

Crete of the Mother Goddess

Communal Rituals and Sacred Art

MARA LYNN KELLER

Crete today, despite its own problems of pollution, commercial overdevelopment, and encroaching militarization, still has the power to evoke the memory of a lost paradise—a peaceful and prosperous island culture in the heart of the beautiful eastern Mediterranean Sea. The natural magic of the island persists in the constant pulse of the waves, sun-hot beaches, mysterious caves, massive mountains, sacred groves, and in the vitality of the native people. In the elemental life of this extraordinary place, admiring visitors can still experience a reflection of the graceful and glorious culmination of the Goddess culture of the ancient Mediterranean world.

Crete fascinates so many of us today in part because it was a more egalitarian and more socially harmonious society than we know in our own twentieth-century lives. According to U.S. archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, "A matrifocal tradition continued through the early agricultural societies of Europe, Anatolia, and the Near East, as well as Minoan Crete. The emphasis in these cultures was on technologies that nourished people's lives, in contrast to the androcratic focus on domination" (1991, x-xi).

Evidence that Crete enjoyed a reputation for an exceptionally desirable way

of life can be found in one of the ancient names for Crete, *Makaris*, meaning "country of the blessed." Another of Crete's ancient names was *Chthonia*, after the Mother Earth Goddess. The Greeks believed that Demeter Chthonia, the great Earth Mother, was worshiped there (Logiadou-Platanos and Marinatos 1986, 14).

Homer described Crete as "lavishly fruitful, sea-girt, radiant," where "out-jutting beaches thunder aloud to the backwash of the saltwater" (*Odyssey* XIX, cited in Krontira 1987, 3). Theophrastos, father of Greek botany, said that Crete was "rich in medicines"; Hippocrates, father of Greek medicine, recommended Crete to people recovering from illness; and Pliny, Roman naturalist and encyclopedist, claimed that the plant and animal life of the island was incomparably better than anywhere else (all cited in Logiadou-Platanos and Marinatos 1986). Like these ancient scholars, many travelers today believe that the island culture of Crete has healing powers for the ailing body and soul!

More eloquent in its praise than even the ancient written testimonia is Crete's archaeological record. The artwork and architecture that have survived the ruination of time still testify to a people who loved not only nature but, in the words of British scholar Sir Leonard Woolley, enjoyed "the most complete acceptance

of the grace of life the world has ever known" (quoted in Eisler 1987, 32).

Before the domination of the Mycenaean warrior clans in 1450 B.C.E., ancient Crete was overflowing with the exuberant powers of life, with a love of life so intense and potent that it expressed its delight in the creative forces of the universe at every turn. The archaeological record that has been unearthed is but a small fraction of what once existed, yet from this small sample clearly emerges the vibrant image of a way of life that was nature-loving and nature-embedded; a spirituality that was fully embodied and erotically pleasurable; and an individuality that was so nurtured within community that even the most deeply personal and intimate of all human experiences—birth, sexuality, and death—were occasions to be celebrated and honored as an integral part of the greater life of the human community within the all-embracing cosmos. Their profound understanding of the interconnectedness of all life sought expression in the people's ritual reenactments, mystical invocations of the primal unity of life.

Perhaps the earliest of all the communal rituals in Crete unifying individual, community, and cosmos was the circle dance. One can join in the Cretan dances

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today and discover the exhilaration and thrill of the dance, the flowing power of the repeating rhythms, the lift of the music as one holds onto the shoulders of companions, as one's very being transforms, trancelike, enchanted, caught up in the rushes of the dance, as body and spirit slip and soar over the edge of everyday reality into ecstasy. Homer tells us that a special dance floor was created at the Palace of Knossos for the priestess Ariadne; and that in that place, young men and women "were dancing, linked, touching each other's wrists, . . . trained and adept, they circled there with ease . . . magical dancing!" (*Iliad* XVII). The musicality of nature insinuated its way through the people's bodies, their voices, clapping hands, sticks, rattles, conch shells, tiny handbells, hand drums, metal cymbals, pan-pipes, flutes and lyres, and above all—through their dancing!

