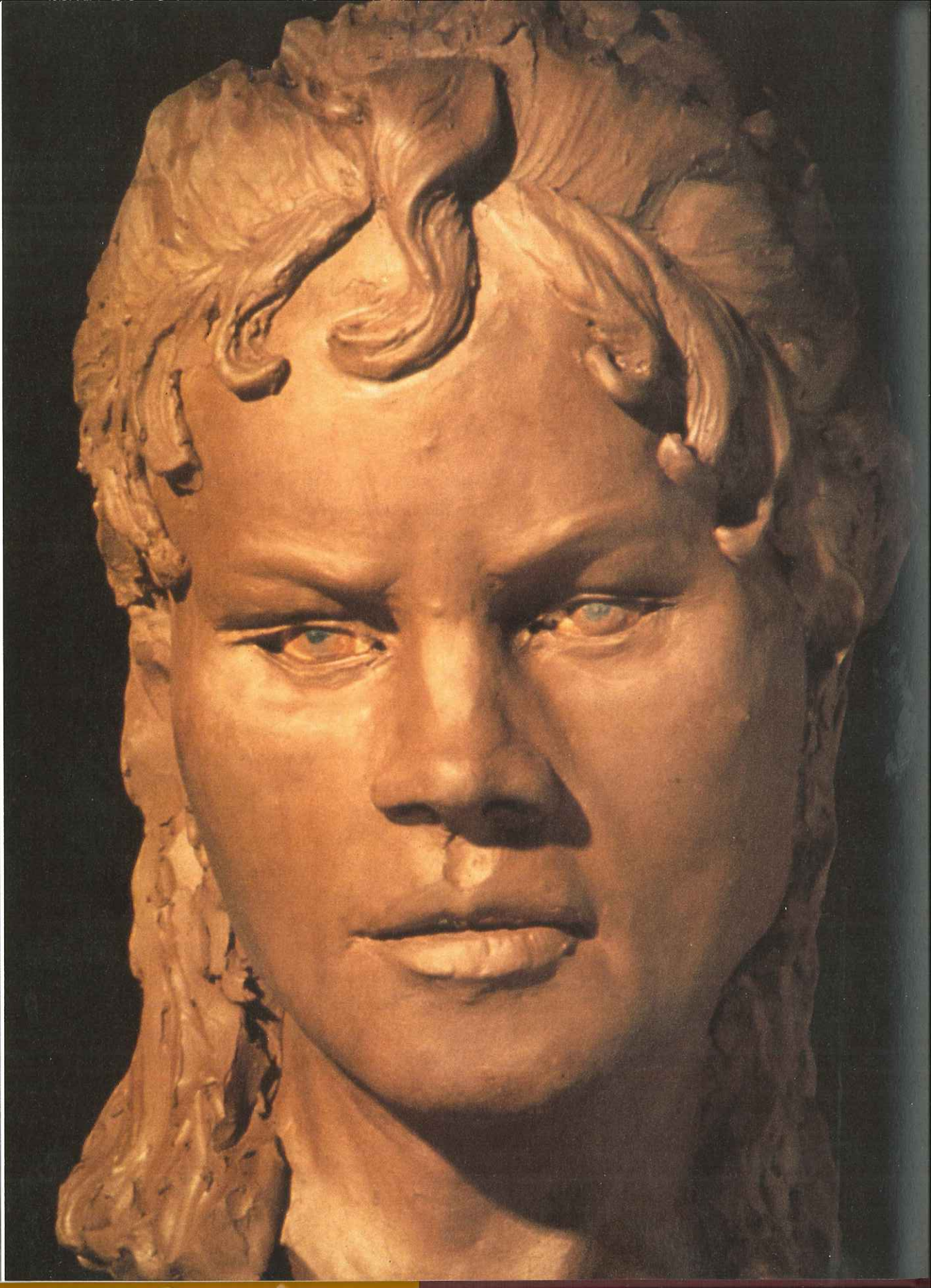

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The Priestess with Blood on her Hands *c.*1650 BC

