The ‘Mountain Mother’ Seal from Knossos - a Reevaluation

The ‘Mountain Mother’ seal from Knossos on Crete (Figure 1) has appeared in archaeological journals and books for almost a hundred years. Whilst excavating at the palace in 1901, Sir Arthur Evans found fragments of seal impressions in several locations in the middle section of the west side of the Central Court. This included the eastern end of the Magazine (Gallery) of the Jewel Fresco and the middle section of the Central Shrine where evidence was found of a tripartite columnar shrine.¹ It was discovered that the impressions were imprints from a single seal (see Figure 2a) which shows what the seal itself would have looked like: the picture is a mirror-image of what appears on the sealings). It measured about three by two centimetres, and has been dated to around the time of the destruction of the palace in LM III A 1/2, c. 1375 BCE.² The proposed use of these particular sealings has not yet been determined.

Sir Arthur Evans described the scene which appears on the ‘Mountain


² Mervyn Popham, ‘The Final Destruction of the Palace at Knossos,’ in Jan Driessen and Alexandre Famou (eds.), La Crète Mycénienne (BCH Supplement 30, 1997), 375-86 at p.385. The chronology used in this paper is based on that of Sturt Manning, The Absolute Chronology of the Aegean Early Bronze Age - Archaeology, Radiocarbon and History (Sheffield, 1995), 217.
Figure 1: Map Showing the Location of Sites Mentioned in the Text.
THE ‘MOUNTAIN MOTHER’ SEAL FROM KNOSSOS

‘the central figure of this design is a female Goddess in the usual Mycenaean garb, standing on her sacred rock or mountain peak, which represents, in fact, her aniconic shape, and upon which her two lion guardians and supporters rest their fore-feet on either side. In her hand she seems to hold out a kind of weapon, and in front of her stands a male votary in the act of adoration. Behind her is her shrine with sacred columns, in front of which, and again on the entablature above, the “horns of consecration” are clearly visible.’

Later, with the publication of the second volume of The Palace of Minos at Knossos in 1928, Evans stated that the central female figure was ‘the Minoan Mother Goddess’ and he identified her as the ‘Minoan Rhea.’ He made no further reference to the male worshipper. Martin Nilsson did analyse the different elements on the seal, especially the mountain, the goddess and her ‘spear.’ Nilsson also favours the identification of the goddess on the seal with Rhea when he discusses ‘the Great Mother of Asia Minor, who was venerated on mountain peaks and was named Dindymene.’

3 Sir Arthur Evans, ‘The Palace of Knossos’ BSA 7 (1900-1901), 1-120, at p.29. It should be noted that there is a stylistic resemblance between the ‘Mountain Mother’ seal and the fragments of seal impressions from the adyton in the Little Palace at Knossos (Figure 2b). ‘Horns of consecration’ are depicted above a building, and the elbow of an unidentified worshipper (?) appears to the left of the composition on one fragment, and the feet and lower limbs of two rampant beasts (lions?) with a rocky outcrop between them appear on another. It is possible that these motifs were commonplace at one time at the palace, and that these represent two similar interpretations of one theme.

4 Evans, Palace of Minos (as in n.1), 808.

5 Evans, Palace of Minos (as in n.1), 809.


7 Ibid.
Figure 2: a) The 'Mountain Mother' Seal from Knossos.
(After Costis Davaras, 'Trois Bronzes Minoens de Skoteino' BCH 93 (1969), 620-650, at p. 637.)

b) Seal Impressions from the Adyton, Little Palace at Knossos.
(After A.J. Evans, 'The Palace of Knossos and its Dependencies' BSA 11 (1904-1905), 1-26, at p.12, figures 5 and 6.)
THE ‘MOUNTAIN MOTHER’ SEAL FROM KNOSOS

By examining the individual pictorial components on the seal, it is possible to arrive at a conclusion as to their possible significance. This conclusion bears a slight resemblance to those of Evans and Nilsson, but has some important additional features. Comparative evidence from the Near East and from Egypt is used in order to clarify some points, and evidence from later literature is also introduced.

