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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SO-CALLED 'HORNS OF CONSECRATION'

Since present evidence is insufficient to resolve the problems of the origin and significance of the familiar but mysterious Horns of Consecration, the scholar may reasonably question the unwarranted consensus which has slowly formed that we do recognize, even if vaguely, the nature of the object, namely as a set of horns.

So J. D. S. Pendlebury accedes without discussion to the view of A. B. Cook¹ that the origin of the Horns lies in the setting of actual horns on the altar.² R. W. Hutchinson, after dismissing various explanations as "mostly very unconvincing," concludes that "More often and more plausibly they are assumed to be derived from the horns of the sacred bull."³ B. C. Dietrich gives the most recent argument for this identification. Writing of an apparent bull-cult in a Neolithic Anatolian shrine at Çatal Hüyük, he notices that "not only the head could stand for the whole bull, but also the horn cores, usually mounted in a rectangular, pillar-like, structure, or along the sides of a bench seven inches deep."⁴ Dietrich recognizes the need for fresh evidence, and finds it in Schachermeyr's work on Neolithic and Bronze Age pottery, which deduces strong ties between Greece, Crete, and Southwest Anatolia at this period;⁵ and in John Evans's view that the Neolithic inhabitants of Knossos "arrived with pottery and

¹ Zeus, Cambridge 1914—40, I, 508

² The Archaeology of Crete, London 1939, 273 n. 3.

³ Prehistoric Crete, Baltimore 1962, 225—6.

⁴ The Origins of Greek Religion, Berlin 1974, 100. The find is interesting, but does not bring us much closer to the peculiar design of the Cretan object. Certainly Dietrich overstates the case when he writes that the finds "at last solve the long disputed question of the origin and significance of the so-called Minoan horns of consecration" (p. 100). It is worth noting that W. B. Emery (Archaic Egypt, Baltimore 1961, 71) found at the First Dynasty tomb of Uadji a "low bench surrounding it, on which was arranged a series of approximately 300 bulls' heads modelled in clay with real horns." See Emery's photographs, plates 8 and 9.

⁵ See F. Schachermeyr, Die ältesten Kulturen Griechenlands, Stuttgart 1955; also, Die Vorderasiatische Kulturtrift, Saeculum 5, 1953, 268—84; Die minoische Kultur des alten Kreta, Stuttgart 1964.

crops that can only be derived from western Anatolia."⁶ The usages of a Neolithic Anatolian cult, despite differences of detail and a separation in time of three millennia,⁷ are expected to elucidate those of a cult of Bronze Age Crete: the separate horn cores, mounted in a structure, are taken to be the ancestors of the Cretan Horns of Consecration.

This illusion⁸ began, apparently, much as did another chimera of Minoan religion, the category of 'Priest-King',⁹ in the name itself: once the name is ascribed, the question of origin is taken as settled. The object does look like horns of a sort; which is why Schliemann called it so in the first place.¹⁰ Evans's phrase "Horns of Consecration," which describes succinctly the shape and use of the object, is a handsome coinage, at once evocative and practical.¹¹ It is doubtful if the name will be changed even if we ascertain one day that the object does not represent horns.

The name and the interpretation which it implied were confirmed in M. P. Nilsson's classic discussion in *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion*.¹² Nilsson's conclusion¹³ was that "the origins of the horns of consecration . . . must remain uncertain."¹⁴ There is, however, another explanation which Nilsson rejected, perhaps too hastily. It must be conceded that the Horns of Consecration do not look much like their

⁶ Dietrich (above, note 4), 73

⁷ J. Mellaart tentatively assigns the relevant strata at Çatal Hüyük to 6500—5700 B.C.

⁸ Popular books on ancient culture and art already speak with certainty of the identity between Horns of Consecration and a bull's horns.

⁹ See E. L. Bennett, *On the Use and Misuses of the Term "Priest-King" in Minoan Studies*, *Kretika, Chronika* 1961—62, 327—35.

¹⁰ H. Schliemann, *Mycenae*, New York 1880, 267, fig. 423, where he calls the object simply "horns."


