

Opinion Article

Copyright © All rights are reserved by Prisco Piscitelli

East and West meet in Crete to Generate Europe: A New Interpretation of the Famous Minoan Bull- Leaping Fresco and An Original Insight into the Roots of the European Soul to Preserve its Values, Environment and Mediterranean Diet

Manuela Pulimeno^{1,2}, Prisco Piscitelli^{1,2}, Maria Prototopas-Marneli³

¹Italian Society of Environmental Medicine (SIMA), Milan, Italy

²Euro Mediterranean Scientific Biomedical Institute (ISBEM), Brindisi, Italy

³Emeritus Researcher-Former Director at the Research Centre on Greek Philosophy at the Academy of Athens, Athens, Greece

*Corresponding author: Prisco Piscitelli, Euro Mediterranean Scientific Biomedical Institute (ISBEM), Brindisi, Italy

Received Date: July 31, 2023

Published Date: August 25, 2023

Opinion Article

The island of Crete is at the center of the Mediterranean Sea, representing the ideal meeting point between three continents: Africa, Asia and Europe. Retracing the tracks of the birth of Europe will allow us to rediscover the soul of our ancient-rooted continent, fruit of the embrace between East and West, between North and South of the world. This insight into the European history starts from an original re-interpretation - proposed here for the first time in the world - of the famous "Bull-leaping" fresco (or "Game of the Bull" - Taurokathàpsia) from the archaeological area of the

Palace of Knossos (datable between the 16th and 14th centuries B.C.), currently exhibited in the Heraklion Museum in Crete. As far as we know, this interpretation of the Bull-leaping fresco of the Game of the Bull has never been formulated so far by anybody and it is the result of an intuition of Prof. Manuela Pulimeno during an official visit at the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion as part of the Symposium on the Mediterranean Diet (1ST International Yale Gastronomy and Culture Symposium"), organized in Crete by the Yale School of Public Health and the Greek Academy of Sciences from 3 to 5 May 2023.

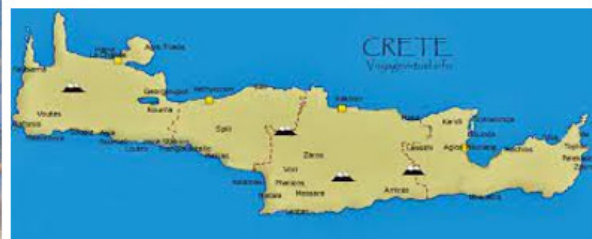


Figure 1: Game of the Bull, XVI Century BC, Fresco. Heraklion (Crete).

The intuitive observation of Prof. Pulimeno consists in having connected the shape of the bull depicted in the Bull-leaping fresco (Taurokathàpsia) with that of the island of Crete itself, as it can be seen in the Figures. In this interpretative perspective, which could not have been extraneous to Cretan navigators, the bull in the fresco actually seems to evoke the geographical forms of the Cretan coast, sinuously lying in the blue background of the Mediterranean Sea (a preferred colour, as we can see in many frescos of that period) and ultimately identifying the bull with the island. It is interesting to look at the detail of the two points of the North-Western promontories of Crete, which precisely recall the horns of the bull, whose elongated and curved body shape is explained as an intentional adaptation to reproduce the length of the island, which seems to end in the Eastern part with a thin peninsula similar to the curl of a tail. Ultimately the bull represents the shape of the island of Crete itself, and that's why the bull plays a crucial role in all Minoan symbolism, art and culture. In this perspective, even the fight of men and women against the bull (represented in the fresco) can be more properly regarded as the need of dominating the wild nature of the island.

The identification of the bull and island shape corresponds to a deeper cultural and anthropological reading, which starts from Greek mythology, regarded as an attempt to convey historical truths through mythical representations. In particular, it should be recalled the Cretan origin of the "father of all gods" ruling the ancient world: "Zeus" is explicitly linked to Crete. Actually, it is in the cave of Psychro in Crete (the ancient Diktaean, in the plateau of Lassithi) that Zeus was raised by the nymphs Adrasteia and Idea, fed with the milk of divine goat Amaltheia, in addition to honey and other simple Cretan delicious food (namely an allusion to a "Mediterranean diet" ante litteram), remaining hidden among the shepherds on Mount Ida, near Rethimno. It is in Crete that was originated Zeus, son of the Titan Cronos and Rhea (both deriving from Uranus, the god of the sky who was in turn originated from the sleep of Mother Earth "Gaea" after her emergence from the primordial Chaos).

This means that the founding myth of the empyrean of Greek civilization was born and raised on the island of Crete and not on Mount Olympus, where the gods were only transferred later. The same fresco of the ritual game of the bulls reminds us that Zeus finds himself transformed into a white "bull" to seduce the Phoenician princess "Europe" (awakened from an emblematic dream in which she was disputed between Asia and the lands of the West), bringing the young woman with him across the sea to Crete with her consent (as evidenced by the peacefulness of the representation in the metope of the temple of Selinunte in Sicily, which dates back to 580-560 BC, preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Palermo, but also in the Siphnian Treasury in Delphi, or depicted on the vases of Villa Giulia in Rome). It is known that Europa would become the mother of Minos, the mythical king of Crete in the labyrinthine palace of Knossos, who was adopted together with his two brothers (Radamanto and Serpedonte) by the "mortal" husband of the princess: the king of Crete Asterion.

The identification both of the bull and Zeus himself with the island of Crete sheds new light on the myth of the abduction of

Europa, which in the official interpretation is already recognized as the representation of the "migration" of the civilization from the Middle East and Africa to the West. Therefore, the same name of Europe, which was then given to the western territories, reflects this archaic integration of populations and cultures ancestrally occurred on the island of Crete, with this event being translated in the myth of Zeus who becomes a "bull" because this animal would represent the island of Crete and its shape.