The central figure, the woman on the mountain, dominates the seal, and is the focus of attention—ours, that of the lions and of the man. Evans thought that she might be a goddess. If so, then who is she? A number of suggestions could be made: she could be some kind of *Potnia Theron* or she could be a mountain Goddess, like Kybele, or Rhea.

To take the *Potnia Theron* proposal first—what we see on the seal is a woman, standing on a mountain on either side of which stand two lions. One of the ‘Snake Goddess’ figurines from Knossos, which Evans called a ‘Votary’ (see Figure 3), brandishes serpents, and has a small spotted cat sitting within the confines of her tiara. It could be argued that with her control over the snakes and the cat, this figurine is an example of a representation of *Potnia Theron*. *Potnia Theron* was commonly associated, in later times, with Artemis, as goddess of the hunt, who took care of both the hunter and the hunted, as the goddess of wild animals. This is illustrated on a much later piece, the François Vase (c. 570 BCE) where she is seen on one handle, with a panther in her right hand and a deer in her left, and on the other with a lion in each hand.8 This is, however, later evidence, and may not apply to the *Potnia Theron* of Minoan times. Nilsson believed that the goddess in the centre was holding a spear.9

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8 *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae II:II* (Zurich, 1984), p.445—plate 33 a) and plate 33 b).

Figure 3: 'Votary' of the 'Snake Goddess' from Knossos.
Perhaps the female on the seal is showing either that she is a hunter with (or of) the lions or that she controls them.\(^{10}\)

The Kybele (Magna Mater) we are familiar with in Greek and Roman times was, earlier, also associated with the hunt. Not only was she accompanied by large wild cats, but, as Lynne Roller states, ‘... we should note that the attributes of the Phrygian Mother, principally the predatory bird and the association with the hunt, suggest knowledge of a Bronze Age predecessor ... with an older Hittite hunting deity...’\(^{11}\) As it is not clear from the seal whether the goddess brandishes a spear or a staff, this point must remain unresolved. However, on the basis of other iconography (see below), the ‘spear’ may be a more benign object—a staff or sceptre.

The worship of Kybele seems to have originated in Anatolia (modern western Turkey). It is possible that the Minoans were familiar with this goddess. There are several reasons for this: firstly, the people of Crete who lived at Knossos at the time of the palaces were descendants of the earliest settlers on the island, some five and a half thousand years earlier, who, on the basis of recent linguistic and archaeological analysis, were not only likely to have been Proto-Indo-Europeans but also may have come from the region of Anatolia.\(^{12}\) If this is so, then there may have been a

10 It is interesting to note that later—during the eighth to sixth century BCE—representations of the Great Mother at Gordion (Phrygia) show her holding a bird of prey and later (until the third century BCE) votive birds of prey were left in her sanctuaries. The bird of prey could signify her domination over wild creatures or that she was a goddess of the hunt, a different kind of hunt, with a smaller kind of prey, from that carried out using a spear. See Lynn E. Roller, ‘The Great Mother at Gordion: The Hellenization of an Anatolian Cult’ JHS 111 (1991), 128-43 at pp.129-31 and 142.


cultural, and therefore religious connection between these people (the Minoans and the Anatolians). Cultural links would have been maintained through trade.

Secondly, there is no archaeological evidence (to date) to suggest that lions ever lived on Crete, so clearly this motif and its association with a female deity must have been imported. There is a modern Cretan wildcat (*felis agrius*, about the size of a large domestic cat) but this is descended from its Minoan domesticated, introduced counterpart. The pictorial representation of the lion accompanying a goddess could have come from Asia.

