

ΠΕΠΡΑΓΜΕΝΑ
ΙΑ' ΔΙΕΘΝΟΥΣ ΚΡΗΤΟΛΟΓΙΚΟΥ ΣΥΝΕΔΡΙΟΥ

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ΤΟΜΟΣ Α1.3

ΤΜΗΜΑ ΑΡΧΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΚΟ

Σώμα – Κινήσεις – Αισθήσεις – Ένδυση

Τέχνη – Εικονογραφία

Σφραγιδογραφία

Γραφή – Διοίκηση



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Τόμος Α1.3: Τμήμα Αρχαιολογικό

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Iconography versus Reality: Goddesses and Gods in Minoan Crete

THE ICONOGRAPHY of the Bronze Age Aegean stands out for many particularities, among them our considerable difficulties in working out a clear definition of its deities. Neither Arthur Evans nor Martin P. Nilsson and later scholars succeeded in reconstructing convincingly a Minoan *pantheon* consisting of gods and goddesses as defined by attributes, as is the case in other civilizations¹. Why is this so difficult and why have our attempts remained so unconvincing even after more than 100 years of research, and in spite of having an enormous quantity of divine figures in seal glyptics, wall paintings and other artistic media at our disposal? In this paper I will try to outline that this problem might be due to the Minoans themselves and, possibly, to their very particular approach to the representation of deities.

GODDESSES WITH UPRAISED HANDS IN LINEAR B TEXTS?

Let us start by taking a glance at Cretan deities during the advanced Late Bronze Age when readable written records are available. It is noticeable that we do not succeed in correlating the approximately 12 female and 17 male deities mentioned in Linear B texts from Knossos and Chania with individual divine figures in iconography². Whereas the written sources of LM IIIA and LM IIIB clearly prove the existence of a rich, versatile and historically grown *pantheon* in what we are used to calling *Mycenaean Crete*, the imagery presents to us an enigmatic realm of mostly unspecific divine figures.

1. I am very grateful to Sarah Cormack for her patience in checking my English. For a similar version of the ideas outlined in this paper, see Blakolmer in print. Nilsson 1968. Marinatos 1993.
2. For the theonyms mentioned in Linear B texts from Crete, see Hägg 1997. Hiller 1997. Rougemont 2006. Gulizio 2008.

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Fig. 1.
Terracotta figure
from Gazi
(after Rethemiotakis 1998,
pl. 44).

Regarding the so-called *Goddesses with upraised hands* (fig. 1) known in large quantity from several shrines of the late 14th until the 12th century³, the different motifs on their headgear and occasionally objects held in their hands constitute the only meaningful variable among them. Although we are tempted to conceive symbols such as *Horns of consecration*, discs, poppy bulbs, birds and snakes as distinctive marks of individual goddesses and their domains, their combinations appear rather arbitrary. Does a terracotta figure with snakes in its hands really designate a different deity than a figure with birds on its *tiara*? And how should we perceive a figure showing snakes as well as birds and possibly further attributes, such as in the case of a figurine from Kannia⁴? They rather seem to constitute a haphazard combination of traditional Minoan religious *insignia* in any order and without defining a concrete deity or excluding the identity and domain of other deities. The most striking feature in the light of the evidence of the Linear B tablets, though, is the fact that among the figures from Late Minoan 'bench sanctuaries' only 4% are male⁵ – a sexual distribution that contradicts sharply the information given by the texts dating approximately to the same periods. Is this really how we have to imagine the deities mentioned in the Linear B records?

We can conclude from these observations that either these terracotta figures represent other deities than those mentioned in the texts, or there existed a basically different comprehension of the figures in shrines which, as a consequence, do not allow any direct conclusion about the deities venerated there⁶. In other words: if there were no texts at our disposal, we would be tempted to talk of a monotheism in LM III Crete as well as on the palatial Mycenaean mainland.

CAN WE DEFINE INDIVIDUAL DEITIES IN MINOAN ICONOGRAPHY?

We come across difficulties of similar character when we attempt to define individual deities in earlier periods of Bronze Age Crete such as the so-called *Snake*

3. Alexiou 1958. Gesell 1985, 47-50; 2004, esp. 138-40. Marinatos 1993, 225-229; Peatfield 1994, esp. 28-36. Whittaker 1997, 184-196. Rethemiotakis 1998.

