

THE ‘SPHINX’ HEAD FROM THE CULT CENTRE AT MYCENAE

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ABSTRACT The plaster ‘sphinx’ head from the Cult Center at Mycenae has been the subject of much speculation; I propose here that it once belonged to a cult statue.

KEYWORDS Mycenae, sculpture, religion, cult statues.

One of the best known, but least understood, Mycenaean sculptures is the plaster ‘sphinx’ head¹ discovered on the acropolis of Mycenae in 1896 by Ch. Tsountas (1902: pl. 152; Marinatos & Hirmer 1960: 176, 105, colour pl. XLI [right profile], 107, colour pl. XLII; Hood 1978: 102, fig. 83; Sakellarakis *et al.* 1994: 329, nos. 12–13, colour pls. 12 [face] and 13 [left side and necklace]) [**Fig. 1A–B**]. Though it has long been displayed in the prehistoric gallery of the National Museum at Athens and appears in numerous publications, scholars are unsure what it represents. As a tribute to the many contributions of Oliver Dickinson to our understanding of Aegean Archaeology, I would like to offer some new thoughts on this problematic piece.

I. DESCRIPTION

A core of rough plaster was used to model the head, with a finer layer of plaster applied to all the surfaces and then painted. Thus the creator of the piece was clearly familiar with the basic techniques of both fresco painting and clay modelling, an observation supported by many of the details discussed and compared below.

The head is nearly complete (the preserved height is 16.8 cm), though the headdress is chipped and much of the nose has broken off (the hollowed nostrils are still visible), and the head is irregularly broken from the top of the neck to the base of the chin. This irregular break, however, indicates that there was, once, more to the figure—this is not simply a disembodied head. Its modelling is distinctive: the top of the head is nearly flat, with a rolled band of plaster around the top to indicate that the figure was wearing a cap; the ears are crescents of plaster in low relief; the orbits of the eyes are rounded and protruding; the nose is long; and a concavity at the chin encircles the thin gash of the short mouth. The modelling of the orbits and the concave area around the mouth enhance the slight relief curve of the cheeks, but from any angle the face appears rather flat and slab-shaped.

Three colours, typical in fresco painting, have been used for details, in addition to the natural white colour of the plaster. The hat is painted light blue with darker blue–black vertical dashes around the brim; a red band encircles the head at the base of the cap. Black is used for the hair, which includes several loops in front of each ear and a fringe of short comma locks across the forehead; the tips of the locks converge at the center of the forehead. The eyebrows and almond-shaped eyes are black, including the pupils: since the pupils are both encircled by white, the face has a staring, perhaps even forbidding, mien. On the face are four, red dot rosettes with large centers: one on the forehead (nearly worn away), one on each cheek, and one on the chin.

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¹ Inventory number: NMA 4575.



Fig. 1. The Mycenae plaster head: A) front; B) side (photographs by the author).

Finally, the central surface of each ear is painted with a red outline in the shape of an inverted comma to suggest, in simplified form, the canthus of the ear.

A small area of the neck on the proper left side of the head preserves part of a necklace consisting of a red thread strung with alternating blue and red amygdaloid beads. Similar beads of alternating colours occur in a number of Mycenaean frescoes (e.g. in representations of women from Thebes, Demakopoulou 1988: 185, no. 157; Younger 1992: 261–9).

II. COMPARANDA

The flat cap has a long history in the Aegean, beginning on MM II Crete, where it is worn by terracotta figurines and—in LM I—by the male ‘harvesters’ on the steatite Harvester Vase from Ayia Triada (Marinatos & Hirmer 1960: pls. 103–5; Sakellarakis *et al.* 1994: pls. 42–4).² A more elaborate version of the cap is worn by one of the faience Snake Handlers from the Knossos palace: here, the brim is adorned by relief circles, and the headdress may once have had a crowning ornament (Marinatos & Hirmer 1960: 59 colour pl. XXIV; Sakellarakis *et al.* 1994: pl. 60.). Best known, but most problematic, is the headdress of the so-called Lily Prince relief fresco from the south side of the Knossos palace, which has

been treated to repeated attempts at reconstruction (Shaw 2004; Younger 1992: 281 no. 54; Sakellarakis *et al.* 1994: pl. 89).