Elements of the later iconography of Kybele are present on the Mountain Mother seal from Knossos —the mountain, the goddess and the wild beasts. In the *Iliad*, Hera and Sleep went to visit Zeus. Their journey took them over the islands of Lemnos and Imbros, and they arrived at Mt. Ida (in northern Turkey) which, in Homer, *is itself* identified as the Mother of Wild Beasts (Homer *Iliad* 14.283).

According to Friederike Naumann, Kybele may be seen as either Mistress of the Animals and of people, or as ‘Mother’, but not as Mother of the Gods (so she is not like Rhea in this respect). She is more like a Mother of Nature and Mother of the Lions rather than of all the animals: depicted with lions, and occasionally with snakes or with a bird, her role is to be the protectress of all life.

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13 The question of whether lions ever lived on Crete is still unanswered (they may have been kept as a curiosity or as ceremonial animals but there is no evidence for this). See Oliver Rackham and Jennifer Moody, *The Making of the Cretan Landscape* (Manchester and New York, 1996), 46-7. There is evidence that there may have been lions on mainland Greece. See Edmund F. Bloedow, ‘On Lions in Mycenaean and Minoan Culture’ in Robert Laffineur and Janice L. Crowley (eds.), *EIKON. Aegean Bronze Age Iconography: Shaping a Methodology. Proceedings of the Fourth International Aegean Conference, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Australia, 6-9 April 1992* (Liege, 1992), 295-306 at pp. 299-301, and Peter Warren, ‘The Miniature Fresco from the West House at Akrotiri, Thera, and its Aegean Setting’ *JHS 99* (1979), 115-29, at p. 123 n.29
One representation of a goddess accompanied by lions comes from the possible homeland of the Minoans: this is a figurine from Çatal Hüyük (Turkey)—the goddess is enthroned, giving birth, and flanked by large wild cats (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Figurine from Çatal Hüyük.
(After James Mellaart, A Neolithic Town in Anatolia. (London, 1967), figure 52, p. 184.)

14 Friederike Naumann, Die Ikonographie der Kybele in der Phrygischen und der Griechischen Kunst (Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth, 1983; = Istanbuler Mitteilungen 28), 101. Kybele and Rhea were largely conflated by Roman times. Lucretius (c. 99-c. 55 BCE), describes Kybele as the Great Mother of the Gods and Mother of the Wild Beasts (De Rerum Natura 2.598-9).
This terracotta has been dated to c. 6000 BCE, which is around four and a half thousand years older than the ‘Mountain Mother’ seal from Knossos. Other figurines were found there which depict a seated woman with large cats, possibly leopards.

There are other goddesses who were associated with mountains or high places—for example, the goddess Rhea is the subject of worship by Jason and his men on Mt. Dindymene (northern Turkey) in Apollonius Rhodius’ Argonautica (1.1094), while Hesiod associates Rhea with Crete as she is sent there by her parents to give birth to Zeus in safety (Hesiod, Theogony 477-480). In the Homeric Hymn to The Mother of the Gods the un-named goddess (that is, the Mother of the Gods who seems to be none other than Rhea), in an unnamed place, is said to be ‘well-pleased with ... the outcry of wolves and bright-eyed lions, with echoing hills and wooded coombes’ (Homeric Hymn to the Mother of the Gods, 4-5). There are other goddesses from the Near East associated with lions. Ishtar was depicted riding on a chariot which was pulled by these wild cats. An Elamite cylinder seal of unknown provenance (from the Mesopotamian region), dating from the middle of the second millennium BCE (Louvre, SB 1359) shows a seated goddess who is said to resemble Ishtar, with a lion under her throne. Later, the Syrian Goddess (who was also known as Atargatis), from the first century BCE, was shown in statues and reliefs sitting on a throne with a lion on either side of her.