4. Gesell 1985, 65. Rethemiotakis 1998, 40, fig. 43.

5. See the catalogue in Gesell 2004, 145-148.

6. Blakolmer 2010a, 33-34.

*goddess*⁷. It has been assumed that a figured vessel from an EM II *tholos* tomb at Koumasa (fig. 2) constitutes the earliest example of the *Minoan Snake goddess*⁸. However, a comparison of the thin coils reaching down from the shoulders of this anthropomorphic vessel with similar libation vessels makes it clear that they represent the schematised arms of the female carrier of a vase⁹. Leaving apart forgeries from the early 20th century, such as the so-called *Boston Goddess*,¹⁰ the number of human figures in combination with a snake does not exceed 18 or 20 specimens throughout the entire Aegean Bronze Age¹¹. Therefore, the existence of a distinct ‘Snake goddess’ in Minoan Crete appears doubtful.



Fig. 2.
Anthropomorphic vessel
from Koumasa
(after Evans 1935,
163, fig. 121).

Recent studies on the Minoan *pantheon* by M. Moss, J. L. Crowley and others have yielded a figure of 17 different deities based on archaeological context and the ascribed function¹² and a figure of 28 goddesses and gods in seal glyptics according to iconographical criteria respectively¹³. Although such studies are highly welcome and necessary in the given methodological situation, they rather appear as desperate attempts to escape from the highly precarious character of our archaeological, philological and iconographical sources.

As for the iconographical definition of deities in Neopalatial Crete, the main problem is caused by the considerable variability of the ascribed *attributes*. Most of these divine figures defined by iconographical criteria –such as position, accompanying animals and attributed objects– are essentially restricted to the period LM I and occur not more frequently than a few times. Do 5 or 10 or even 20 specimens of a type of divine figure really suffice to speak of a *Lady of the Dragon* or a *Lord of the Agrimia*, even if we take the incomplete evidence of Mi-

7. Evans 1921, 500-510. Gesell 2004, 139 with figs. 7, 3-4. Gesell 2006; 2010.

8. Xanthoudides 1924, 39, pls. II, XIV. Evans 1935, 163, fig. 121. Branigan 1969, 34. Warren 1973, 138, 142. Betancourt 1985, 42, fig. 23. Gesell 1983, 94. 1985, 7, 179, fig. 37. Fowden 1990, 15-16, fig. 1.

9. Cf. Marinatos 1993, 277: 6. Jones 2008, 40: 14. Goodison 2009, esp. 235-236. For this type of vessel, see further Cadogan 2010, 41-47.

10. Butcher and Gill 1993. Lapatin 2002; 2006. Poursat 2008, 280, fig. 399.

11. Svoboda 2003. Gesell 2010. See furthermore Trčková-Flamee 2003.

12. Moss 2005, esp. 151-179.

13. Crowley 2008.

noan seal images into consideration¹⁴? This turns out to be unlikely when we bear in mind the thousands of representations of Ishtar accompanied by the lion and astral symbols in the Near East, of the falcon-headed Horus in Egypt, and of Poseidon with his trident in classical Greece¹⁵. Instead of representing our much sought-after standardised and consistent Minoan *pantheon*, Neopalatial images such as these rather form the exception than the rule.

The iconography of Minoan Crete possesses a large quantity of religious emblems, symbols and mythological creatures. However, their applications and contexts do not suggest a comprehension as real diagnostic attributes in order to individualize a deity and to separate it from other divine figures. We get the impression that at least most of them served for generally marking and reinforcing the divine character of a figure. A good example of that is the so-called 'Goddess with snake-frame' in seal images¹⁶. Her head-gear forms the only distinctive mark, whereas her accompanying animals – griffins, lions or goats – seem to be interchangeable creatures intensifying her sacred character, unless we would like to attribute them to three different goddesses.