Like the dance, the visual artwork of ancient Crete of the Mother Goddess is alive with the musicality, the dynamic grace of this radiant place. As one looks at the many wonderful works of art, from the pottery and jewelry to the villa and palace architecture, from the votives and sealstones to the frescoes and sacred figurines, one understands the praise of Canadian classicist Marymay Downing: "Just as remarkable as the technological expertise of the manufactured goods and architecture . . . is the aesthetic sensibility that permeates everything they created. Nothing they made was made artlessly" (Downing 1984, 17).

The artisans of Crete created beautiful jewelry for both men and women, frequently reflecting spiritual themes. One of the most lovely necklaces is the gold pendant of honeybees. Priestesses of the Goddess were called honeybees in many regions of the ancient Mediterranean, for they helped bring forth the fruitfulness of the Earth, and her sweetness (Keller 1988, 33, n. 18). Carved sealstones, used for identification purposes and perhaps as amulets, depicted ritual scenes, the Goddess, her adorants, and her sacred plants and animals.

Chalices, first appearing during the Neolithic Age, were carved with special artistic beauty—for example, the luminous crystal vase from Zakros, or the bull *rhyton* or libation vessel from Knossos. The *kernos*, a ceramic vessel with a

wreath of small cups for holding the first fruits of grain, fruit, honey, or wool, is one of the oldest ritual objects from Crete and may have been worn on the head of dancing women at the harvest festivals—as was done during the classical era in Greece in the rites of Demeter and Persephone in Athens and Eleusis.

The primary religious symbols in Crete were the Labrys and the Horns of Consecration. The Labrys was used to decorate altars; given as a votive object in cave shrines or at mountaintop sanctuaries; painted on pottery and carved on sealstones; and sometimes stylized as a butterfly, a symbol of rebirth. It was the sign of the double axe, a major tool of agricultural cultivation and home building. The Labrys can also be seen as the symbol of the Bird Goddess combined with the crescent moon (Munch 1984) or interpreted as the symbol of the Sacred Marriage that merges the phallus with the sacred pubic triangle of the Goddess (Artun 1992). The Horns of Consecration, so named by British excavator Sir Arthur Evans, were also used to signify an altar and were a direct reminder of the potent powers of the bull and the masculine principle in nature.

A harvest celebration was exquisitely carved on the Harvester Vase, with its image of a boisterous team of men with harvest tools, walking in stride to the accompaniment of musicians and choristers. This remarkable scene indicates that the labors of farming were performed communally and exuberantly. As British classicist Jane Ellen Harrison suggests, their labors may have been shared as sacred play devoted to the Mother Goddess, as a celebration of the divine feminine and masculine forces of nature (Harrison 1980, 566; 1913, 30–31).

The planting and harvesting rituals rounded the seasons, coming full circle to create the whole cycle of life. Within the seasonal cycles, the great mysteries of birth, sexuality, and death were also given ritual reverence and spiritual meaning, the more personal and the more universal celebrated as microcosm and macrocosm, being of one and the same essence.

Birthing rituals eased the efforts of childbirth, as in the cave of Eileuthyia, Goddess of Childbirth, not far from the town of Knossos close to the northern

coast. Here, from Neolithic times, women came to give birth. In the middle of the cave they built an altar around a Madonna-and-Child stalagmite statue, to which they devoted gifts with their prayers of supplication, or gratitude, for a child well-born. In the back of the cave are pools of cool, refreshing waters.