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17 OCD, 416. Mt. Dindymene is usually associated with the ‘Phrygian’ Kybele, not necessarily with Rhea.
When considering the identity of the woman on the mountain on the seal, there are a number of possibilities to be considered, none of which needs to exclude the others:

- the ‘Mountain Mother’ could be a type of *Potnia Theron* who dominates the mountain and the wild creatures;

- the ‘Mountain Mother’ could be a goddess similar to Kybele, who has a connection with mountains and with lions;

- she could have ‘evolved’ from an early goddess (like the one from Çatal Hüyük) who was also accompanied by wild cats and may have been associated with bulls;

- the ‘Mountain Mother’ could be a depiction of a goddess like Rhea who was associated with mountains and wild animals, and later, in Hesiod, with Crete.

20 Robert Oden, Jr., *The Syrian Goddess* (Evanstone, Illinois, 1980), 1-3. Oden points out (2) that the name of Atargatis may be derived from the goddesses Ashtart, Anath and Asherah. The Lion Gate at Mycenae dates from around 1250 BCE, which is later than the date of the seal (c. 1375 BCE) and is—of course—Mycenaean. There are two lions rampant standing on either side of two incurved altars, their front paws resting on top of the altars. A pillar stands between them. Several theories exist as to the possible meaning of this relief: Maria C. Shaw has summarised them, saying that it ‘... has been variously interpreted ... as purely decorative, or as symbolic, with the column being the aniconic image of divinity, as a shrine, or as the Mycenaean palace.’ Maria C. Shaw, ‘The Lion Gate Relief of Mycenae Reconsidered’ in *Philia Epe Eis Georgion E. Mylonas* (Athens, 1986; = *Bibliothekte Tes En Athenais Archaeologikes Hetaireias* CIII), 108-23, at pp. 121-2. Yet the ‘Mountain Mother’ seal appears to be Minoan in its iconography (the saluting male, the building with horns of consecration, and the pose of the female on the mountain) apart from the lions, which often appear antithetically on Mycenaean seals or rings—for example, on a gold ring from Mycenae (Ashmolean Museum 1938: 1126, see Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion* (as in n.6), figure 119, p. 250). The symbolism of the lions rampant, as part of Mycenaean iconography, may have been associated with a deity, perhaps someone like Kybele or Rhea.
Figure 5: The 'Master Impression' from Khania.

(After Erik Hallager, *The Master Impression* (Göteborg, 1985; = Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology, LXIX), figure 11, p. 50.)
The so-called ‘Master Impression’ sealing found at Khania in western Crete provides us with some interesting comparative iconographic features (Figure 5). This has been dated to LM IB/LM II.21

The man standing above the centre of the buildings has been identified as a god,22 but there is a possibility that he may be a king. Nanno Marinatos points out that ‘... the distinction god or king is not possible to make, for the two are completely identical in the iconography.’23 If he was the king, his authoritative pose, which is similar to that of the goddess on the ‘Mountain Mother’ seal, might be a sign that he has divine approval/authority and that, imbued with this power, he imitates the pose of the deity who bestowed this upon him.24

There are other representations of people holding this pose, for example, the ‘Priest King’ on the fresco of the same name from the palace

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21 Erik Hallager, *The Master Impression. A Clay Sealing from the Greek-Swedish Excavations at Kastelli, Khania* (Göteborg, 1985), 12. There is a problem with chronology here: the ‘Mountain Mother’ sealings have been dated to LM III A1/2. This does not tell us when the ring or seal, with which these impressions were made, was created. The Khania sealing is much earlier than LM III, and as Knossos was a major political and religious centre, it is not unreasonable to assume that religious changes may have originated there, or at least been noted in some way that appears in the archaeological record. Perhaps the ‘Mountain Mother’ sealings show how the goddess was supposed to confer kingship upon a potential ruler, a ‘snapshot’ of Minoan mythology perhaps, that seeks to explain or justify the way in which a ruler assumed that role.