Divine figures such as the goddess in the mural paintings from Xeste 3 in Akrotiri (fig. 3) with her numerous symbols¹⁷ have been interpreted as having a *multiplicity of domains incorporated into a single image* suggesting an *essential divine unity*¹⁸. Obviously, these attributive features do not exclude but rather reinforce each other. Therefore, it is *a priori* needless to isolate, to identify and to name one single deity by terms such as *Mistress of apes*, *Mistress of griffins* or *Goddess of nature*. The more complex a divine figure appears, the more isolated it appears in Minoan iconography. Its ambivalent iconographical character suggests that in Minoan imagery *no* standardised iconography of individual deities has been developed. Sacred requisites served only as markers of the divine character of a figure. Thus, our methodological disorientation in defining individual Minoan deities is mainly due to the fact that we are facing a *pantheon* without real attributes¹⁹.

That this scepticism against the depiction of distinct deities in Minoan iconography is not an expression of my fantasy can be proven by the quantitative comparison with mythological creatures such as the so-called *Minoan Genius*, which constitutes a more or less standardised motif attested by about 80 spec-

14. Cf. Pini 1996, 1092; 2000, 243.

15. Cf. esp. Mylonopoulos 2010.

16. Hägg and Lindau 1984. Hiller 2006. See also CMS II 8: 255.

17. Doumas 1992, 158-67, figs. 122-30; Marinatos 1987; Chapin 2008; Vlachopoulos 2008.

18. See Peatfield 2000, 142, referring to a lecture by P. Warren.

19. Blakolmer 2010a.

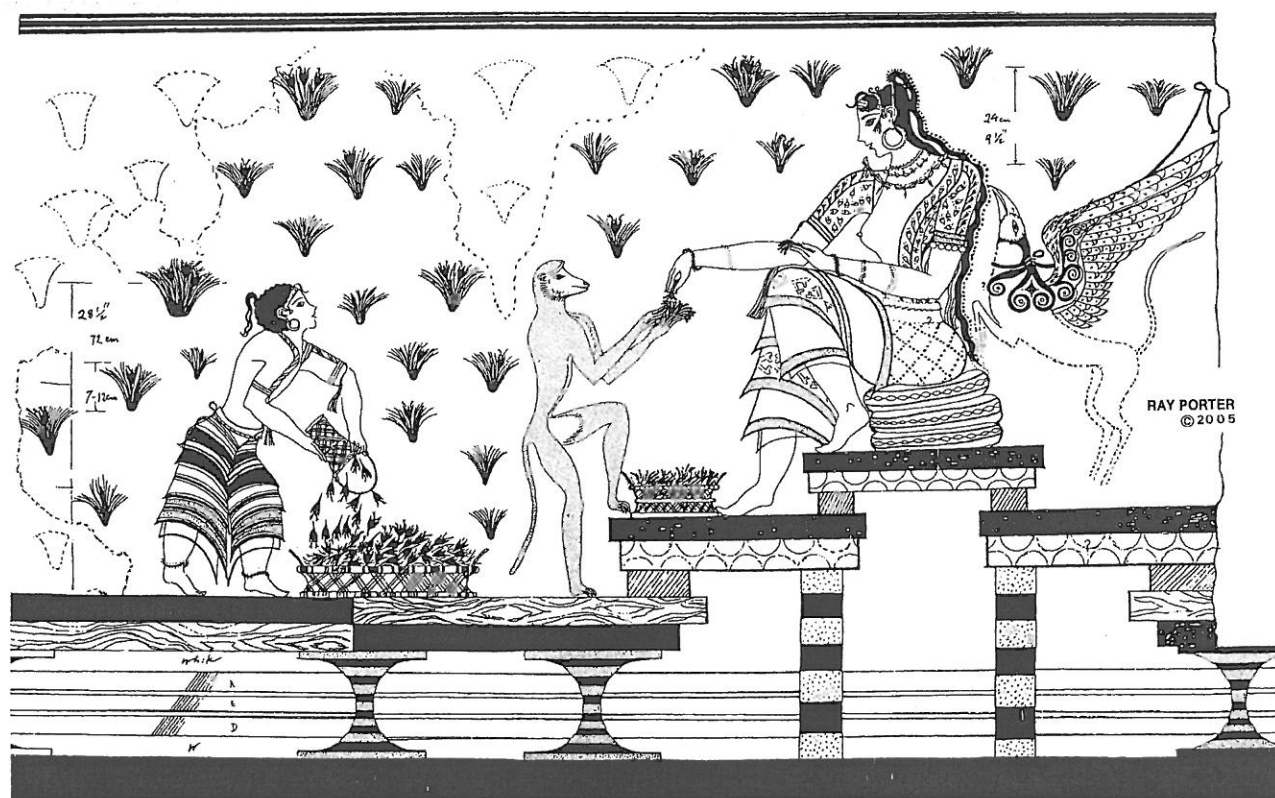


Fig. 3.
Wall-painting
from Xeste 3,
Akrotiri, Thera.
Drawing by Ray Porter
(after Betancourt 2007,
125, fig. 6.15).