This woman's end was a sudden and violent one, and we can read the circumstances in extraordinary detail. The setting was the idyllic and highly civilised island of Crete, high on a hilltop looking northwards towards the palace of Knossos and the blue Mediterranean. With at least three others she was in the side room of a colourfully decorated temple, taking part in what must have been an emotion-charged religious ceremony. Even after thousands of years we can glimpse her attending a brightly painted altar, see a jar ornamented with the figure of a bull, catch the gleam of a strange-looking knife, hear the swish of her long, tiered skirt. Early though her 'Minoan' civilisation was, it was one with style.

But in seconds, all was over. Suddenly overhead masonry began tumbling, striking her with such force that she fell forward, legs splayed, never to move again. Her male companion had time only to look upwards, instinctively raising his arms to protect himself, before landing on his back as fatally overcome as she. Just feet away the person carrying the bull-decorated jar was similarly stricken, the jar smashing into more than a hundred pieces. Shortly afterwards the entire temple was engulfed in flames, the subsequent ruin apparently evoking such awed superstition that no one, either at the time or for centuries to come, ever dared rake its ashes.

Quite extraordinary therefore is that we can deduce all this across more than 3600 years, virtually without even using a jot of imagination. Thanks to Richard Neave's magic touch, we can contemplate our dead Minoan woman's face[1] as she would have looked in life, before fate so calamitously overtook her.

Reconstruction of the Minoan priestess's facial features, as created by Richard Neave from a cast of her 3600-year-old skull found amidst the ruins of a hillside shrine at Archanes, Crete. The hairstyling, although conjectural, is based on known fashions among Minoan priestesses, as depicted on the stone sarcophagus shown overleaf.

Yet of this lady and the occurrence that killed her the world remained completely unaware until 1979 when the Greek husband-and-wife archaeologists Yannis and Efi Sakellarakis began digging a hillside site called Anemospilia, near the present-day Cretan village of Archanes.[2] During exploratory surveying Efi had found quantities of ancient pottery, along with a piece of stone carved as a stylised bull's horn. She recognised this as a type that decorated religious buildings during the Minoan civilisation, made famous by Sir Arthur Evans's Knossos excavations. Suspecting that

the Anemospilia site might have been a temple from the same period, she and Yannis were thrilled to see emerging from the earth a distinctively tripartite building structure that duly confirmed this.[3]

Then the team came across the excavation's first set of bones, those of the person who had died while carrying the bull-decorated jar. Although this individual, perhaps an attendant, had been so badly crushed by falling masonry that neither age nor sex could be determined, the bones alone were an exciting find, as the only Minoans previously found were individuals who had received formal burial. The remains were found in a corridor area filled with offering jars that led to an ash-filled central room thought to have contained the temple's statue of a god, of whom all that remained were feet of clay. So it seemed that whoever this person was, he or she was in the act of taking the jar to the statue, never to complete the journey.

But it was the contents of the side-room to the temple's west, which the jar-carrier appeared just to have left, that really intrigued the archaeologists. By the west wall there lay the skeleton of a powerfully built man, six feet (1.82m) tall and middle-aged, who had died on his back, his hands raised to protect his face in a classic rigor mortis pose that pathologists call the 'boxer' position. On the little finger of his left hand was a ring with an oval bezel made of silver coated with iron, this latter a very rare and precious commodity in what was then still the Bronze Age. Attached to his wrist was a delicate agate seal depicting a man seemingly punting a slender boat. Since such objects had previously been found only in tombs thought to be royal, there could be no doubt that he was a Minoan of importance. Face down in the corner of the room just to the north of him lay our Minoan lady.