24 Khania is over 100km west of Knossos. The similarities between these seals may be a sign of a recognisable iconography spread throughout the island.
at Knossos. Fragments of the ‘Priest-King’ fresco were discovered in May 1901 to the south of the Central Court. By 1907 these fragments had been restored, together, by M. Gilliéron (senior), to form a single life-sized male figure wearing a ‘Lily Crown’ (see Figure 6a). The problem with Gilliéron’s restoration is that he combined the fragments to form one figure, when there is some doubt as to whether they came from a representation of a single person or not. There have been a number of suggestions as to what the original may have looked like. Niemeier thought that, based on studies of the musculature of the torso, what may have been depicted was a young man with his left arm raised in a ‘commanding gesture,’ rather than having his right arm stretched out behind him as on Gilliéron’s reconstruction (see Figures 6a and 6b). Niemeier went on to argue that not only is the man in the Master Impression a god, but that ‘... if our reconstruction of the torso of the ‘Priest-King’ fresco is correct, the figure to which the torso belonged most probably was the representation of a god too.’ As with the Master Impression, whether the so-called ‘Priest-King’ is a representation of a god, or of a king with the power and sanction of a deity, is not clear.

Evans described the man on the ‘Mountain Mother’ seal as ‘a male votary in the act of adoration.’ This seems very likely—there is evidence from the hill-top or peak sanctuary on Mt. Jouktas, about 13km south-west of Knossos and at 811m above sea-level, that what have been identified as votive offerings, in the form of figurines, depict men in the same pose of veneration. Similar figurines have been found at other sites

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26 Niemeier. ““Priest-King” Fresco” (as in n.25), 237-8.

27 Niemeier. ““Priest-King” Fresco” (as in n.25), 237-41.

28 Niemeier. ““Priest-King” Fresco” (as in n.25), 242.
Figure 6: The 'Priest King' Fresco from Knossos.

a) First Restoration (Gilliéron).

b) Niemeier's Reconstruction.
(After W.D. Niemeier, 'The "Priest King" Fresco from Knossos. A New Reconstruction and Interpretation' in E.B. French and K.A. Wardle (eds.), Problems in Greek Prehistory (Bristol, 1988), 235-244, at figure 2, p. 239.)
including the cave sanctuaries at Skoteino and Psychro. They too have the left arm held straight at the side, with the right fist (or hand) to the brow. Bogdan Rutkowski, in his discussion of ancient Greek prayer gestures (which includes the hand-to-the-brow), suggests that ‘... we can define the above-discussed gestures as pertaining to adoration (or prayer), in a way that the votary expects the deity to gratify his requests.’

Evans’ interpretation that the figure is ‘a male votary’ seems to be correct, but the size of the figure causes problems of interpretation. Does he appear to be large because of an attempt on the part of the engraver to show some kind of perspective? Or more likely, is he, perhaps, a man of importance who is being given power or authority by the woman on the mountain in the form of the proffered ‘sceptre’, if that is what the staff might be? If Rutkowski’s suggestion is correct, then this implies that the man may be asking for such power and authority and that he hopes that the woman will respond favourably to his demand.

This particular idea has been discussed recently and is becoming more widely accepted. The man seems to be acknowledging the woman’s dominant position, and the staff she holds in her right hand may be a symbol of power and authority which she is offering to him, in which case the man’s wishes seem to have been granted.


33 Olivier Pelon, ‘Royauté et iconographie royale dans la Crète minoenne’ in R. Laffineur and W.D. Niemeier (eds.), Politeia II (Liège and Austin, 1995), 309-22, at p.312. See also Marinatos ‘Divine Kingship’ (as in n.23), 46.
Evans described the structure that appears on the right as 'her shrine ... in front of which, and again on the entablature above, the “horns of consecration” are clearly visible.' In Minoan archaeology, horns of consecration came in a number of sizes depending upon their use, which ranged from small votive offerings to the decoration on the roof of shrines. At Knossos, two of these items were over 2m in height. They appear to signify the presence of a shrine, and they seem to be associated with bull-centred ritual. At the peak sanctuary of Mt. Jouktas on Crete, for example, many figurines of cattle were discovered as well as stone horns of consecration, along with a seal depicting a bovine head with a solar or stellar symbol between its horns (Figure 7). This suggests that worship of

Figure 7: Seal from Mt. Jouktas.


a deity concerned with the fertility and well-being of the herds took place there. A clay sealing from the Temple Repository shows a bovine head with an equal-armed ‘x’ between its horns. Sir Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos* I (London, 1921), 699, figure 522b.

