example, in the paintings on the four sides of the Aghia Triadha sarcophagus.

Moreover men are rarely seen in commanding positions, despite attempts to identify them in such positions. Even the lifesize male figure in the reconstructed frescoed stucco relief at Knossos which Evans identified as the "Priest-King" is now believed to be made up of fragments of several different figures. The only thing that seems relatively certain is that one or more of the figures was male.

Images of women occur more frequently than men in the Minoan archaeological record, both on Crete and in the more recent excavations on the island of Thera (Santorini). At both sites women are seen depicted in frescoes either alone or in groups.

  
**"Toreador Fresco"**   
from the East Wing of the Court of the Stone Spout, Knossos  
c. 1400 BCE. Fresco (restored)   
(Archaeological Museum, Herakleion)

One of the most revealing images of the status of women in Minoan society is the famous "Toreador fresco" in which young women, shown with the conventional white skin, and darker-skinned men, engage in the dangerous sport that appears to involve somersaulting over the back of a charging bull.

Although it is difficult to decipher exactly what these figures are doing, the context and their proximity to the raging bull clearly denotes a game or ritual that involves bravery, agility, and skill, qualities which in any other contemporary eastern Mediterranean culture would have been thought of as residing exclusively within the domain of men. That they are being demonstrated also by young women in the Minoan fresco strongly suggests that on ancient Crete women occupied a significant place in society.

*Excursus:*   
**Matriliny in the Aegean Bronze Age**

The evidence outlined in the previous sections ([Minoan Snake Goddess](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/)) supports the argument that women occupied a dominant position within the religious sphere of Minoan culture.

It could be argued they therefore also enjoyed superior legal and social positions, but this is more difficult to judge without written documentation. Circumstances on Crete would suggest that the Minoans lived in a matrilineal society. Although lack of sufficient documentation makes it impossible to substantiate this claim, circumstantial evidence from other more or less contemporary Bronze Age Aegean cultures can be found which lends support to this supposition.

It is clear that between the end of the Bronze Age and the emergence of Classical Greece the role of women in Eastern Mediterranean cultures changed drastically. Clues to the nature of this change are to be found in the myths and legends about the people and events which "historically" took place in the period of the Bronze Age but which were written down only much later.

In the intervening period, the central portion of which constitutes the Greek "Dark Ages" (from approximately 1200 to 900 BCE), the original native populations of the Eastern Mediterranean, or Aegean, were "invaded" by Indo-European intruders who brought with them heavily patriarchal and patrilineal social structures.

Even the ancient Greeks themselves, such as Herodotus, acknowledged that the Classical Greeks were not native to Greece but, as later writers recognized them, were the product of Indo-Europeans who superimposed themselves on the indigenous non-Greek, non-Indo-European, inhabitants.

This Indo-European "invasion" was already underway by the 13th century BCE when a primitive written Greek appears in Linear B, a script based on the earlier, and as yet undeciphered, non-Greek Linear A which was already flourishing on Minoan Crete as early as 1700 BCE. Linguists recognize that a number of ostensibly "Greek" names - such as Odysseus, Achilles, Theseus, Athene, Hera, Aphrodite, Hermes, Knossos, Mycenae, for example - are in fact non-Indo-European and belong to a pre-Greek language (or languages) that was spoken in Greece and perhaps throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, including Minoan Crete.

By the time the Bronze Age myths and legends began to be written down, starting in the 8th century BCE with Homer, the patriarchal Greek culture which had by then established itself on the mainland wished to see reflected in them its own social value system.

Yet, despite the patriarchal adjustments made to the stories, retained within them, like the pre-Greek identity hidden beneath the later "Greek" names, are clues which indicate that the original cultural context within which these stories were composed was a matrilineal one.

As was shown in the sections devoted to the [Venus of Willendorf](http://arthistoryresources.net/willendorf/) and to [Menkaure and His Queen](http://arthistoryresources.net/menkaure/), the issue of whether or not patriarchy was preceded by matriarchy is a controversial one. With respect to Ancient Greece, one line of argument holds that matriarchy is a "myth" employed by the Classical Greeks to justify the historic claims of the patriarchal state. Matriarchy resulted from the absence of male rule; a situation which, on the domestic level, may be brought about by the breakdown of marriage, the collapse of the patriarchal family, and the destruction of the male-dominated household.