Most curious of all, however, and ultimately to reveal what was happening in the temple during its last moments, was a set of bones on what seemed to be an altar table next to where the tall man had fallen. The occasional Minoan painting depicts a bull being sacrificed trussed on an altar of this kind,[4] and the Sakellarakises' first assumption was that the bones must have come from some similar large animal. Then from the dust emerged a heavy bronze knife blade, engraved with a monster's face and still razor sharp, on further bones which were unmistakably human. More definitive analysis revealed that they were of a youth of about eighteen years old. He had been about five feet five inches (1.66m) tall, and he lay with his legs drawn up in a foetal position, exactly as if he had been trussed up like a sacrificial animal.

To musical accompaniment, Minoan priestesses offer up a bull as a sacrificial victim, part of the decoration of a stone sarcophagus preserved in Iraklion Museum, Crete. The young man whose bones were found on the altar at Anemospilia may well have been offered up in much the same way.

6000 BC – Earliest settlement at Knossos, Crete

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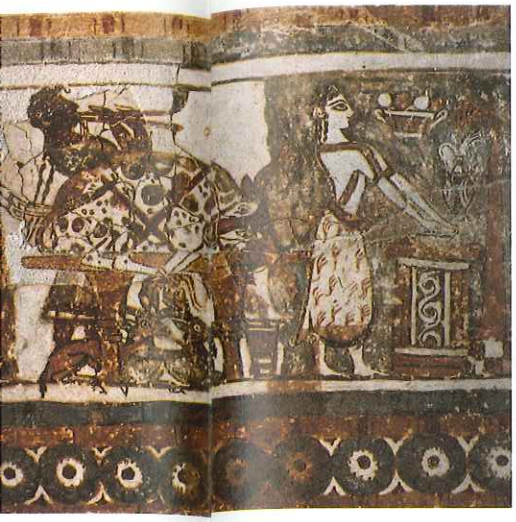

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A new significance suddenly dawned for the shattered, bull-decorated jar found in the corridor, the only object not in its logical place throughout the whole temple. Given that the location was a temple and that a rite was in progress, our Minoan lady and her tall companion with the ring had to have been some kind of priestess and priest. Probably alarmed by a spate of earthquake shocks – to which Crete is particularly prone – they or the people they represented had felt prompted to offer the young man's blood, and with it his life, as an appeasement to the god they believed responsible for such happenings.

But before the attendant carrying the blood-filled jar could reach the statue in the central chamber, a truly massive earthquake struck with devastating suddenness, so severely, as archaeology elsewhere has indicated, that it toppled not only this particular temple but numerous other major public buildings throughout Crete. As the temple's stone and wood roof collapsed on to the occupants, and (as is thought) oil from lighted lamps spilled on to the flammable furnishings and fittings,[5] the whole structure caught fire and disintegrated into a heap of rubble, the bodies of the three sacrifice 'celebrants', together with their victim, remaining undisturbed[6] until the arrival of the Sakellarakises.

From expert appraisal of her bones, our priestess, if that is indeed what she was, has been calculated as in her early to mid-twenties when she died, and a fraction over five feet (1.52m) tall.[7] Her teeth were on the whole healthy – she had lost only one of them at the time of her death – though tartar build-up would have meant she had bad breath. Scientific analysis of her bone-marrow indicates that she had been suffering (ironically in the circumstances) from congenital anaemia, a deficiency of red cells in the blood. This would have caused her to be pale-skinned, with a tendency to over-tiredness and spells of dizziness. Despite the fire her skull was relatively intact, and as expert study revealed, its vault was unusually thick, probably due to the anaemia. Another observation was that her skull's side bones were affected by osteoporosis, or brittleness, a condition apparently fairly prevalent among Minoans, even ones as young as she, possibly occasioned by a 'civilised' rather than hunter-gatherer type of diet.