V.E.G. Kenna thought that ‘a cult object arranged between the horns of a bull advertises the religious character of many seals at this time ...’ The equal-armed cross might be interpreted as a stellar or solar symbol—in any case the use of an angular symbol of this kind, appearing between the horns of a bull or cow appears to have had some significance.

At Çatal Hüyük, many shrines have frescoes on which a figure with outstretched arms and legs appears above a horned bovine head. James Mellaart saw this as a depiction of a goddess giving birth to a bull. But there are some problems with this interpretation: firstly, the figure ‘giving birth’ appears to be genderless; secondly, the figure may be leaping or even seated (albeit uncomfortably) rather than giving birth; and thirdly, the ‘bull’ may be a horned cow rather than the male of the species. There is, therefore, room for some doubt about Mellaart’s interpretation (it is interesting to note that the goddess giving birth to a horned bovine, and the seated goddess with lions were worshipped alongside each other).

In Egyptian iconography, Hathor was depicted as a goddess (or as a cow) with a solar disc between cow’s horns on her head. Similarly, the goddess Baalat-Gebal, at Byblos (the port in what is now Syria with whose inhabitants the Minoans carried out trade), was also portrayed with a solar disc and cow’s horns, as she was identified with Hathor-Isis. See Nina Jidejian, *Byblos Through the Ages* (Chicago, 1969—first published in Beirut, 1968), 18. Also see L. Vance Watrous, ‘The Role of the Near East in the Rise of the Cretan Palaces’ in Robin Hägg and Nanno Marinatos (eds.), *The Function of the Minoan Palaces. Proceedings of the Fourth International Symposium at the Swedish Institute in Athens, 10-16 June, 1984*. (Stockholm, 1987; = Skrifter Utgivna Institutet i Athen, 4º, 35), 65-70, at p. 66.


38 Similarly, the goddess Baalat-Gebal, at Byblos (the port in what is now Syria with whose inhabitants the Minoans carried out trade), was also portrayed with a solar disc and cow’s horns, as she was identified with Hathor-Isis. See Nina Jidejian, *Byblos Through the Ages* (Chicago, 1969—first published in Beirut, 1968), 18. Also see L. Vance Watrous, ‘The Role of the Near East in the Rise of the Cretan Palaces’ in Robin Hägg and Nanno Marinatos (eds.), *The Function of the Minoan Palaces. Proceedings of the Fourth International Symposium at the Swedish Institute in Athens, 10-16 June, 1984*. (Stockholm, 1987; = Skrifter Utgivna Institutet i Athen, 4º, 35), 65-70, at p. 66.
Isis, with whom Hathor became confounded, was depicted with the same symbolism on her headdress. To the Egyptians, Isis was seen to be the 'power behind the throne'. This is supported by her iconography which often shows her with a small throne on her headdress: the throne is also the ideogram for Isis (Figure 8a).

The symbolism of the solar symbol between the horns of a cow at Mt. Jouktas and in Egypt may be a happy coincidence, but in Egypt, horns are associated with goddesses who may be represented as female cattle, goddesses who are also protectors of the ruler, the Pharaoh.

