

# Malady or Vanity: A Minoan Peak Sanctuary Figurine

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## Abstract

The Uppsala archaeoastronomical group has shown that there are indications that the structures of the so-called peak sanctuaries on the hilltops Petsophas and Traostalos were used for astronomical studies. Other studies have also shown that Classical and Hellenistic Greek literature in part describe the sky as it was during Minoan times, i.e. around 2000 BCE. Earlier I have shown that the terracotta figurines found on those two peaks most likely represent constellations. However, an earlier interpretation of the figurines as gifts in a healing cult still lingers on. In this respect, the figurine most often cited is a seated female with one 'thick' leg. However, it appears that the normal, bare leg is carefully sculpted while the thick leg and the body are formed as a clay cylinder and seem to be of minor interest. The bare leg on a sitting woman, seen in profile, reminds us of Cassiopeia, the Ethiopian queen that, due to her vanity, was doomed to be a constellation. This paper will discuss that figurine, arguing that it depicts Cassiopeia, and also another figurine that has been used to motivate the hypothesis of a healing cult, showing that it can be understood as the constellation Andromeda.

KEYWORDS: Minoan, peak sanctuaries, constellations, Cassiopeia, Andromeda

## POVZETEK

Člani uppsalske arheoastronomske skupine so pokazali, da so strukture svetišč na vrhovih Petsophasa in Traostalosa verjetno služile za astronomska opazovanja. Nekatere druge raziskave pa so pokazale, da klasična in helenistična grška literatura opisujeta nebo, kakršno je bilo v minojskem obdobju, t. j. okoli 2000 let pr. n. št. V preteklosti sem že pokazal, da terakotne figurice, najdene na obeh omenjenih vrhovih, najverjetneje predstavljajo ozvezdja. Kljub temu še vedno živijo starejše interpretacije, ki figurice razlagajo kot predmete zdravilskega kulta. V tej zvezi se največkrat navaja figurica sedeče ženske z eno 'debelo' nogo. Vendar se pri njej zdi, da je bila tista normalna, suha noga zelo skrbno izdelana, medtem ko sta bila debela noga in tudi telo oblikovana kot glinast valj in se zdita manj pomembna. Če pogledamo figurico sedeče ženske iz profila, njena suha noga spominja na Kasiopejo, etiopsko kraljico, ki je bila zaradi svoje nečimrnosti kaznovana tako, da je sedaj v ozvezdju. Poleg te figurice članek obravnava še eno, ki je v preteklosti prav tako vzpodbujala hipoteze o zdravilskem kultu, a jo lahko razumemo kot upodobitev ozvezdja Andromede.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Minojci, svetišča na vrhovih, ozvezdja, Kasiopeja, Andromeda

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## **Background**

Research carried out previously by the Uppsala archaeoastronomical group has shown that the surviving structures of the so-called peak sanctuaries on the hilltops Petsophas and Traostalos indicate that they were used for astronomical observations, for calendaric and navigational purposes (Henriksson & Blomberg 1996).

The sites are rather close to each other on the east coast of Crete, overlooking the sea to the east. Both sites are so-called peak sanctuaries within 1-2 km, from major Minoan settlements situated at sea level. Traostalos is 515 m above sea level and Petsophas is at about 255 m. There are no indications of ancient roads leading up to the peaks; they were reached by foot, Petsophas being reached in about half an hour and Traostalos, a rather more demanding climb, in about an hour for a young healthy person. Neither of the sites has any water source and they are exposed to the weather. These are not places that a sick person would find easily accessible. The climb to Traostalos, where the figurine with, and I quote, 'a swollen leg' or 'an oedematous leg' was found would have been very difficult and could have caused further health problems to the individual in question. Moreover, it would appear that the small structures at these sites were not suitable for more than overnight visits to study the stars and as lookout points towards the sea. These two sites are not situated 'on the lower and more accessible summits', as are the sites described in a paper on healing cults in Minoan times (Arnott 1999: 2).

There have also been studies showing that Classical and Hellenistic Greek literature, e.g. Aratos' *Phaenomena*, contain partial descriptions of the sky as it appeared during Minoan times, i.e. around 2000 BCE. This means that there seems to have been a long tradition concerning the stars, the sun, the moon, and the constellations, as well as the knowledge of how these could be used for keeping track of time, a tradition going back to the time when those two structures were originally built (Blomberg, P.E. 2003, with further references).

More than 2400 figurines in total are found on the two sites, dated to the time of the construction of the hilltop buildings (c 2000 BCE). The function of these figurines is still debated. Earlier I have shown that they are most likely representations of constellations, used for educational purposes (Blomberg 2000 and 2006). However, there are those who interpret them as gifts in a healing cult.

For example John Myres was the first to suggest this interpretation of the figurines when he published his excavation on Petsophas in 1902 (Myres 1902-1903). His interpretation was based on a number of terracotta figurines depicting parts of the human body, which reminded him of the votives found in Hellenistic Greek healing cult temples as well as in the modern churches of Greece. However, the majority of the terracotta figurines depict small animals: bulls, ibexes, along with human figures. The figurines representing animals dominates; while bulls are especially numerous.