Despite these deficiencies, Neave's striking facial reconstruction reveals a by no means unattractive face, the high forehead and turned-up nose bearing a marked, and therefore convincing, resemblance to Minoan women as depicted in the

2500 BC – Pyramids at Gizeh, Egypt, begun

2000 BC – First palaces in Minoan Crete

*c.*1450 BC – Minoan civilisation mysteriously collapses, Crete becoming taken over by Mycenaeans from mainland Greece

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3000 BC

2000 BC

1000 BC

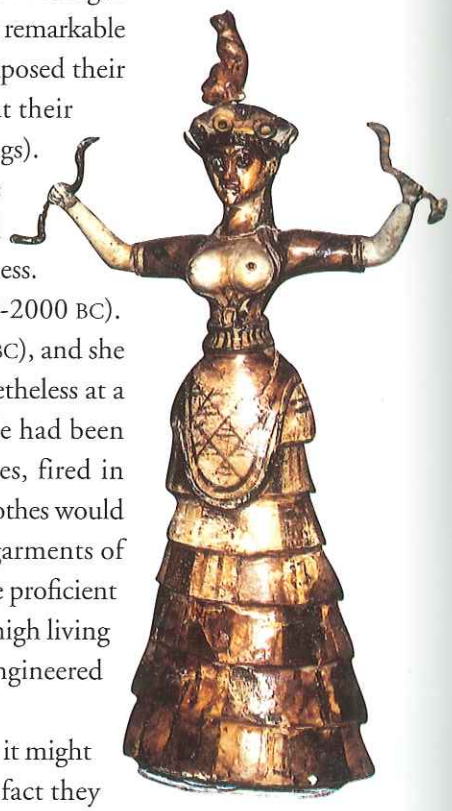
1,650 BC – Minoan priestess officiates in temple at Arkhanes, Crete

1290–1224 BC – Pharaoh Ramesses II on the throne of Egypt

brilliantly coloured frescoes at which this civilisation excelled, even when they decorated comparatively ordinary homes. The Greek archaeologist Professor Christos Doumas is currently unearthing numbers of such frescoes in a whole street of humble houses that were preserved Pompeii-style when a massive volcanic eruption overwhelmed a Minoan port on the island of Thera (Santorini), sixty miles (100km) north of Crete, only a hundred years after the earthquake which toppled the Archanes temple.[8] And these frescoes, along with female statuettes found at Knossos and elsewhere on Crete, provide important indications of the sort of attire that our priestess would have worn, since all too few clues survived from the temple itself.

For her hairstyle, for instance, Richard Neave's rendition of a snake-like forelock on her upper forehead, on which he was guided by Efi Sakellarakis, is firmly rooted in the depiction of the women in the Minoan frescoes. In an example from the West House on Thera, specifically interpreted as depicting a priestess making an offering, a fully realistic-looking snake can be seen forming a head-dress.

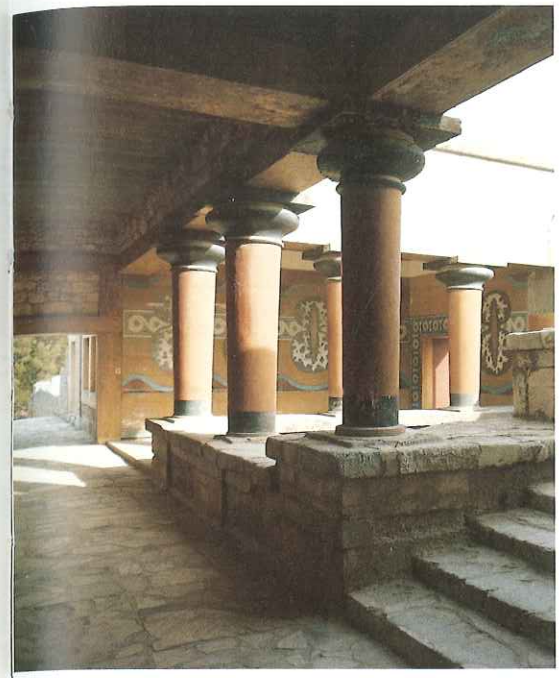
However, the Thera frescoes also convey other even more spectacular features of Minoan women's attire, and adornment in general. Their skirts were long and multi-coloured, sometimes quite anachronistically Victorian-looking, with several tiers of flounces. They rouged their cheeks. They clearly loved jewellery, sporting giant earrings, rows of delicate necklaces, and colourful bracelets and anklets in designs that would look at home on stalls in any modern-day holiday resort. Most remarkable of all, despite or because of their exquisitely made bodices, they fully exposed their breasts, one of the few 'civilised' cultures in which women went about their normal life bare-breasted (and Minoan women were no servile underlings). It is more than likely that our priestess would have been thus dressed as she helped collect the blood of the youth at whose sacrifice she had officiated, and whose death her own followed with such untimely swiftness.