There are some male gods in Eastern mythology with similar attributes or associations. In the creation mythology of Babylon (The Epic of Creation VI) the god Marduk, supreme god of the Mesopotamian pantheon and patron deity of the city of Babylon, 39 is described as looking down over the shrine of Esharra, wearing a horned crown, a symbol of his divinity. 40

In northern Israel, according to the Old Testament, Jeroboam developed a form of worship of Yahweh that incorporated the worship of bull calf idols. 41 This has been interpreted 'as being analogous to or in opposition to the cherub throne in Jerusalem that served as a pedestal on which the invisible Yahweh took his place ...' 42 In other words, the bull calf images—which are often associated with the worship of Baal—may be compared with the cherub throne in Jerusalem which symbolised the presence of Yahweh, as supreme god, who ruled over the city. So in Near Eastern mythology, and in the Old Testament, there are supreme gods who oversee the welfare of the city and who are associated with bulls.


40 Dalley Myths from Mesopotamia (as in n.39), 262 and n.37, p. 276.

41 1 Kings 12.28-33.

Figure 8: Isis and Hathor.

a) Isis
(After Edouard Lambelet, *Gods and Goddesses in Ancient Egypt*² (Cairo, n.d.), figure B14.)

b) Hathor
(After Lambelet, as in Figure 10a, figure B10.)
In the Near East and Egypt, goddesses supported the ruler, endorsing his position. In Sumerian mythology, the goddess Inanna determined whether her consort, Dumuzi, would be king. At first, Inanna did not wish to marry this shepherd, but she was persuaded by her family, and by Dumuzi himself. Dumuzi became king through Inanna’s acceptance of him, ‘... by her cosmic powers (she) ensure(s) the king’s powers of leadership and fertility.’\(^43\) Inanna also determined when his kingship would be limited—Dumuzi had made no attempt to help Inanna during her sojourn in the Underworld, nor did he go to greet her when she returned. Instead, he spent his time consolidating his position as king. Inanna had to find someone to take her place in the Underworld and, being furious with Dumuzi, decreed that he should be that person. If it were not for the compassion of his sister, Geshtinanna, who agreed to take his place for half of the year, Dumuzi would have had to remain in the Underworld forever. Inanna had conferred kingship upon Dumuzi, and she later removed him from his exalted position. He was permitted, through the actions of his sister, and with Inanna’s consent, to assume an earthly, kingly role for half of the year.\(^44\) This myth was taken seriously by the Sumerians—King Sargon of Agade (c. 2390 BCE), for example, claimed in an epic work that Inanna/Ishtar had chosen him to be the ruler.\(^45\) As goddess, the mythology of Inanna had religious, social and political implications.

The situation regarding the relationship between kingship and religion was quite different in Egypt and Mesopotamia. In Egypt, the Pharaoh was seen to have several close links with the gods, having been ‘... begotten by Amon-Re upon the queen-mother ... he was Horus, son of Hathor. As the legitimate successor to the throne ... he was Horus, son of Osiris and Isis ...’\(^46\) So his father was Amon-Re, the sky (sun) god,\(^47\) he himself was


\(^44\) Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven* (as in n.43), 167.

seen as the reincarnation of Horus, and although he was recognised as the son of Isis ('the Great Throne') he was also —simultaneously—the son of Hathor, the Cow goddess who represented motherhood. This confusing situation existed because the Pharaoh was seen on several 'levels' at once. He was inextricably connected to the divine, and was himself the living reincarnation of a god. The significance of the Pharaoh being seen as the 'son of Isis' has been discussed by Henri Frankfort who points out that Isis, as the deified throne, makes the king (my emphasis): when the Pharaoh sits on the throne (in the lap of the goddess, his mother) he is king. Thus in Egypt, religion and kingship were very closely linked—the Pharaoh could not rule without the religious customs and rites associated with Horus, Isis and Hathor.

In Mesopotamia, on the other hand, the ruler had a different kind of support for his role. Kingship was said to have come down from heaven, '... the office, and not the office-holder, was of superhuman origin ... the Mesopotamians viewed their king as a mortal endowed with a divine burden.' This contrasts with the situation in Egypt where the Pharaoh was seen as a god. The scene on the 'Mountain Mother' seal shows

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47 Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (as in n.46), 379.

