

BOGDAN RUTKOWSKI (POLAND)

## CULT IMAGES IN THE AEGEAN WORLD

According to a widespread opinion cult images were either unknown in the Bronze Age, or else they appeared only towards the end of the Aegean period. That concept, caused perhaps by the deficiency of archaeological materials, was based on a strongly rooted presupposition, assuming that cult images had appeared jointly with temples. It was, however, generally accepted that in the Aegean culture there were still no temples which (following Nilsson's definition) could be considered sacred, free standing buildings, being a divinity's dwelling containing its image. A sacred edifice, called sanctuary by modern scholars, was to be only a repository for keeping cult implements and votive offerings. It might therefore be surmised that such an idea was the result of an attempt at shifting the concept of temple and cult image, known from the Greek classical period, to the Bronze Age, that is nearly one thousand years earlier. However, in the light of recent research that assumption cannot be accepted. Latest investigations have proved that in the Aegean world there existed temples which, contrary to the shrines of classical Greece, had initially no established ground plan and rather resembled dwelling houses. Only the façade had already in the Aegean period a typically tripartite form and was probably most often decorated with elements of symbolic meaning, such as the running spiral carved or painted on the portal of buildings, conveyed to us by iconographic sources presenting images of temple façades.<sup>1</sup>

A regular feature of the Aegean temple is its position isolated from the neighbouring dwelling buildings. In A. Irini,<sup>2</sup> the island Kea, the temple (in use from the MH period) was excavated. Well distinct from the inhabited surrounding, separated by narrow streets and a small square from all nearby houses, the temple held an important place in the settlement, being situated near the town's main gate and its defence walls. The much elongated building was over 23 m long (partly destroyed by the sea) and 6 m wide. Another example from the period LM III B/C comes from the Mycenae. In the vicinity of the Citadel House a sacred

area was discovered in 1968 - 1969; it contained two buildings designed for cult purpose, one of which, having dimensions  $11.50 \times 5.60$  m, may have been a temple.<sup>3</sup>

We have more discoveries from Crete confirming our assumption about temples having existed in the Aegean world. A small building of Gurnia,<sup>4</sup> with an inside space of some  $3 \times 4$  m, is perhaps the best known example. Situated in the centre of the settlement, quite near the main square which can be reached by a paved street (period LM I). Other buildings discovered in settlements and towns,<sup>5</sup> on mountain peaks and in rural environment, may have also fulfilled the role of temples.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore temples, being buildings meant for public cult, although not following an established ground plan, were known in the Aegean period from at least the Middle Bronze Age. They had the character of a divinity's house, keeping its image or its paraphernalia. The question of cult images in the Aegean world was till now far from being clear. However, the now accessible evidence allows to suppose that they had various forms, from such as free standing pillars and amorphic idols to anthropomorphic statues.

There is evidence that the earliest cult images were natural rock formations, for instance stalactites and stalagmites in the Cretan caves. There are examples of worship, such as offerings deposited before a stalagmite and enclosing it within a wall; they substantiate the view that stalagmites and other natural forms were cult images. They had various shapes, pillars and columns, and a more lively fancy could even imagine them to be human or animal figures, single or in groups, one of them reminding the figure of a mother and child. It seems that these natural forms may have been sometimes shaped by hand to give them anthropomorphic characteristics: for instance, a rock chipped to give it the shape of head, or a hollow made where should be an eye.<sup>7</sup> Concretions in the shape of a human being were venerated in domestic sanctuaries and tomb chapels as cult objects.<sup>8</sup>