imens occurring in several repeated iconographical contexts throughout 600 years²⁰. This means that it is specifically the realm of deities which confronts us with crucial methodological problems which, moreover, cannot be explained by a coincidence of finds either.

AN EVOLUTIONARY MODEL OF EXPLANATION

In order to approach more closely the problem of the iconographical definition of distinct deities in Minoan Crete, it could be useful to bear to mind that images do not necessarily reflect the reality. They constitute a medium of communicative processes and form an excellent tool for exercising power and for manipulating a wider audience in a given society. Thus, they could well be utilised to simulate a world deviating from the real one. Especially the sphere of religion represents a preeminent field for manipulative strategies in order to unify a society and attain similar aims. Let me briefly outline an evolutionary model

20. Gill 1964. Weingarten 1991, 12, fig. 10; 2000. Sambin 1989. Rehak 1995. Chryssoulaki 1999. Phillips 2008. I, 156-167.

which, possibly, could explain how this peculiar treatment of divine figures in Minoan Crete came into being.

When studying divine images in the Aegean, two aspects could be of special significance: First, instead of comprehending Minoan religion as a uniform, static block lasting 2000 years, we should rather imagine it as a lively, dynamic process undergoing changes and experiencing breaks in its development²¹. And second, we have to be aware that religions in the Aegean Bronze Age, for a long time, did not require any representation of deities. Until the 18th century BCE, Cretan religion constitutes a widely uniconic system of belief. Even more abrupt, then, is the appearance of a Minoan ritual iconography towards the end of the Old Palace period²². These motifs constitute the immediate predecessors of the Neopalatial religious iconography and were often adapted from Near Eastern prototypes²³.

Among other changes, the ritual imagery of MM III suggests the start of a process of integration and unification of Minoan Crete initiated by the palace of Knossos. Now, for the first time, Minoan iconography appears highly standardised and conceptualized, although possessing certain variabilities, and the monumental stucco reliefs on the palace walls of Knossos probably delivered the prototypes of many iconographical cycles²⁴. *Minoan art* in Neopalatial Crete essentially means a *language of images* initiated by Knossos and expanding towards the wider Southern Aegean area. This, possibly, can be perceived as an outcome of centralized palatial power. At the same time, imagery could have been the driving force in order to propagate the new ideology of Knossos²⁵. It is undeniable today that in the early Neopalatial period some fundamental changes at the intersection points of religion and power took place; just to mention some key-words: peak sanctuaries, system of the Minoan *villa*, standardised *palatial* architectonic forms, administrative network and, last but not least, iconography²⁶. It appears highly tempting to relate this political and social process of transformation back to a programmatic political strategy by a ruling group of priests at Knossos which used religion as an integrative tool²⁷.

21. Cf. Branigan 1969. Wright 1995. Betancourt 1999.

22. Immerwahr 1985. Poursat 2008, 94-132.

23. Watrous 1987. Aruz 2008, esp. 172-175, 228-229. Phillips 2008, I, esp. 229-230. Marinatos 2009; 2010. Dubcová 2010.

24. Evans 1930, 176-80. Blakolmer 2007a, 221-223; 2007b, 37-43.

25. Wiener 2007. Blakolmer 2010b.

26. Driessen 1989-1990. Gesell 1985, 19-40; 1987. Peatfield 1990, esp. 126-130. Walberg 1989; 1992, esp. 142-143. Adams 2004.

