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HALF-CLAD MINOAN WOMEN, REVISITED

The possibility of complete female nudity on certain Minoan seals received much attention for nearly a century, until E. Kyriakidis demonstrated, through minute inspection of the artifacts, that virtually all of these figures are in fact clearly dressed, in apparently light-weight, ankle-length garments.¹ The clear contrast between female figures thus becomes, not dressed *vs.* naked, but dressed in flounced overskirt *vs.* dressed but without such an overskirt.

With the problem stated in that manner, most Aegeanists will immediately be reminded of the fresco after which the House of the Ladies, at Akrotiri on Thera, was named. In this painting, a mature woman dressed in a chemise and a tiered overskirt (technically a back-apron) holds out a similar tiered and flounced overskirt or back-apron to another person in front of her, who is unfortunately only fragmentarily preserved – we see only a bit of her arm, including the end of her short sleeve. Another woman on the opposite wall, mature like the first, is dressed in the same manner as the first woman.

The standard reconstructions, quite reasonably, are based on the assumption that the poorly preserved female is about to be dressed with the proffered apron, and therefore is only partially clad – that is, wears only her chemise. It also seems reasonable that this large fresco was painted to show something less mundane than simply getting dressed every morning, and hence that it depicts a *ritual* dressing of a woman.

I wish to point out the close parallel of these scenarios – both presenting a back-apron, and contrasting females with and without overskirts – to a persistent European “folk” tradition. Rural women across most of the Balkans and East Europe have long been in the habit of presenting a special back-apron (or other historically related

¹ Evangelos Kyriakidis, *Nudity in Late Minoan I Seal Iconography*, *Kadmos* 36 (1997), pp. 119–26.

hip-garment) to a girl precisely when she is judged ready to become a bride and thus become available for courting. The presentation by older women occurs at the time or slightly after the girl reaches physical puberty, depending on local custom, but *never* before. The special hip-wrap then becomes the woman's lifelong outward "badge" or symbol of her status as a child-bearer. She may possess (or progress through) several actual garments, which can even differ somewhat in their decoration, e.g., plainer for work, and more elaborate for festival time and for the period when she is not just a candidate but an actual "bride" (usually lasting from betrothal through the birth of her first child, in East Europe). Often there is also a plainer version for when she becomes too old actually to bear children, but she still wears the status-giving apron – as a child-bearer *emerita*, as it were.² In some areas of Europe this tradition can be traced back archaeologically for many millennia, to periods much earlier than the Bronze Age Minoans.³ Versions of it were still known and used in parts of Greece in the 20th century,⁴ not to mention in Homeric and Hellenistic Greece.⁵

In 1927, the renowned ethnographer D. Zelenin described the traditional ceremony in South Great Russia and the Ukraine as follows. The girl, wearing her normal girl's chemise and belt, would be brought into the main room of the house by her mother and/or some other older female relatives, where she would step up onto the wide bench that ran around the room and walk along it while the women followed her, holding out the specially patterned ritual back-apron (called a *panjova* or *plakhta*). They would invite her to step or jump into it, while she would reply with a ritual ditty: "If I want to, I'll jump; if I don't, I won't!" (*Khochu – vskochu; ne khochu – ne vskochu!*) She was supposed to accept it of her own free will. And, as Zelenin put it, "If she jumped, then she was proclaimed a [prospective] bride, and if a suitor was already wooing her, she thereby

² See E. J. W. Barber, On the Antiquity of East European Bridal Clothing, in L. Welters ed., *Folk Dress in Europe and Anatolia: Beliefs about Protection and Fertility* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 13–31, for copious illustrations, local details, and references.

³ Supra note 2.

⁴ Linda Welters, The Peloponnesian 'Zonari': A Twentieth-century String Skirt, in L. Welters ed., supra note 2, pp. 53–70.

⁵ Homeric: E. J. W. Barber, *Prehistoric Textiles*, Princeton, 1991, pp. 257–58. Hellenistic era: represented on funerary dish of a young woman, So. Italian, 3rd quarter of 4th c. BC: Art Institute of Chicago, K. K. Adler Fund 1984, 10.

expressed her willingness to marry this bridegroom.”⁶ But if she felt unready, or knew that some disliked suitor awaited her, she could (at least in theory) delay taking the plunge for up to a year after puberty. The back-apron then served as a visual symbol of her womanhood; when she actually married, other symbolic garments to insure fertility and protection were added to her costume. So an onlooker could tell at a glance the exact “marital” status of any woman.

Since this general system goes back to the Neolithic and beyond in the Balkans, and since the Minoans clearly inherited the Neolithic Balkan weaving tradition and fell in step with the Balkan switch from small hip-wrappers to long bell-shaped skirts for women around 2000 BC (as, for example, in the Petsofa figurines, or the statue from Kličevac⁷) we should seriously consider the tradition as an explanation of the fresco in the House of the Ladies and of the signet rings that contrast a half-clad, kneeling woman with one or more women wearing overskirts.

What we may never know is the detailed significance of this rite of passage to the Minoans. Was the overskirt awarded at puberty? at betrothal? after the girl’s first sexual encounter? Did the precise details vary between, say, Thera and Crete? (The young girls in fancy flounced skirts collecting saffron in Xesti 3 look rather less well endowed and hence rather younger than the skirtless ladies on the seals, for example.) Certainly the details vary somewhat across the rural communities of Europe (this is a very specifically European tradition). But in all cases the key element is a woman’s ability to produce new human beings out of her body – in a word, her fertility. Kyriakidis sensibly concluded his article by saying that “the ‘pronounced thighs’ attributed to several [of the half-clad] figures are no more pronounced than any other dressed ones which co-exist in the same depictions. Thus, no connection between fecundity and those figures seems obvious.”⁸ I suggest, however, that a connection to fecundity may still be there: as he says, not in the size of the thighs, but in the age-old and widely attested sartorial moment of ritually dressing those thighs.

⁶ D. Zelenin, *Russische (ostslavische) Volkskunde* (Berlin, 1927), pp. 207–8.

⁷ *Supra* note 2, fig. 2. 3.

⁸ *Supra* note 1, p. 126.