The earliest cult idols kept in sacred places were also amorphic figures, simple stones or wooden beams, evidenced by later iconography on golden rings (chiefly in the LM I period).<sup>9</sup> The existence of such simple cult idols is confirmed by analogies from the Bronze Age in Cyprus, where two clay models in the shape of three vertical, probably wooden beams were found, surmounted with bull's heads, phallic and breast-like protrusions. A woman deposits her offering before the idol.<sup>10</sup> This new piece of evidence confirms the earlier assumption, that in the rich scenery of the sacred enclosure from Vounous in Cyprus,<sup>11</sup> a cult image was presented in the shape of three beams bound together. In both the periods EM and MM in Crete and earlier in the Greek Mainland, we find a large group of little figurines reminding pillars, which probably substituted stone betyls

and wooden cult pillars. Here belong figurines covered with red paint in the form of a small pillar from Sesklo,<sup>12</sup> some Cycladic statuettes<sup>13</sup> and small figurines with hardly distinct head and oval body found in Crete (period EM and later).<sup>14</sup> All these examples suggest the existence of aniconic idols in the Aegean world. Neither is it excluded that in this period the divinity may have been identified with its belongings or with natural elements that were its hypostasis. The first to be mentioned is the "highplace" or mountain, that was considered sacred in the east Mediterranean, generally bestowed with characteristics of holiness. Such ideas are also reflected in the forms of cult images. An idol in the shape of a stylized mountain has been placed on the façade of a sacred building on the representation of a peak sanctuary on the rython from Kato Zakro.<sup>15</sup>

Cult images with anthropomorphic characteristics were relatively early placed in temples and holy spots of the Aegean world. They were, however, usually simply stone and wooden pillars, that we know about only owing to the indirect, above mentioned, forms. We believe that the pillars used to be clad in garments and dressed with leaves. Some other objects confirm our supposition, among others a faïence model of votive robe, found in the treasury of the Temple Repository at Knossos.<sup>16</sup> Ex-votos of that kind are proof that not only models of dress were offered in cult places, but also garments in which aniconic cult images were clad. Wooden pillars had probably sometimes elements out of other materials. Fragments of bronze locks from a head belonging to a wooden statue of superhuman size, were found in Knossos.<sup>17</sup> Those figures should, however, not be considered fully anthropomorphic, but only having anthropomorphic features, in which the head, almost naturalistically treated, was set on a rectangular or oval pillar. It is, moreover, probable that ovally formed, aniconic idols' bodies have survived in cylindrical clay figurines, which were very popular in the LM period.

At the same time a tendency to the introducing of anthropomorphic female images of divinities can be noticed. In the early Cretan iconography it would be difficult to indicate the person which Minoans would have considered to be goddess, for no single figure was distinct among her companions, votaries or priestesses. Perhaps her central position might indicate her supernatural character. The earliest cult statues seem to lack emblems suggesting supernatural features proper to gods. Sometimes larger dimensions may have distinguished a goddess among statuettes of her attendants. Such a fact was observed in the temple of A. Irini on the Kea island. The cult statue, dimensions excepted, was quite like the small figures of votaries in respect to dress, head gear and posture of hands.<sup>18</sup> Some later cult statues, particularly those dated to LM III B

period, found in sanctuaries of Kannia, Gurnia and Gazi, have richer symbolics, therefore hands lifted in a gesture of blessing and head ornamented by symbols of divine authority. The head of the statue of goddess from Kannia is topped by something like a nest with serpents' heads slipping out — this was to suggest a goddess's contact with the earth. Solar discs, double horns, doves, poppy flowers and corn ears are symbols ascertaining the power of gods (cf. statues of Gazi and Karphi). A remarkable thing is that the faces of most of goddesses look kind and good-natured.

The statues recently discovered in Mycenae<sup>19</sup> display cult images from a final phase of Aegean culture (period LH III B and early III C). In some cases they do not seem to be an iconographic novelty. Sometimes the faces differ from small figurines made at the same time only in size. The finishing appearance of the face and other details completing the tiny figurine found at the acropolis of Tiryns,<sup>20</sup> is almost identical with a big statue found in Mycenae, the dimensions of which were over 50 cm. However, not only these dimensions are proof of big idols from Mycenae fulfilling cult functions. The latter are also confirmed by all sorts of attributes held by the idols' hands (double axes, or hammers with long handle) and a singular individual expression, distinguishing an idol's face from other faces. The discoverer of statues in the big Mycenae temple, W. Taylour, draws attention to the diversity of expressions to be read in their faces; some of them are good natured, others are terrifying, which would certainly mark the differentiation of functions assigned to particular divinities. The rank of each was also told by the place designed to every idol in the temple: a goddess holding an eminent position in the pantheon, stood on a higher platform, whereas gods of minor importance had only lower places assigned to them.