Minoan 'topless' female fashion? Statuette of a Minoan 'snake goddess', one of the many examples of a bare-breasted, but otherwise surprisingly Victorian fashion that seems to have been popular among the women of Minoan Crete.

Puabi had been a Sumerian of the so-called Early Bronze Age (3200-2000 BC). Our Minoan priestess belonged to the Middle Bronze Age (2000-1500 BC), and she lived about a century earlier than the period of the Thera frescoes, nonetheless at a high stage of cultural development. The numerous pots in her temple had been thrown on the potter's wheel, fashioned to a variety of elegant shapes, fired in purpose-built kilns and painted with tasteful designs. Her high-fashion clothes would have been woven on a loom, dyed and made up as elaborately as any garments of today. She would have enjoyed exotic goods brought back to Crete by the proficient traders among her people. As we noted, the Minoans had exceptionally high living standards, with multi-storey houses, paved streets, toilets and cleverly engineered drainage systems, and she no doubt would have benefited from all this.

Yet although, not least on the strength of Neave's vivid reconstruction, it might seem easy to believe that we know a great deal about the Minoans, in fact they



Staircase section of the Palace at Knossos, indicative of the remarkably civilised way of life that the Anemospilia priestess would have known.

remain a people of considerable mystery to archaeologists.[9] It is unclear where they had come from before they arrived on Crete. Because their Linear A writing script has never been deciphered, no one even knows for sure what language they spoke. Of their social structure, if they had royalty in the fullest sense of the term (and that is undetermined), the only king whom anyone seems to have heard of is Minos, according to Greek legend a heartless tyrant who demanded of the Athenians the lives of seven youths and seven maidens as an annual offering to the mysterious bull-man monster, the Minotaur. Modern thinking has usually dismissed this as merely an old legend, and few scholars had cared to consider that a people as ostensibly civilised as the Minoans could have indulged in anything like human sacrifice – until the Sakellarikises' grim discovery at Archanes.

Barbaric and uncivilised though human sacrifice might seem to us, it is important not to judge our priestess and priest too harshly – or even to assume that they were necessarily a professional priestess and priest at all. Contemporary with, and culturally similar to, the Minoans were the Canaanites, of biblical fame. Among these and related peoples it was expected that whenever dire circumstances threatened, their kings and queens, above anyone else in the community, should sacrifice their eldest son or daughter to whichever god was adjudged in need of appeasement. Egyptian reliefs show this being practised when Canaanite towns were about to be stormed by an enemy, and a similar example can be found in the biblical story of King Mesha of Moab, as recounted in 2 Kings 3: 27.

So could our priestess and priest in actuality have been a local king and queen, with the hapless, trussed-up young man no ordinary victim, but none other than a much loved 'royal' son (perhaps the woman's stepson, given their ages)? In which case the emotion in that side-room of the Anemospilia temple must surely have been much more charged than we have dared to contemplate.

This question is not one of those idle historical ones to which we can never know the answer. The bones of those who died at the Archanes temple have been preserved – that is how Neave came to be able to make his reconstruction not only of the priestess but also of her tall companion – and if they were subjected to DNA analysis (assuming that it proved practical), this ought to determine whether they were related to each other, and if so, how closely.[10] We might find the 'attendant' carrying the bull-decorated jar to be of rather more interest than has previously been acknowledged. So might we also begin to learn rather more of Minoan origins and language.