27. Platon 1983, 273-276. Hood 1995. Melas 1995, esp. 617-624. Betancourt 2002. See further Bint-

Which part was played in this process by the representation of deities? In the absence of a pre-existing standardised iconography of local, regional and possibly superregional deities venerated on Crete, the priesthood of Knossos could have initiated the systematisation of a Minoan *pantheon* which accommodated several aspects: it pursued the fundamental change of a merely abstract, *impersonal* religious concept towards a restructured, figure-orientated theological system. This does not necessarily imply the change from monotheism to polytheism or *vice versa*. Such a theological initiative rather could have aimed at the unification of the hitherto regional and societal diversity in ritual and belief in the Minoan realm by applying different strategies²⁸.

Possibly, the by now omnipresent motif of a goddess in the form of an indistinct *woman in festive dress* (fig. 4) could have integrated and absorbed the traditional regional cults and systems of belief. What appears to us as a *Great Minoan Goddess* in deliberate ambiguity could have been propagated by the priestly rulers of Knossos as *the lowest common denominator* in formerly regional belief. Such an interpretation as intentional neutrality is reinforced further by the absence of annotated names or explanatory texts in images. Moreover, a highly impersonal iconography such as the Minoan one which did not even represent individual rulers, should by no means let us to expect the representation of individual deities²⁹. This concept has been practiced more or less forcefully and could well be the reason why divine figures continued to be represented mainly as indistinct women, irrespectively of the real, multifaceted *pantheon*, until the end of the Aegean Bronze Age and including the religious iconography of the late Mycenaean mainland.

A second centralizing theological strategy could have been the adoption and adaptation of divine figures and ritual equipment from Egypt and especially from Syro-Palestine, becoming visible now mainly in Minoan seal images (fig. 5). This concept would fit excellently the construction of a new propaganda of religion and could have constituted a second tier in order to give a new orientation to a conceptualised Minoan ritual iconography. The Neopalatial period of Crete is without any doubt the period which shows the most frequent allusions



Fig. 4.
Seal image from Chania
(after CMS V Suppl. 1 A,
no. 177).

liff 1977, 160-164.

28. A similar process has been proposed for the period MM I by Branigan 1969, 36-38. Cf. Peatfield 1987, 92-93. Betancourt 1999. Blakolmer 2010a, 59. Cf. further von Padberg 2009. König 2008.

29. On the problem of images of rulers in the Aegean Bronze Age, see Davis 1995. Otto 2000. Blakolmer 2007, 214-215.



Fig. 5.
Seal image from Knossos
(nach CMS II 8 no. 237).

to Near Eastern ritual iconography in the entire era of Aegean prehistory³⁰.

Thus, the key for our understanding of the discrepancies and problems of more closely defining divine figures as outlined above may lie in two elements: the first is that in Minoan iconography specificity of distinct deities, probably, was not intended, at least not to an extent which allows us to talk of real attributes of distinct gods and goddesses. And secondly, if this hypothetical scenario holds true in this or a similar form, the elites of Neopalatial Crete could have simulated by iconographical means and by other theological provisions a conceptualized, normative and unified Minoan *pantheon*, which was positioned behind these neutral, ambivalent divine figures. Thus, iconographical and semantic specificity of the deities, obviously, was of less importance than the omnipresence of divinities and ritual acts in images propagating the new palatial ideology.

Due to the remarkably conservative character of palatial culture in the Aegean, its arts and the purposes of its image-usage, it is no wonder that neither in the subsequent periods on Crete nor on the Mycenaean mainland an attempt was made to invent a consistent iconography of individual gods and goddesses which most probably existed in large quantity throughout the entire Aegean Bronze Age and beyond. The strongly formulaic, abstract character of divine figures, therefore, makes it also useless for us to expect from iconography any clear arguments for defining the development of a *pantheon* or the origins of so-called *classical* deities well attested in the Linear B texts.

It is one of the most enigmatic features of Minoan Crete that in spite of the omnipresence of ritual activities in the archaeological and iconographical sources, we know almost nothing about the worshipped deities themselves. There probably existed no canonical, established iconography for the visual distinction among different deities in Bronze Age Crete. With regard to divine figures we have to be careful in taking them as literal sources for defining a distinct Minoan *pantheon*. At least in the Neopalatial period of Crete, the formative period of Aegean iconography, religion constituted a profoundly *political* matter. Thus, instead of perceiving divine images as an outcome of pure documentation of Minoan religion, we should take into consideration the manipulative ideological purposes exercised by images. Irrespective of the validity of the model presented here briefly, it seems obvious that in our comprehension of Minoan deities we are still very much at the beginning.