Not surprisingly, the myth continues with the story of Europa's brothers, including Cadamo, who arrived in mainland and founded Thebes, bringing the alphabet with him from Phoenicia to Greece. From Homer onwards it was clear that the first Greek civilization was born in Crete and not in Mycenae on the continent, so much so that the legendary legislators of Sparta and Athens - Lycurgus and Solon - went to Crete to draw inspiration for their "constitutions". It is therefore not a coincidence that the myth attributes the killing of the Minotaur to the Athenian Theseus, thus symbolizing the definitive passage of the baton from Crete to the new epicentre of Greek culture: Athens.

So, Europe was born in Crete. It is here that the peoples of three continents met and - by merging in a consensual way as described in the myth of princess Europa with the Cretan-native Zeus - they gave rise to the very first link of the European chain (as acknowledged by Will Durant): the Minoan civilization (2700 BC - 1400 BC), which was contemporary of the Mesopotamians and Egyptians, namely a flourishing "thalassocracy" extended from the Black Sea to Egypt, up to the Strait of Sicily (more recently identified with the "Pillars of Hercules"), representing the first example in Europe of a complex political and cultural entity (the first "state entity").

The centrality of this Mediterranean island - "straddling" between East and West (just like those who competed in the ritual game depicted on the bull representing the same Crete) - is therefore crucial for all the peoples who recognize nowadays themselves in the definition of Europe, as well as in its soul: a spirit of hospitality and welcome still typical of the Cretans, but which risks drowning in this same Mediterranean sea, responsible for the ancestral meeting of men and women, populations and civilizations currently merged under the flag of the common European home. All of modern Europe, from South to North (keeping in mind that the "Northern" king Charlemagne was the champion of the idea of Europe) has its centre in the Mediterranean Sea, being the European heart in Crete.

The fresco of the Taurokathàpsia, where men and women participate in the ritual game with the bulls, reminds us of this European soul, referring to the dimension of gender equality which was daily experienced in Crete, where the condition of women was far from the typical isolation of the "Gynaecium" (characteristic of the subsequent Mycenaean or Athenian societies). But there's even more: writing in Europe starts from Crete (with the famous "Linear A and B", in addition to the mysterious "Cretan hieroglyphics" or the still enigmatic disk of Festus), as well as art (i.e., the impressive three-dimensional frescoes emerged from palace of Knossos and preserved in the museum of Heraklion) and technology: in fact, the

disc of Festus, with its engravings from “stencils” can be considered the forerunner of printing invention.

Once again, we should focus on the Mediterranean Diet, indicated as the secret of longevity in modern epidemiological studies: it is not a coincidence that “ambrosia” (the nectar of immortal gods), can be assimilated to the sweet honey, which has become a symbol of all the products of the mother island (Crete), together with olive oil, fragrant herbs (including *cistus creticus*, from which the “panacea” of Ladanum is obtained), fruits and products of the land. This is also a call to preserve - for our grandchildren - the environment that has been handed down to us as an inheritance from our ancestors. Nature can be resiliently grabbed as the horns of the bull (without suppressing it), to meet the challenge of sustainable development from an environmental, economic and social point of view.

It has been observed that the bull in Cretan culture is everywhere: on vessels, gold rings, sealings, stone seals, gems, statues, terracotta figurines and even sarcophagi. The fact that the bull - including that represented in the “Bull-leaping fresco” - is identified both the shape and the idea/concept of Crete and with the same “political” entity of the island (in the same way that the eagle will represent the “idea” of Rome and its empire) is also testified by the subsequent negative myth of the Minotaur, generated by the union of Queen Pasiphae with a very different bull than the father of the gods, thus generating a monster that annually required the sacrifice of nine girls. This clearly symbolizes the progressive corruption and drift of the power, transformed into a monstrous “Leviathan” asking for human sacrifices. It also seems to be a warning to us modern descendants of Europe against the risk of violating the nature, which turns against humanity itself: from the Crete of the past a powerful warning to Europe and the entire world.

The intuitions reported in this article, concerning the identification between the shape of the bull represented in the Taurokathapsia Fresco with that of the island of Crete itself, reflect the opinions of the authors and are offered to the analysis of researchers for further insights.

References

1. Evans A (1921) *The Palace of Minos: A Comparative Account of the Successive Stages of Early Cretan Civilization as Illustrated by the Discoveries at Knossos*. Macmillan and Company, London.
2. German SC (2005) *Performance, Power and the Art of the Aegean Bronze Age*. Archaeopress, Oxford.
3. Koehl RB (2006) *Aegean Bronze Age Rhyta*. INSTAP Academic Press, Philadelphia.
4. MacGillivray J, Alexander (2000) *Labyrinths and Bull-Leapers*. *Archaeology* 53: 53-55.
5. McCormick J (2000) *Bullfighting: Art, Technique and Spanish Society*. Transaction Publishers, London.
6. McInerney J (2010) *The Cattle of the Sun: Cows and Culture in the World of the Ancient Greeks*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
7. Rehak P (1995) *The Use and Destruction of Minoan Stone Bull's Head Rhyta*. In *Politeia: Society and State in the Aegean Bronze Age (Aegaeum 12)*, Robert Laffineur and Wolf Dietrich Niemeier, Liège and Austin (Eds.), Université de Liège and University of Texas at Austin, pp. 435-460.
8. Sakellariou A (1958) *Les Cachets Minoens*. P. Geuthner, France.
9. Younger JG (1976) *Bronze Age Representations of Aegean Bull-leaping*. *American Journal of Archaeology* 80(2): 125-137.
10. Jeremy McInerney (2011) *Bulls and Bull-leaping in the Minoan world*. *Penn Museum V. 53*(3).