¹¹ According to the supplement to the OED, Evans first used the phrase in *JHS* 21, 1901, 196. Professor E. L. Bennett, however, has indicated to me an earlier instance of the phrase in *BSA* 6, 1899—1900, 11, where Evans is speaking of the relief of a steatite pyxis found at Knossos in 1894. Still earlier, in *JHS* 14, 1894, 273, Evans speaks simply of "the gold ornaments representing oxes' heads with a double axe between the horns."

¹² Lund 1950² (hereafter MMR), 165 ff.

¹³ Adopted by S. Marinatos: "We can only say of them [the double-axe and the Horns] that they represent the God himself, or—more often—indicate the sanctity of a place." *Crete and Mycenae*, New York, 34.

¹⁴ MMR 190. If, on the other hand, one admires the circumspection of R. F. Willetts (*Cretan Cults and Festivals*, London 1962, 80, 145—6) for mentioning the Horns only three times in a book on Cretan religion—and for there taking no stand on their significance—it might still be objected that a prominent element of Cretan cult is slighted unfairly.

alleged prototype.¹⁵ They do, however, closely resemble the Egyptian hieroglyphic sign of the horizon (cf. Figs. 1—11),¹⁶ a similarity which was noticed as early as 1909 by Newberry¹⁷ and by Gaerte in 1922.¹⁸ Nilsson, while conceding that the “similarity of form is undeniable and the influence of Egypt on Minoan Crete . . . so strong from so early a period that it would be easy to understand the adoption of such a symbol,”¹⁹ nevertheless rejects this view, mainly on the basis that the Egyptian sign is a symbol, whereas the Minoan examples are cult implements used to designate the place of consecration for various objects. Therefore, “it must be as erroneous to connect the horns of consecration with a special deity as it would be, for example, to consider the altar as the symbol for a certain deity.”²⁰

Nilsson’s objection may be challenged on two grounds. First, the Minoan Horns of Consecration by no means always serve to set off a place of consecration,²¹ but are found as a decorative motif (Fig. 11).²² Second, one does not need to connect the Horns with a particular deity (as did Gaerte, who made them a symbol for the Minoan Earth Goddess²³) in order to accept their Egyptian provenance. The Egyptians themselves did not employ this emblem to symbolize a divinity, but to represent the solar god’s place of rising.²⁴ The birth of the sun god from the horizon is already described in the Pyramid Texts (Utterance 2064): “The two mountains divide () a god comes into being. . . .”²⁵ The sign is widely used²⁶ to designate the renewal of the solar divinity by means of his passage through the Nether-

¹⁵ For an enumeration and description of the finds, see MMR 165—83.

¹⁶ Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 are after A. Piankoff-N. Rambova (*Mythological Papyri*, New York 1957), Figs. 8, 15, 14, 16, 18 respectively. Figure 5 is after A. Piankoff-N. Rambova (*The Tomb of Ramesses VI*, New York 1954), Fig. 3. Figures 7, 8, 10, 11 are after photographs in Marinatos (above, note 13), plates 47, XXVIII, 129, 127 respectively. Figure 9 is after Nilsson (MMR), Fig. 73.

¹⁷ *Two Cults of the Old Kingdom*, *Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* I, 1909, 24ff.

¹⁸ *Die Horns of Consecration*, *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 21, 1922, 72ff.

¹⁹ MMR 189

²⁰ *loc. cit.*

²¹ Originally A. J. Evans’s interpretation. See Dietrich (above, note 4) on this, p. 100.

²² Nilsson himself notices the several uses of the Horns: MMR 184—5.

²³ Above, note 18

²⁴ Cf. H. Bonnet, *Reallexikon der Aegyptischen Religionsgeschichte*, Berlin 1952, s.v. *Horizont*.

²⁵ S. A. B. Mercer, *The Pyramid Texts*, New York 1952, 303

²⁶ Nilsson, MMR, 189, is mistaken in stating that the horizon sign was used after the Old Kingdom chiefly as a word-sign.

world of death, and, by analogy, to describe the resurrection of the dead man: the motif reappears again and again on Egyptian funerary papyri and above entrances to Egyptian tombs (Fig. 5).²⁷