Even this very short review allows the conclusion that cult images had existed already in a very early period of Aegean civilization. The tendency of giving anthropomorphic characteristics to cult images, observed at least from the period MM (or even EM),<sup>21</sup> which led to the forming of big cult statues in the period MM — LM, did not inhibit the worship of aniconic images, which may have been placed simultaneously in the same temple.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Compare, for instance, the rython of Kato Zakro ("Ergon", 1963, p. 186, fig. 187).

<sup>2</sup> J. Caskey published a report about his excavations — "Hesperia", Vol. XXXI, 1962, p. 263 ff.

<sup>3</sup> W. Taylour, "Antiquity", Vol. XLIII, 1969, p. 99 ff.; *ibidem*, Vol. XLIV, 1970, p. 270 ff. There existed moreover temples in Eleusis (G. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries*, Princeton 1961) and in Delos (Artemision C). Cf. R. Hagg, *Mykenische Kultstätten im archäologischen Material*, "Op. Arch.", Vol. VIII, 1968, p. 39 ff.

<sup>4</sup> H. Boyd Hawes *et al.*, *Gournia, Vasiliki and other Prehistoric Sites on the Isthmus of Hierapetra, Crete*, Philadelphia 1908, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> The temple of Karphi has been published in BSA, Vol. XXXVIII, 1937/38, p. 75 ff. Similar functions may have also been fulfilled by buildings of Malia (J. C. Poursat, BCH, Vol. XC, 1966, p. 514 ff) and in A. Triada, last phase (M. Nilsson, *Minoan-Mycenaean Religion*, 2nd ed. Lund 1950, p. 96 ff.).

<sup>6</sup> P. Faure offers a list of sites and quotes further literature on the subject: *Sur trois des sanctuaires crétois*, BCH, Vol. XCIII, 1969, p. 174 ff.

<sup>7</sup> P. Faure, *Fonction des cavernes crétoises*, Paris 1964.

<sup>8</sup> M. Nilsson, *op. cit.*, p. 90 ff. (further literature concerning the Fetish Shrine in the small palace of Knossos); cf. also K. Majewski, *Plastyka antropomorficzna na Krecie w III i II tysiącleciu przed n.e.* [La plastique antropomorphe de la Crète dans les IIIème et IIème millénaires avant n.è.], p. 29, fig. 9. The finding of Apesokari is described in *Forschungen auf Kreta*, Berlin 1950, Vol. XX - XXI (ed. F. Matz), and I. Pini, *Beiträge zur minoischen Gräberkunde*, Wiesbaden 1968, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the golden ring from Knossos: V. Kenna, *Cretan Seals*, Oxford 1960, p. 125, No. 250.

<sup>10</sup> Found at Kotchati not far from Idalion (V. Karageorghis, *Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus 1970*, Nicosia 1970, p. 10 - 13.

<sup>11</sup> R. Dussaud drew attention already in 1932 to the cult function of idols presented in the model of Vounous (cf. Karageorghis, *op. cit.*, p. 12).

<sup>12</sup> For instance, Chr. Tsountas, *Dimini kai Sesklou*, Athenai 1908, Table 12, 1.

<sup>13</sup> For instance K. Majewski, *Figuralna plastyka cykladzka. Geneza i rozwój form* [Die kykladische figurale Plastik, ihre Genesis und Entwicklung], Lwów 1935, Pl. XV h and others.

<sup>14</sup> For instance P. Demargne, *Aegean Art*, London 1964, figs. 60 and 86.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. note 1.

<sup>16</sup> A. Evans, *Palace of Minos*, I, London 1920, p. 463 ff. and K. Majewski, *Plastyka antropomorficzna...*, p. 29, fig. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. recently S. Hood, *The Minoans*, London 1971, fig. 85, p. 85.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. note 2.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. note 3.

<sup>20</sup> National Museum of Athens, Mycenaean Room.

<sup>21</sup> The figurine of Furnu Korifi will have probably already had the function of cult image (Museum in A. Nikolaos, see "Arch. Report", 1968 - 1969, fig. 48, p. 35).