On the LM III A painted sarcophagus from Ayia Triada, at least one important woman on one of the long sides and two women in the griffin-drawn chariot on one end wear variations of this headdress (Marinatos & Hirmer 1960: colour pls. XXIXA, XXX; Sakellarakis *et al.* 1994: pls. 98, 100). The cap reappears on the mainland in the painting of the White Goddess from the Pylos palace (Lang 1969: 83–6, no. 49a H nws, pls. 33, 116, 12, colour pls. D, 128), and the standing figure with grain on a painting from the Cult Center at Mycenae (Immerwahr 1990: 191, MY No. 6, pl. 61).³ Later examples include the caps of mourning women on some of the painted larnakes from Tanagra (e.g., Demakopoulou 1988: 74–5, no. 5 and colour fig. 10). Thus, the cap is worn almost exclusively by important women, both human and divine, but it does not serve conclusively to distinguish the one from the other.

Similar caps are also worn by the supernatural creature, the sphinx. Sphinxes wear plumed caps on several, rather crudely, carved ivory inlays from a LM IIIA tomb at Phylaki Apokoronou in western Crete (Godart & Tzedakis 1992: 59–60, pl. LVI.1–4).

² The rolled brim indicates that this is a costume, and not a way of wearing the hair.

³ Here the cap is yellow with red markings, and the band around the base was marked out by impressed lines and then painted with an elaborate pattern of rectangles in different colours.



Fig. 2. The 'Lord of Asine' (photograph by the author).

On a small ivory pyxis of LH IIIA–LH IIIB date from a chamber tomb at Kastellia in Thebes, a pair of confronting sphinxes wear similar headgear, in this case much more finely executed (Demakopoulou 1988: 72–3, no. 3 and colour photographs on right). Similarly impressive, confronting sphinxes occur on an ivory plaque found in the Ivory Houses outside the citadel at Mycenae (Tournavitou 1995: frontispiece; Poursat 1977: pl. XII, no. 138). Here they rest their forepaws on top of a carved column, above a frieze of repeating horns of consecration.

The facial rosettes (tattoos or cosmetics) are another feature which has a long tradition in Aegean art beginning in the EBA with the decoration of some Cycladic figurines. In the LC I paintings from building Xeste 3 at Akrotiri, both an enthroned goddess and a mature woman have a crocus blossom painted on the cheek (if this is not simply a flower draped over one ear; Dumas 1992: pls. 125, 126, 131, 132). Facial markings are also a distinctive aspect of large terracotta figurines that were produced between LH II/LH IIIA and the end of LM IIIC. A large scale figurine with a variety of facial markings (but no rosettes) is the 'Lady of Phylakopi', which was found in the excavation of a shrine complex on the island of Melos (Renfrew 1985: 215–6, colour frontispiece, fig.

6.4, pls. 31, 32a). Another terracotta female figurine from the Mycenae Cult Center—more specifically, the Shrine with the Fresco—has lozenges decorating her face and body (Sakellarakis *et al.* 1994: 242, fig. 17). But the dot rosettes on the plaster head are most similar to those decorating the cheeks of the terracotta statuette found in the storeroom of the House of the Idols in the Mycenae Cult Center (Demakopoulou 1988: 192, no. 167, 193, colour fig. [center]; Sakellarakis *et al.* 1994: 240, pl. 14).⁴

The modelling of the Mycenae head recalls that of the 'Lord of Asine', found in a LH IIIC shrine at that site (Demakopoulou 1988: 94–5, no. 24, and colour photographs; Sakellarakis *et al.* 1994: 243) [Fig. 2]. The flat face, concave chin, and hollowed nostrils of the Mycenae example are all very similar to the Asine figurine. In the latter, however, the curved brim of a decorated *polos* cap over the forehead forms long, serpentine rolls at the back of the head, which hang down the back and thus seem to be part of the coiffure.