Of course the Minoans did not use the sign in just the same way as did the Egyptians. They often represent it plastically, for one thing, whereas the Egyptians portrayed it graphically. Furthermore, the Minoans present the Horns in association with the double-axe, the sacred tree (Figs. 8, 9), and cult vessels. Certainly the Minoans were not Egyptians, although they were profoundly influenced by them. It is typical of the Minoans to adopt external forms from a foreign cult, and then to impart to these forms their own characteristic usages and style.²⁸ One need only think of the numerous Egyptian features on the Hagia Triada sarcophagus,²⁹ the sistrum of Hathor carried by a singer on the Harvester Vase,³⁰ or the *Tet*-amulet, a kind of apotropaic knot, worn at the girdle by Egyptian gods, which the Minoans stylized and combined with the double-axe to create a new design.³¹ Secular motifs were similarly borrowed, such as the papyrus plant which became popular as a decorative device on Late Minoan pottery;³² perhaps the famous bee-pendant from the cemetery at Mallia copies the very similar form of the Egyptian hieroglyphic sign *bit* (which signifies sovereignty over Lower Egypt).³³ Even features of

²⁷ Cf. A. Piankoff-N. Rambova, *Mythological Papyri* (above, note 16), Fig. 12 for an additional example.

²⁸ Cf. MMR 439

²⁹ See Paribeni, *Il sarcofago dipinto di H. Triada*, *Monumenti Antichi* 19, 1 ff.; Ch. Picard, *Les Religions Préhelléniques*, Paris 1948, 228 ff.

³⁰ Cf. A. J. Evans, *Palace of Minos II*, 47. This rattle-fetish is used almost solely by women in Egyptian cult; occasionally Pharaoh will offer it to a god. See Bonnet (above, note 24), s.v. *Sistrum*.

³¹ Marinatos (above, note 13), plates 82 (right), 83 (lower right). Cf. Bonnet (above, note 24), Fig. 85

³² Marinatos (above, note 13), plate 82 (right), 91, 92, 93

³³ The bees (or wasps) on the pendant have one wing, while the hieroglyph shows two; cf. the example on the nearly contemporary shrine of Sesostri I in K. Lange-M. Hirmer, *Egypt*, New York 1956, plate 95. Presumably the granulation on the bee pendant has been soldered by a highly sophisticated technique called "gold colloidal soldering," rediscovered in this century but still not used commercially. Characteristic of Egyptian gold jewelry, the technique permits the intricate bonding of gold to gold without the use of alloys and without the displacement of the granules during soldering through the bubbling caused by a borax flux (see C. Aldred, *Jewels of the Pharaohs*, New York 1971, 99 ff.). Curiously, Napoleon I, depending upon the statement in Ammianus Marcellinus (17.4.2) that the hieroglyphic significance of the bee is *rex*, revived the symbol and used it in his monogram, in

Egyptian eschatology turn up in Crete, if we accept that the Elysium of Greek mythology and the judgement of the dead by Minos, Rhadamanthys, and Aeacus are Cretan; for the Elysian fields are like the pleasant Egyptian Field of Offerings,³⁴ and the evaluation of the dead man's life (before Osiris and the forty-two assessors) is peculiarly Egyptian.


Modification of this sort is not unusual when one culture adopts a symbol from another. For example, in the Southwest United States I recently saw the design of an American flag elaborately beaded around the handle of a peyote fan, a kind of ritual implement used by American Indians in the peyote cult.³⁵ The explanation is that American Indians widely regard the flag as having magical power, and it would therefore vivify the fan and assist in the ritual. For most Americans, however, the flag is a secular, if special, symbol, devoid of religious or magical meaning; indeed, to use it in such ways is offensive to many.

Given our lack of information, we are never likely to understand precisely what the Minoans meant the Horns of Consecration to signify, even if they had a precise opinion. I plead, however, for a review of the theory that they were a symbol of the bull or of the cult of the Great Mother. Their superficial resemblance to horns is not sufficient evidence, particularly when we note that a similar symbol was employed in Egypt, whence the Minoans borrowed and adapted so much.³⁶

Notes on the Illustrations

FIGURES 1—6:

Egyptian representations of the Horizon Mountains

Egyptian religion made extensive use of symbols to communicate its ideas and to create its objectives magically. In Figure 1, from a Twenty-first Dynasty coffin, the hieroglyphic ideogram , *3h*, 'horizon,' is elaborated into a glyph that signifies the dead man's res-

combination with the star, to signify "Roy-Soleil" (see E. Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs*, Copenhagen 1961, 132—3). Whether the Minoan bee-pendant had a similar signification on Crete, it is impossible to affirm or to deny.