On the public level, the creation of matriarchy through the loss of male rule would result in chaos and disorder and the collapse of the state. Matriarchy represented the opposite of everything that was Greek, civilized, and "normal." In the Classical period, matriarchy was posited as the horrific and chaotic alternative to patriarchy and thereby served as a tool to explain and validate patriarchal institutions, customs, and values.

**NOTE**: Much of the following discussion is drawn from Kenneth Atchity and Elizabeth Wayland Barber (see [BIBLIOGRAPHY](http://arthistoryresources.net/snakegoddess/bibliography.html))

However, for the "myth" of matriarchy to have had some validity, and in order for a Classical Greek theatre audience to accept the fact that women such as Helen, Clytemnestra, Antigone, Iphigenia, Hecuba, Andromache, Penelope, Medea, Alcestis, and Elektra (fully half of all extant 5th century plays have powerful women in leading roles) could indeed threaten patriarchal social order or alter the course of history, it must have had some basis in historical reality. The "historical" situation of the majority of the myths and legends is the Bronze Age, during or near the end of the Minoan civilization, and the "reality" may have been not matriarchy *per se* but rather matriliny.

A common feature of patriarchal and patrilineal cultures is "virilocality" (or patrilocality), which means that when a man and woman marry, the wife goes to live at her husband's family's residence. A distinguishing feature of matrilineal cultures is "uxorilocality" (or matrilocality), which means that the husband goes to live at his wife's family's residence.

Evidence of uxorilocality can be found in various myths and legends which are "historically" situated in the Bronze Age. For example, in the well-known story of Helen, when Menelaos first marries her, he travels to live with her in Sparta where he rules as king, even though Helen has two worthy brothers, Kastor and Polydeukes (Castor and Pollux). Menelaos attains the kingship of Sparta through his marriage to Helen who carries the bloodline of the Lakedaimonian throne.

When Helen is abducted by Paris and taken off to Troy, Menelaos, his position as king thereby made insecure, makes every effort to get her back, enlisting the help of all Greece. When during the course of the siege of Troy Paris and Menelaos agree to fight in single combat, the prize is not only Helen but "all her possessions." Later, after Helen's death, it is her daughter, Hermione, and not one of Menelaos' sons, who becomes the next ruler of Sparta.

Helen was the daughter of Leda who was ostensibly married to Tyndareus. Tyndareus, however, was not the father of Helen. Later tellers of the story, no doubt uncomfortable with Leda's evident promiscuousness and lack of adherence to patriarchal laws of male inheritance, interpolated the myth of Leda's seduction by Zeus as a more satisfactory explanation of her behaviour.

Leda's case is by no means unique. Bronze Age myths and legends are filled with important children whose mother is named but not their father. These children obviously had a human father, and one who wasn't necessarily the husband of their mother, but when the stories were retold this affront to patriarchal sensibilities was softened with the explanation that each child was in fact fathered by a god.

Helen's sister was Clytemnestra who moved away from Sparta to Mycenae when she married Agamemnon. However, in true matrilineal form, she feels no compunction after Agamemnon leaves for Troy of taking Aegisthus as her consort-king with whom she rules Mycenae. And doubtless she felt quite justified in having Agamemnon killed upon his return after he had committed the sin of murdering Clytemnestra's heiress-daughter Iphigenia.

Another possible instance of matriliny is to be found in the story of Penelope who, following the departure of Odysseus, appears to have been regarded as the heiress-queen of Ithaka whose hand was sought by the suitors hoping thereby to be made king. Crete is referred to several times in the story of Odysseus; he had visited the island in his travels and when he returns home to Ithaka while in disguise he tells everyone the "lie" that he had just come from Crete.

Minoan Crete, however, has also been suggested as the real identity of the island of the Phaiakans upon which Odysseus had been shipwrecked and where he met Nausikaa (*Odyssey*, Books 6 and 7). Although perhaps no more than a folk-memory by the time Homer was writing, the story describes a matrilineal society wherein, for example, Nausikaa invites Odysseus to marry her and settle in her family's residence (an uxorilocal arrangement). Moreover, Odysseus is instructed to supplicate not the king, Alcinous, but Queen Arete, implying thereby that it is the queen who will determine Odysseus' eligibility to marry the heiress-princess Nausikaa and thereby become king.

Other stories not narrated by Homer which illustrate matrilineal succession to the royal throne include the marriages of Atalanta, Hippodamia, and Jocasta. These and other clues embedded in Bronze Age myths and legends indicate patterns of marriage and inheritance which suggest that matriliny was to be found among pre-Greek Aegean cultures.

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