30. Supra n. 23.

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Περιεχόμενα

Σώμα – Κινήσεις – Αισθήσεις – Ένδυση

Céline Murphy, No mouths, just hands: A review of the Minoan Fist on Chest gestures 9-23

Ευγενία Περισυνάκη, Κρητική όρχησις 25-40

Joanne Cutler, Eva Andersson Strand, Textile Production at three Middle Minoan Centres 41-57

Bernice R. Jones, The Minoan Peak-Back Robe: A New Replication ... 59-71

Τίνα Μπολώτη, Έμπλεα πτηνών και ανθέων: Περίτεχνα γυναικεία ενδύματα της Ύστερης Χαλκοκρατίας ή η κοινωνική διάσταση των περίτεχνων γυναικείων ενδυμάτων 73-92

Τέχνη – Εικονογραφία

Evangelia Sikla, The Authority of the Bull: Beyond Knossian Ideology as Legitimization 95-107

Χαράλαμπος Β. Χαρίσης, Αναστάσιος Β. Χαρίσης, Η προϊστορική μελισσοκομία στο Αιγαίο. Επανεξέταση μερικών μινωικών-μυκηναϊκών, θρησκευτικών λεγομένων, παραστάσεων 109-123

Αθηνά Τσαμπανάκη , Μινωικός κήπος. Ουτοπία ή πραγματικότητα; Η περίπτωση των αιγαιακών τοιχογραφιών	125-148
Έλενα Σουλιώτη , Η σημασία και το περιεχόμενο του μινωικού συμβόλου του ιερού κόμβου	149-172
Fritz Blakolmer , Iconography versus Reality: Goddesses and Gods in Minoan Crete	173-187
Evgenia Zouzoula , The Bird-ladies of Minoan Iconography: Artistic Fancy or Religious Icons?	189-200
Νεκταρία Μαυρουδή , Άνδρες, γυναίκες και ένας... πίθηκος στην κρητική εικονογραφία της Εποχής του Χαλκού	201-220
Geraldine C. Gesell , The Goddesses with Up-raised Hands at Kavousi: The Relationship between Potters, Fabrics, Technology, and Appearance of the Figure	221-232
Γιάννης Τζεδάκις, Βίκη Κολυβάκη , Χάραγμα στο εσωτερικό πίθου από τη νεκρόπολη των Αρμένων: τοπογραφικό σχέδιο ή ιερό παιχνίδι;	233-241
Dieter Rumpel , Homer and the Harvester Vase	243-251
Γιάννης Γαλανάκης, Έφη Τσίτσα , Επανεξετάζοντας την τοιχογραφία του Φοίνικα από την Αίθουσα του Θρόνου στην Κνωσό	253-265
<i>Σφραγιδογραφία</i>	
Maria Anastasiadou , Minoan Soft Stone / Material Seals with Centred-Circles	269-284
Olga Krzyszkowska , Seals from Petras Siteia: New Insights for MM II Hard Stone Glyptic	285-295
Evangelia Tsangaraki , Human Figures vis-à-vis Bovines: A Quantitative and Qualitative Statistic Comparison of two Naturalistic Motifs on Neo-palatial Sealings	297-320

Pietro M. Militello , An einer Stange hängende Gefässe. 21321. Nota su un motivo sfragistico	321-333
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Γραφή – Διοίκηση

Άγγελος Τσαγράκης , Καταγραφές αγγείων στην Κνωσό. Σύγκριση με τα δεδομένα από την ηπειρωτική Ελλάδα	337-359
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Yves Duhoux , La Room of the Chariot Tablets du palais de Cnossos: école scribale ou archives ordinaires?	361-371
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Vassilis Petrakis , Rulers of the Late Bronze Age II-IIIB administrations: How ‘Minoan’ and how ‘Mycenaean’?	373-389
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Αγγελική Καραγιάννη , Χρονικές διαιρέσεις και οργάνωση στις πινακίδες της Γραμμικής Β από την Κνωσό και την Πύλο	391-408
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Μηνάς Τσικριτσής, Δημήτρης Τσικριτσής , Στατιστική ανάλυση των συλλαβογραμμάτων στην Κυπρομινωική γραφή	409-430
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