³⁴ Cf. J. H. Breasted, *The Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*, New York 1912, 130—3

³⁵ A Cult, incidentally, so strongly identified with the Indian race that, although the Native Church is a legally recognised religious institution, Caucasians are forbidden by federal and state laws from participating in it.

³⁶ Although the birth of the sun from the horizon, one should remember, is not itself a religious concept original to Egypt (Fig. 3).

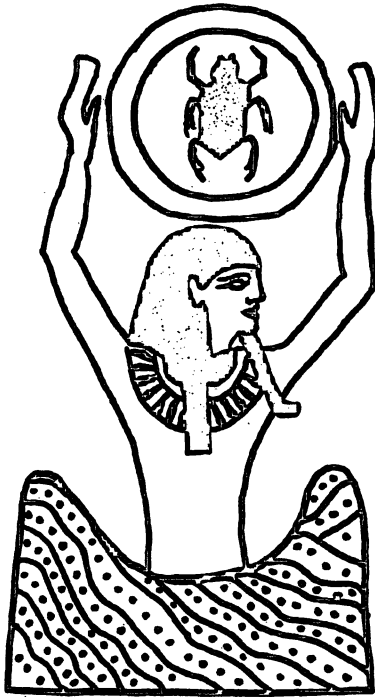


Fig. 1. Sunrise over the horizon.

urrection. A bearded god rises from the horizon. He lifts the sun disk which contains a scarab, *ḥpr*, 'He Who Becomes.' The wavy lines and dots on the horizon sign represent the contours of the earth and pebbles. Typically Egyptian is the repetition of approximately equivalent symbols in the god, sun disk, and scarab. In color, the inner

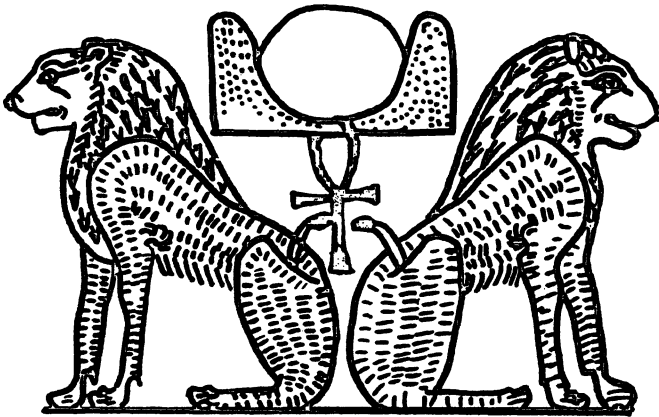


Fig. 2. The horizon lions Shu and Tefnut and the horizon sign.



Fig. 3. The sun god stepping over the Eastern Mountain.



Fig. 4. The portals of the horizon.

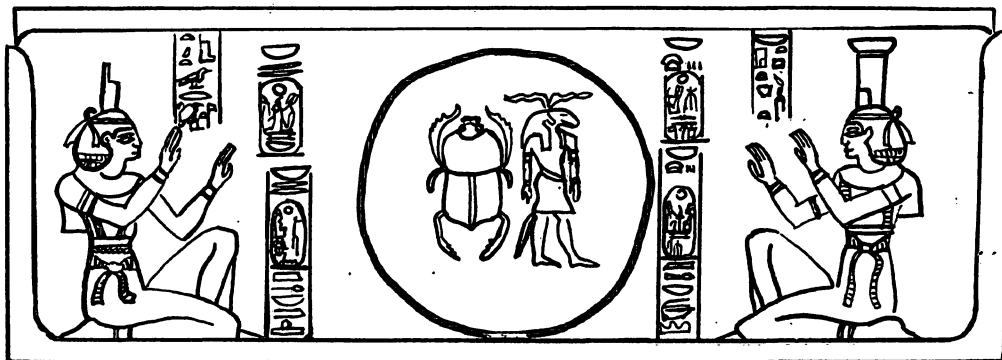


Fig. 5. Entrance to the Tomb of Ramesses VI.

