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The Influence of the Egyptian Goddess Hathor on Minoan Religion

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The religion of Minoan Crete remains intriguing and mysterious due to the fact that no written information or reliable literary traditions can be used to interpret the original civilization and its beliefs. Well before the first millennium BC, this unique island population seems to have been completely absorbed into the Mycenaean milieu, a culture quite different from their own, leaving very little trace of original religious practices besides those depicted in art.

The Minoan's unique organic and energetic art style that stood out during the Aegean period also heightens the interest in an explanation for how this island culture lived. The strict artistic cannons of Egyptian art could not contrast more with the Minoan's experimental style, although earlier Minoan art does show Egyptian influence. Contact between Crete and Egypt during the earliest developments of the island society through trade would have made this influence on art possible as well as being influential on Minoan religion.

Particularly, the Egyptian worship of the goddess Hathor exhibits many similarities in art and seemingly in practice with the mother goddess of Minoan Crete. However, while the purpose of my research will be to interpret Minoan rituals in art through similarities with the practiced worship of Hathor in Egypt, it is not meant to be an all encompassing explanation. Nor is the intent of the research meant to ignore individual Cretan developments, the possibility of multiple religious cults, or other outside influences. Instead, the objective of my research is to explain the seemingly exclusive type of goddess worship on Crete through the types of worship of Hathor in Egypt.

Different types of goddess worship occurred all over the ancient Mediterranean. I believe that my avenue of research not only contributes to the interpretation of art in Minoan religion, but also trade between the different civilizations existing around the Mediterranean. Similarities in worship and depiction are evidence of how much mobility and interaction existed between these early civilizations. I believe that more trade existed than is currently recognized. Trade between Egypt and Crete is important to my thesis and therefor evidence of its existence was also apart of my research.

The main points of similarities between Hathor and the Minoan mother goddess that I explored before leaving for Greece were the worship of the trade patroness, the cult of the dead, libations, ecstatic dance rituals, agricultural rituals, votive offerings, sacred tree

worship, flower plucking, and other representational similarities between the two cultures. I also looked at pottery finds and connections between Crete and Egypt in order to establish an estimated timeline of their trade interactions.

The purpose of traveling to Greece and specifically Crete was to have the opportunity to look at more obscure and unpublished artifacts. One of the connections that I was most curious about was lower class goddess worship. The small votives used in these rituals were largely unpublished and important in researching this connection.

My goal while in Greece was to visit the Athens National Archaeological Museum, The Benaki Museum, The Archaeological Museum in Heraklion, The ruins of the Palace of Knossos, and possibly the Mallia Archaeological Museum. I was able to visit all of these places except for Mallia. The only disappointment was that the Archeological Museum in Heraklion was under renovation and so only a portion of the collection was on display. However, I also found the museum at Thera to be surprisingly relevant to my topic. While at the different museums I photographed relevant artifacts and compared my findings to my previous research and timelines.

My discoveries were exciting. Specifically, I found early Minoan sacral knots which were also common in the worship of Hathor in Egypt. Likewise, there were similar burial artifacts and death masks that supported early trade between Crete and Egypt. I also found the small clay votives used in lower class worship that I was particularly interested in viewing and they were very similar to those used in the worship of Hathor for sickness relief.

Surprisingly, I was also able to find important Egyptian evidence while in Greece. In one collection, Hathor was depicted holding a snake and lotus flowers, which is similar to a Minoan depiction. I discovered Egyptian women holding snakes and flowers in another piece and this was the first time that I had seen this similarity. Supporting evidence on the use of a bird to denote the Minoan goddess and Hathor also existed.

The opportunity to travel to Greece in order to continue my research proved to be not only helpful, but also necessary because it was the only opportunity that I had to view some relevant materials. Along with contributing to my research, the trip was also a valuable cultural and education experience that furthered my overall understanding of art history. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity I had to travel and participate in an advanced research process.