The lighthearted reverence that was bestowed on mothers in this culture can be seen in the many charming pitchers called "nippled ewers" by archaeologists. These pitchers, used to serve water, milk, juice, wine, or beer, were decorated to look like a Bird Goddess, with beak and eyes, necklace, and breasts. The Bird Goddess, like the Snake Goddess who is also depicted extensively in Cretan art, was a frequent motif in ritual art around the Mediterranean world (see Gimbutas 1982, 1989, 1991).¹

Another example of the imaginative and spritely sense of humor in the people can be seen in the pitcher called "The Goddess of Myrtos." This female figure, holding a pitcher in the crook of her arm, is herself a pitcher, with the smaller pitcher forming the pour-spout. This "goddess"—so named by Peter Warren, British excavator of the Early Bronze Age town of Myrtos in the southeast of Crete—is artistically decorated with a pubic triangle, another motif typical of the Goddess cultures of the Neolithic Age, especially in the Cycladic islands to the north of Crete. This artistic custom is an indication that the erotic and procreative powers of women were given special respect, that these physical aspects of women were seen as divine as well as human, that the human and the divine were not separate.

The ritual of sexual union, the Sacred Marriage or *Hieros Gamos*, was also central to the lives of the peoples of Crete. In its more cosmic expression, the people celebrated the procreative union of the Goddess and her lover, of Mother Earth and her hero who was the Cretan farmer. Homer wrote:

So too fair-haired Demeter once in the spring did yield
To love, and with Iason lay in a new-ploughed field.

(*Odyssey*, 5.125,
cited in Harrison 1980, 564)

The Sacred Marriage of the fertile mother and the impregnating and hus-

banding male partner was one of the chief rituals of the farming peoples of ancient Crete, enacted in imitation of the Goddess and her lover to ensure the fruitful abundance of Mother Earth, her cornucopia of gifts, the foodstuffs of land and sea (see Harrison 1980, 565). In one of its forms, the ritual of the Sacred Marriage would have been celebrated in the fields at the seasonal time of planting the seeds for the new crops. The sexual communion of women and men would have been symbolically situated and patterned within the overarching belief in the blessedness and sacredness of the mating of female and male, in the celebration of the pleasures and bounty of spiritual and physical union.

Cultural historian Riane Eisler writes that the Cretan's "frank appreciation of sexual differences and the pleasure made possible by these differences" generated a pleasure bond that "would have strengthened a sense of mutuality between women and men as individuals." Their affirmative attitude toward sex, "along with their enthusiasm for sports and dancing and their creativity and love of life seem to have contributed to the generally peaceful and harmonious spirit predominant in Cretan life" (Eisler 1987, 39).

Death/rebirth rituals were also an integral part of the culture. The dead were typically buried in communal graves—*tholos* tombs shaped like the womb of the mother and facing eastward—in all probability signifying, as British archaeologist Lucy Goodison and others theorize, a belief in rebirth from the womb of Mother Earth with the assistance of the regenerative powers of the Sun (Goodison 1990, ch. 2).

Household shrines were built to honor the dead; such shrines, called "pillar crypts," were a common feature of the temple-palace centers as well. But it would be a mistake to characterize the ancient Cretan religion (as some scholars have) simply as a "cult of the dead." For while there was obviously a deeply rooted practice of ancestor reverence, there was at least as much emphasis placed on the birthing and rebirthing of life.

The two most important rituals celebrated by the whole community were evidently the festival of the Sacred Mar-

riage at the time of planting the crops and the Harvest Festival after the work of the harvest was completed. Then, all gathered to express their gratitude to the Earth Mother for the harvest of foods that would nourish and sustain the people. Did the Sacred Marriage occur in the spring, and the Harvest Festival in the fall? We do not know. Perhaps these two ritual moments occurred side by side at the same time of year. After the harvest was gathered in came the New Year celebration, which gave thanks for the crops of the past season and pre-

imaginative reconstruction of the ancient practices.

The temple-palace walls were covered with marvelous frescoes—of dolphins and birds, monkeys and lilies, flowers and fishes. Two of the most memorable are the fresco of the Great Procession, with celebrants bringing their gifts to the High Priestess, Queen, or Goddess; and the Bull-Leaping Fresco, with its women and men leaping over the horns of the giant wild bull. I believe that the fresco of the Great Procession depicts the Harvest Festival

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pared for the planting of the new crops. The Sacred Marriage was performed in anticipation of the harvest to come.