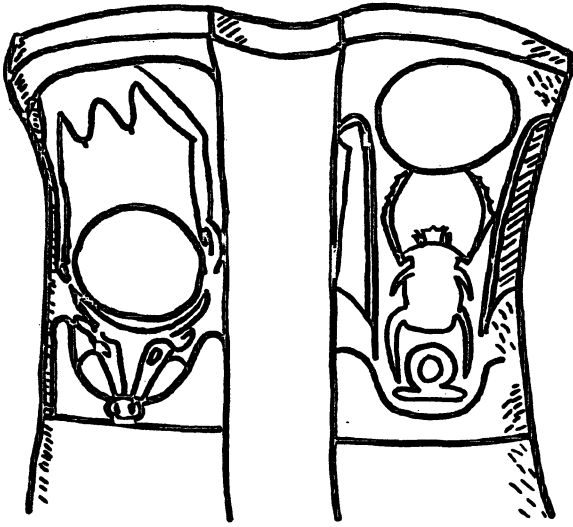


Fig. 6. The sun disk at sunset and sunrise.

circle of the sun would be red, the outer white (cf. Nina M. Davies, *Picture Writing in Ancient Egypt*, London 1958, 33). A similar duplication is apparent in Figure 2, from the sarcophagus of Khonsu, where the two lions, identified with Shu and Tefnut, are emblems of the horizon. The *ankh* suspended from the horizon sign between the lions emphasizes the new life that will come for the dead man, just as the sun arises anew from the horizon each morning. The motif of the paired animals is well-known from Cretan and Mycenaean representations as well, and the equivalence here between heraldic lions and horizon sign may perhaps find a parallel in the Minoan-Mycenaean alternation of lions and Horns of Consecration in order to frame a central pillar. Similar lions appear to crown the portals which stand on either side of the representation of mountains on an Akkadian cylinder, Figure 3. Here sunrise is designated by the sun god stepping over the Eastern Mountain. Guardian spirits attend the portals. The Akkadian conception is similar to the Egyptian, and may of course be antecedent. The portals of Figure 3 are again present in Figure 4, from the papyrus of Nefer-Renpet. There an unidentified figure opens portals which, resting in the horizon mountains, support the hieroglyphic sign for sky (☩). Figure 5, from above the entrance to the tomb of Ramesses VI, shows the same configuration of the horizon sign, here much elongated, supporting the sky sign. The picture represents the sister goddesses Isis, on the left, and Nephthys,

on the right. They pay obeisance to the central sun disk in which are the scarab and Re as a ram-headed god. The hieroglyphic writing identifies the goddesses and gives the names of Ramesses V, for whom the tomb was first intended, and the names of Ramesses VI, who usurped it. The scene denotes symbolically the entrance of the dead man, identified with Osiris, into a new life. The sisters of Osiris, in genuflecting before the rising sun, assist in this new birth. Figure 6, from the coffin of Khonsu, represents both the rising and setting of the disk. In the left-hand picture the sky goddess Nut places the disk in the horns of the Hathor cow, here tantamount to the Western horizon. Hathor, in one aspect, is goddess of the Western Necropolis. The right hand scene portrays the rising sun. The scarab pushes the sun disk up from the horizon mountains. The magical *shen* sign beneath him may signify the completed circuit; the feathers on either side are unexplained, but may be abbreviated forms of 𐀓 , the sign for West: hence the underworld from which the sun returns over the Eastern horizon (cf. Piankoff-Rambova 33—4).