48 Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (as in n.46), 173 and 171.


50 Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (as in n.46), 237.
similarities with the Mesopotamian idea of kingship—that the king is given his authority by a deity.\textsuperscript{51}

As has been shown, there are examples from several nearby cultures of a ruler’s right to rule being conferred upon him (these rulers were often, but not exclusively, male) or ‘endorsed,’ by a deity. The Pharaohs of Egypt had the right to such authority because they themselves were deemed to be the sons of Osiris and were protected by Isis and Hathor. The rulers of Mesopotamia and Sumer claimed divine sanction for their position—in King Sargon’s case through the will of the goddess herself.

Hesiod tells us in his mythical account of the childhood of Zeus that Rhea, Zeus’ mother, hid him in a cave in order to keep him safe from the murderous will of his father, Kronos (Hesiod \textit{Theogony} 481-484), safe so that he could assume his position—later—as ‘king’ of the gods. The ‘Mountain Mother’ seal, with the man apparently being offered a sceptre (or authority) by a goddess may be seen as another example of this—the goddess grants authority and divine protection to the ruler.\textsuperscript{52}

Rather than seeing a prototype of Artemis—as \textit{Potnia Theron}—or Kybele in the seal from Knossos, perhaps what we see is a patroness of kingship, a goddess who endorses the authority of the ruler. In Classical Athens, Athena Polias was the patroness of the city. It may be the case that the Cretan goddess was either a local prototype of such deities who guarded the city and ‘endorsed’ the leadership of the ruler, and/or that this was part of a wider trend, adopted by early \textit{poleis} in the region.

One issue that arises from this hypothesis is the extent to which a ruler was able to manipulate the religion at Knossos (because the seal was

\textsuperscript{51} This idea presupposes that there were kings on Crete during the Final Palatial period (LM II - LM IIIIB: c. 1490-1470 to c. 1200-1190 BCE). Nanno Marinatos believes that there is sufficient evidence to believe that ‘... Minoan rulers claimed divine heritage and were considered the representations of gods’. See Marinatos, ‘Divine Kingship’ (as in n.23), 47.

\textsuperscript{52} On the seal it seems clear too where the real power resides—in the hands of the goddess who offers it.
found there) in order to secure 'divine approval' for his position. The
goddess may have evolved not only as a result of a specific need, that is,
that of the ruler who wished to be acknowledged as holding his position by
means of religious sanction, but also as a result of the machinations of the
ruling élite. At Knossos, a theocracy developed as the palace and its
complex administrative and social systems grew. A guiding supervisory
(or even merely titular) leader may have been needed in order to ensure the
survival of the new order. That religion or religious beliefs were used in
order to prevent undesirable changes to that order is a significant
development.

The Minoans, living on an island at the centre of the southern Aegean,
took ideas (even iconography) from cultures with which they had contact
through trade (and ancestry), and shaped them according to their own
particular needs. The rise of the palace, with its newly-centralised
administrative and religious role, was the ideal environment in which the
evolution of a goddess could take place. The Egyptian idea that it was a
goddess with bovine attributes who was the 'power behind the throne' may
have been mixed with elements of mythology from Mesopotamia, Ugarit
and Israel in which male, divine authority was connected to the fertility of
the herds. Nonetheless, the real 'power behind the throne' came from
goddesses.\textsuperscript{53}

What we see on the 'Mountain Mother' seal from Knossos represents,
therefore, the amalgamation of these ideas—a goddess of nature who now
offers power and protection to the ruler, like Inanna, Hathor/Isis and Rhea.

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\textsuperscript{53} Whittaker argues that if political power is supported by religion on Crete
'then religious worship becomes, by implication support for the ruling power'.
In this way religion assumes a political role which may be an innovation in
Minoan times. See Helène Whittaker, \textit{Mycenaean Cult Buildings} (Bergen,
1997), 38.