Since earliest settlement, the peoples of Crete lived in closely built villages and towns, often with a central community building with communal work areas for craftwork, cooking, and religious ceremonies. These community centers gradually evolved into the temple-palaces, the religious, economic, and administrative centers of the populace. The temple-palaces are best thought of not primarily as the residences of royalty but as centers of economy and cult, as Greek archaeologist Nanno Marinatos has designated them, the central temples of the community (Logiadou-Platanos and Marinatos 1986, 139–41, 146).

Like other visitors to the ruins of the temple-palace at Knossos, I have tried to imagine the communal rituals as they were enacted three-and-a-half or four thousand years ago, during the Palace Periods, c. 2000 to 1450 B.C.E. Fortunately the architecture, ritual objects, wall paintings, and the beautiful and powerful figurines of the Snake Goddesses or Snake Priestesses of Knossos are rich finds that aid the intuitive and

honoring the Mother Goddess, and that the bull-leaping games were part of this Harvest Festival. The ritual celebration may then have culminated in the celebration of the Sacred Marriage by the High Priestess and her Consort.

In my mind's eye I begin to see the dancing groups of women in the fields and groves surrounding the Palace of Knossos, then the formation of the procession of the townspeople in their best clothing, bringing music and offering gifts. The procession reaches the west courtyard with its walled pit *kouloures*, where celebrants throw flowers, fruits, and ceramic votives, returning a portion of the gifts of the Mother Goddess again into her depths. It is there that the people are first greeted by the priestesses and then led on their way through the palace, along the corridors and down the stairways, deep into the dark depths of this sacred home of the Goddess, then back up again along the porches overlooking the fertile valley, gazing toward the horizon with its sacred mountain top—the mound of the Goddess—framed by the huge Horns of Consecration, then finally arriving at the Great Courtyard for the main rituals and festivities presided over by the priestesses

representing the Goddess (Sculley 1979; 1982). Here all join in the enjoyments of music and dancing, feasting and merrymaking, and the amazing bull-leaping games.

The bull-leaping ritual may have served as mimetic protection from the devastating earthquakes that frequent this region of the world. Perhaps it was also an offering of awesome magic, invoking the blessings of the deities. A poem has survived (from centuries later in Crete) that gives us an indication of what might have been in the hearts of the peoples at this time:

leap for full jars
and leap for fleecy flocks
and leap for fields of fruits
and for hives to bring increase!
Leap for our cities
and leap for our seaborne ships
and for our young citizens
and for the goodly Themis!

(cited in Harrison 1913, 116-17)

In later Greek religion, Themis was the goddess of social justice and harmony and a daughter of the Mother Earth Goddess. Whenever I hear this poem I think of our own civilization, and in my heart I voice my own similar prayer for the well-being of the peoples of the Earth today, that all might be fed abundantly, that all peoples might prosper in their endeavors, that the children be protected and well-loved, that we might all live together with social justice, in peace.

As the climax of the day's celebration, priestess and priest recited a sacred hymn (perhaps like the one thought to be printed on the Phaistos Disk) before proceeding to the marriage chamber (Artun 1992; Doyle 1991, 4).

Several thousand years ago, the multicultural peoples of ancient Crete poured their creative powers into communal celebrations, into the artistry that graced all aspects of their lives, into the enjoyment of the abundant gifts that Nature offered so generously in that time and place. For some fifty-five hundred years they lived primarily in peace, from approximately 7000 B.C.E. until 1450 B.C.E., when the Mycenaean warrior clans came down from the northern Greek mainland, bringing their warrior gods and warrior customs, dominating the island, and turning the people into slaves. The island no longer could remain immune to the

spreading warfare of the Bronze Age, and onslaught after onslaught of violence devastated the people's efforts to create and re-create their culture. Finally, with the invasions of the Dorian clans about 1100 B.C.E., the island culture collapsed. The survivors were reduced to a subsistence level, the arts were reduced to crude, simplistic objects, and the skills of writing—which had been practiced with increasing sophistication for over one thousand years—were lost.