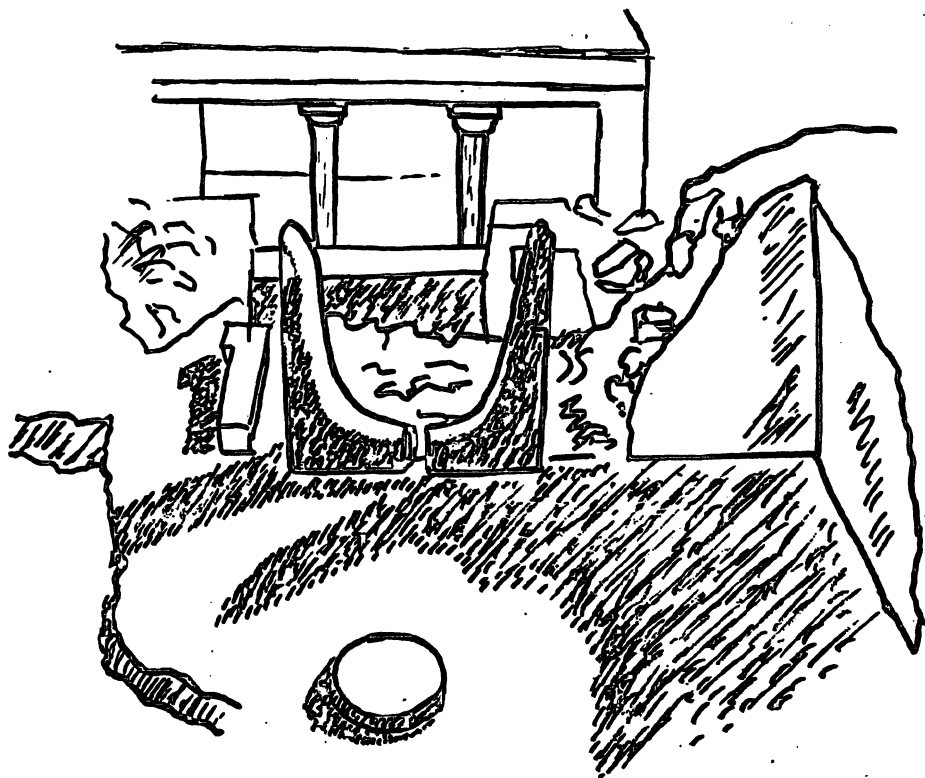


Fig. 7. Knossos, Temple Tomb. Upper pillared hall.

FIGURES 7—11:

Minoan representations of the Horns of Consecration

Figure 7 shows the upper pillared hall of the Temple Tomb at Knossos. The view is from the hill to the West, looking down

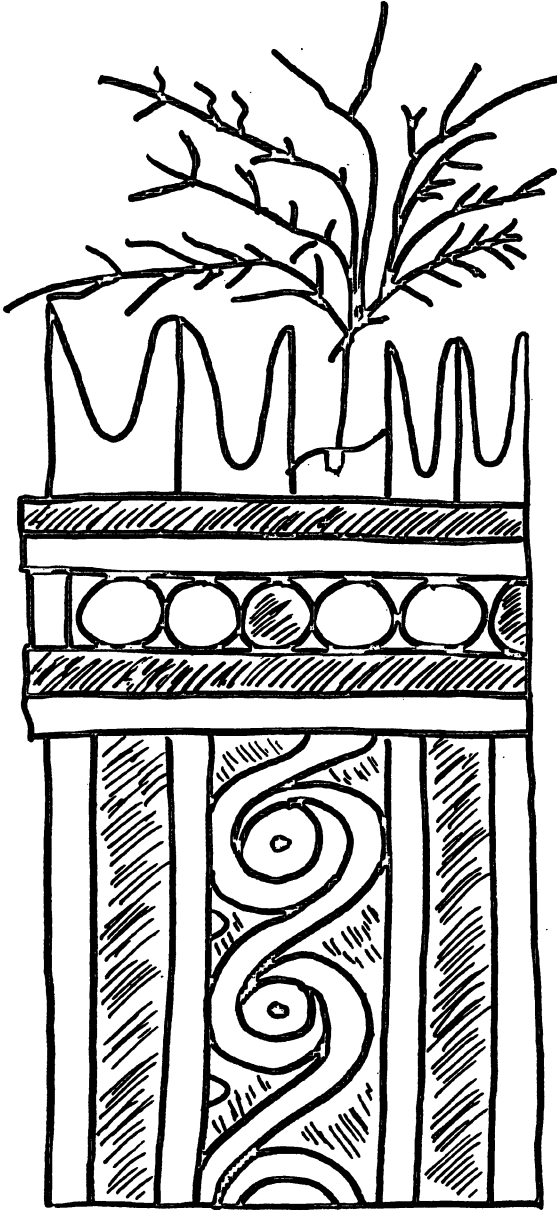


Fig. 8. Sanctuary from fresco on Hagia Triada sarcophagus.



