

Submitted Abstract

ID IMC22-FSAbstr- 642

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Country	Ireland
Region	Western Europe
Title	Mountain Ritual And Spirituality In Minoan Bronze Age Crete.
Keywords	Minoan, Bronze Age, Spirituality, Communitas
Type	List Of Focus Session
Focus Session ID	63

Abstract

In Cretan folklore God is imagined as a labourer, who, after he makes the world, throws the rocks left in his sieve into the sea, and so creates Crete. In this imagining, Crete is a land of mountains, even though the highest peak is only at 2456 metres. It is evident that this popular integration of human culture and mountains may be so deeply embedded that it goes back to the Bronze Age. Nowhere is this more so than in the ritualisation of the Cretan mountains in the Minoan Bronze Age (3000-1000 BC), through the phenomenon of mountain "peak sanctuaries".

Around 30 mountain peaks on Crete have been identified as sacred sites. Not only do they have common assemblages of archaeological artefacts, votive offerings in their thousands and ritual equipment, they also share common topographic features. The distribution of these "peak sanctuaries" over the island indicates a ritualisation concept that was embedded into the civilisation and its interaction with its landscape. The importance of religion to Minoan culture has long been recognised, but most scholarship has focused on elite aspects. The interest of the peak sanctuaries is that they offer insight into Minoan popular religion, vernacular culture and spiritual experience.

The topographic features of the peak sanctuaries (proximity, visual connection, accessibility) emphasise interaction between the people and the lived, exploited landscape. The predominant archaeological finds are clay figurines (in their thousands) representing the worshippers themselves. In other words they image the spiritual experience of the ordinary people rather than complexities of elite theistic ritual and belief. They express interest in popular, even ordinary concerns: health, well-being, rites-of-passage, agricultural fertility. Broadly speaking the Minoan peak sanctuaries are the expression of a ritualised mountain landscape as religious *communitas*.

In this paper therefore, we shall present the evidence, the sites and the archaeological finds, from our ongoing research about peak sanctuaries. We shall argue that they offer a significant contrast to the conventional perception of sacred mountains as manifestations of the "other", the remote, the arduous and dangerous, the abode of the supernatural, even the divine. This phenomenological contrast is the contribution of the Minoan Bronze Age peak sanctuaries to the global discourse about sacred mountains, and ritualised mountain landscapes.