⁴ Inventory number: NM 15001. On stylistic grounds, the statuette is dated to the LH IIIA period, meaning that it was manufactured before the construction of the shrine in which it was found; it must have been housed elsewhere originally.



Fig. 3. Terracotta statue from the Temple at Kea (photograph by the author).

One group of artefacts that has not been brought into previous discussions of the Mycenae ‘sphinx’ head is the assemblage of large terracotta figurines of local manufacture found during the excavation of a LBA shrine at Ayia Irini on the island of Kea, which lies to the south-east of Attica (Caskey 1986; [Fig. 3]). There, parts of some 35 life-sized (or near life-sized) female figures dating to Periods VI and VII (LM IA–LM IB) were found, perhaps representing a group of votaries or officials because of their large numbers. A few additions or replacements were probably manufactured in LM/LH IIIA, after the widespread LM IB destruction of the site.

Most of the statues were modelled of coarse clay in two main sections over a rough armature of reeds and withies. The lower body consists of a flaring skirt with a belt or girdle in relief. The upper bodies consist of a torso with a narrow waist and prominent breasts, wearing a flaring bodice of Minoan inspiration. The arms are generally held away from the body and slightly bent at the elbow, with hands resting on the hips. A relief necklace or garland encircles the base of the neck. A number of pieces preserve traces of white, yellow or red paint, applied to a surface coat of finer clay.

It is the modelling of the heads, however, which concern us here. The faces tend to be flat and slab-like, with a prominent nose and eyebrow ridges that are modelled as circular curved additions. A similar raised area at the level of the mouth is surrounded by a concave area, which gives the cheeks some prominence. Above the brow, the head is encircled by two surmounting raised bands of clay which represent the coiffure or a headdress, occasionally with tresses of hair hanging down the center of the back. Almost all of these details find parallels on the Mycenae plaster head, which is of comparable size. A profile view of some of the Kea heads further heightens these similarities to the Mycenae head.

CONCLUSION

I suggest, therefore, that the Mycenae head may once have belonged to a similar statue, though only its head has been recovered. The Kea figures are too numerous for all of them to represent goddesses, and their pose might suggest they are dancing. In historical times on Kea, the *parthenion* festival allowed girls of good families to dance in public, as a way of showing the girls off to the larger community and—of course—to

potential bridegrooms (Bodson 1986: 310; cf. Scanlon 1992: 117–8). In the case of the Mycenae head, its size and facial decoration make it easier to envision her as a goddess, and its findspot in the Cult Center supports this view.

It is also interesting to note that several other, large Mycenaean heads have been discovered divorced from the rest of the body: the Lord of Asine, and several of the Kea statues—one head from the latter group was rediscovered at a later date and propped up in a collar of clay in the 8th century, when the shrine housed the cult of Dionysos.

We know of at least one goddess whose iconography recalls that of the Mycenae plaster head: the enthroned divinity on the gold ring from the Tiryns Treasure, who holds a chalice, while a procession of *genii* approaches bearing jugs (Sakellariou 1964: no. 179; Sakellarakis *et al.* 1994: 284–5, pl. 77). Shared traits include the flat cap with vertical marks on its edge, the somewhat flat shape of the head, the tress of hair which falls behind, and the beaky nose, rounded eyes, and slight concavity around the mouth. The ring also preserves the long robe of the figure, with a vertical fringe along the front and another at the hem; this is identical to the garment worn by the standing goddess with a sword on a fresco from the Cult Center at Mycenae (Immerwahr 1990: 191, MY No. 6, pls. 59, 60).

If the Mycenae plaster head represents a goddess, perhaps seated like the goddess on the Tiryns ring, then we have yet one more representation of a divinity from the Cult Center at Mycenae: this time one that seems purely Mycenaean, rather than Minoanising as are most of our representations of female divinities (Rehak 1995B).

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