Fig. 9. Ivory signet ring from Phylakopi.

upon the Horns and the forecourt and entrance hall in the background. Figure 8 is the shrine from the fresco on the Hagia Triada sarcophagus. Four sets of Horns atop the shrine frame a sacred tree. Further variation in shape of the Horns of Consecration is indicated by Figures 9—11. In the more angular and pointed example in Figure 9 a woman worships before the Horns. The object between and above the Horns seems to be a bough, perhaps the sacred bough which appears elsewhere in Minoan religious representations. Behind the woman are two stylized branches. Figure 10 is of a large clay idol found at Gazi west of Heraklion in 1936. The Horns on her head have external vertical lines that arch slightly outward. Together with the doves on either side, the Horns evidently denote the figure's divinity. Figure 11, from a decorated chest-sarcophagus from Palaikastro, portrays a winged griffin, plant, and two sets of Horns. The vertical designs between the Horns are actually handles of some sort. Here the Horns are decorative; they do not 'consecrate.' Other religious symbols (not shown) on this sarcophagus are the double-axe and lily-like patterns.

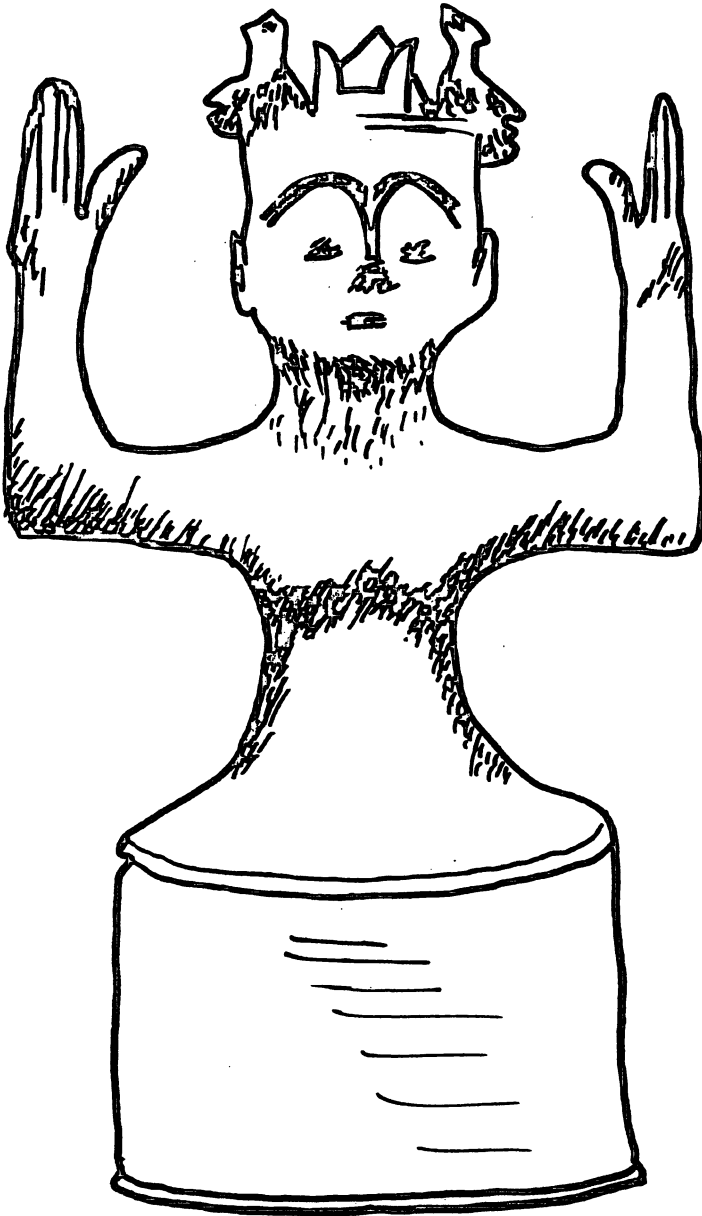


Fig. 10. Female clay idol from Gazi (LM III).

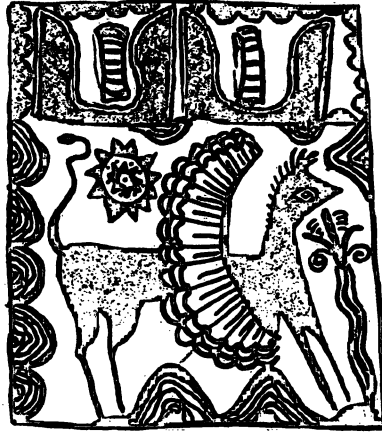


Fig. 11. Decorated panel on chest-sarcophagus from Palaikastro.