As the wars of the late Bronze Age escalated, more and more trees were felled to feed the forges to make more and more weapons, while expanding farmlands and herds prevented the natural regrowth of the forests. Soils eroded and the whole ecosystem—not only in Crete but throughout the Mediterranean basin—became increasingly rocky and barren. For the next three centuries, the survivors in Crete endured the suffering and despair of the Greek Dark Ages.

When the environment and people had somewhat recovered throughout Greece, the same pattern of relentless warfare and exploitation of the natural resources began again. Toward the end of the Classical Age of Athens, Plato wrote, "What now remains compared with what then existed is like the skeleton of a sick man, all the fat and soft earth having been wasted away, and only the bare framework of the land being left" (cited in Bates 1960, 121-22).

I see in the story and fate of Crete a lesson for our own age. First, the ancient culture of Crete teaches us that it is humanly possible and eminently desirable to find a way for women and men to live in harmony with nature, with the multicultural peoples of one's land, and with one's foreign neighbors. Secondly, Crete signals to us the message that like the peoples of ancient Crete, we are in danger of being overrun by the militarism of the warrior clans of our own era. The challenge and task for us today is to discover how to avoid another Barren Age caused by the devastation of war and to create instead the wise means of resolving our problems and conflicts without resorting to violence. Finally, ancient Crete provides us with an example of a spiritual practice that did not divorce body from spirit, female from male, individual from com-

munity, or humanity from nature. The spirituality of ancient Crete included a love of life that sought harmonious and just relations in all spheres of life. These peoples wove together the best of the cultures of that day, gathered in from the Near and Middle East, from northern Africa and from Old Europe, and succeeded in creating a culture of partnership, prosperity, and peace.

Sadly, the beauty, exuberance, and love of life of Chthonian Crete of the Mother Earth Goddess has mostly been lost from our collective memories.² Only a few fragments still remain, like seeds, to send forth the possibility of renewed life, to inspire the renewed blossoming of prosperity and peace. I invoke the memories of ancient Crete to suggest not that we re-create the past but that we might be inspired to find a new conception of living, a way of telling our own sacred stories about the creative forces of the universe, of finding our own songs and dances and festivals, of discovering our own ways of living in harmony with each other, and with the rest of nature, within the universal stream of life.

I want to conclude this panoramic view of Cretan civilization by focusing on the culture of Crete today. Once again it is self-sufficient in basic foodstuffs and is at peace. It exports a surplus of oranges, grapes, currants, wine, and olive oil and is increasingly a magnet for travelers from all parts of the world. The views of the ancient scholars about Crete's powers to generate and sustain health still hold true. Residents of Crete today are reported to live longer, generally, than other inhabitants of Europe.

A Greek friend tells the story of how she and her American husband first came to explore the ruins at Knossos in 1960. They climbed up into the fields above the ruins to have a wider view of the broad fertile region where, in the vineyards, her husband found some pottery shards. While they focused intently on this discovery, Lilica saw from the corner of her eye the thick, heavy boots of a large man. Rather anxiously she asked, "Is it your vineyard?" But instead of claiming ownership, the huge, handsome man gestured generously across the vineyard and stated simply, "*Enai e prosphora mas!*" "It is our offering!"

And so, despite all the wars and destruction the Cretans have witnessed through the past three-and-a-half millennia, the spirit of the ancient culture of Chthonian Crete of the Mother Goddess still survives. At least some of her people understand that the Earth cannot be possessed by any person but, rather, that we are given the possibility of laboring and playing upon the Earth as a thank-offering to the divinity of Nature.

NOTES

1. This has been extensively documented by archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, especially in relation to Old Europe. These motifs can be found in Egyptian and Middle Eastern artifacts as well.
 2. I have chosen the name "Chthonian Crete" instead of "Minoan Crete" to indicate the Goddess-centered, egalitarian culture of Crete, prior to the invasion of the Mycenaean warriors. King Minos of Athenian Greek legend was probably one of the Mycenaean overlords who ruled at Knossos under the aegis of the warrior god Zeus.

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