

The Proof is in the Pattern: Plant Motifs and their Representations in the Realities of the Minoan and Mycenaean Civilizations

The dietary and secondary product practices of the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations have increasingly become one of the most important topics of recent scholarly debate. These studies are conducted primarily through the use of archaeobotanical studies on the macrobotanical remains of plant food products found within extant pottery from prevalent archaeological sites, as well as through chemical residue analyses of whole pottery and existing sherds (e.g. Tzedakis and Martlew 1999). Unfortunately, the extent that these analyses have been done is not wide and they are not a common practice. studies are crucial in order to gain a better understanding of the cultural food practices of ancient civilizations, especially concerning the civilizations of the Minoans and the Mycenaeans, and the secondary product usage of the foods and other plants which they cultivated. Such expression of secondary products is seen in foodstuffs such as olives (olive oil), grapes (wine), and plants such as crocuses (textile, perfume and unguent), irises, palms, and lilies (perfume and unguent). These secondary products especially had extensive production and use within the redistributive and international economic transactions of the Minoans and the Mycenaeans (Cline 1991, 1995).

Previous research concerning the pottery of these civilizations focused primarily on the distinctive artistic designs represented on the pottery's exterior decoration. These motif designs represent an image which may be used singularly or as a composition, and are analyzed iconographically in relation to the overall artistic tradition of a civilization. The center of pottery from the early to middle second millennium is the Minoan civilization of Crete; this shifts to the Mycenaean civilization of mainland Greece into the middle of the second millennium in the Late Bronze age (during the Late Helladic II). When concerning designs from nature, the Minoan

artistic tradition adds movement to their motifs while the Mycenaean artistic tradition creates a more standardized and fixed natural pattern (Crowley 1989:4-5).

Popular motifs of nature range among those foodstuffs and plants from the dietary and secondary product records. These motifs feature such plant as olive vine, grapes and vine, irises, palms, and further derivative motifs based on them. The presence of these motifs which match the same foodstuffs and plants found through macrobotanical analyses and chemical traces, as well as match established knowledge of secondary product production, should therefore be set as a comparison.

Further, the comparison of the two – motif vs. trace – allows for a new level of cross-comparison between the studies of ‘art’ and ‘archaeology.’ This cross-comparison will then further substantiate the dietary and secondary product record of the Minoans and the Mycenaean. Discussion will be placed on the expression of the motif vs. trace, as there is variable naturalistic expression between the Minoan and Mycenaean artistic tradition in motif which may skew how the motif is perceived. Additionally, the motif will be definitively discussed within known data concerning the dietary and secondary products. This is to better establish the motif as a real plant used, or intensified for production or diet within the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations. Overall, I look to see how these motifs are distinguished in the contents of the pottery or how they relate the representation of the motif to the civilizations’ dietary and secondary product practice.

Bibliography

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