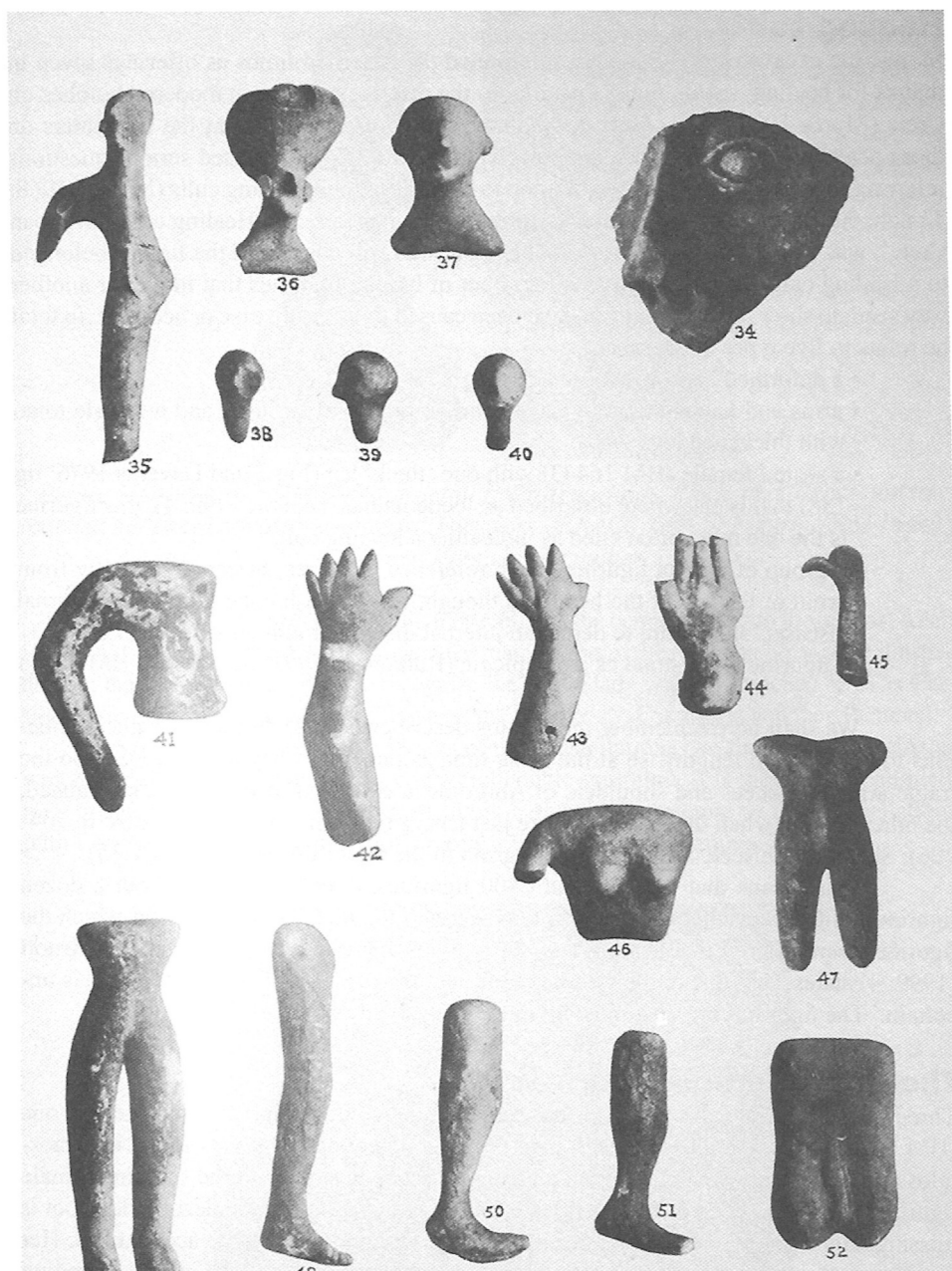


Figure 1: Finds from Petsophas (Myres 1902-1903).

## Healing cult?

Myres, the excavator of Petsophas, interpreted the detached limbs as offerings given in thanks for healing, seeing them a parallel to the offerings we see in modern churches on Crete (Myres 1902/1903). Martin P. Nilsson, however, doubted that the terracottas on those peaks were parts of a healing cult (Nilsson 1968: 74) and raised serious questions referring to missing human parts common to known Hellenic healing cults (Nilsson 1968: 74 note 60; Blomberg 2003). Robert Arnott (1999) in an article, 'Healing cult in Minoan Crete', was well aware of Nilsson's doubts, but was still convinced the figures belonged to a healing cult. He refers to a small number of human figurines that in one or another way seem to show a defect that can have been caused by some disease or accident. In total he refers to five types of figurines:

- a deformed hand (Davaras 1976: fig 139)
- arms and hands that may have been deformed by arthritis and a female torso with thickened legs
- a seated female (HM 16443) with one 'thick' leg (Fig 2 and Davaras 1976: fig 138) that is elsewhere described as 'oedematous' (Arnott 1999: 4), this figurine is the one most often cited as indicating a healing cult.
- a group of human figurines, with reference to Myres, bisected vertically from groin to the top of the head and thought to show a human with some internal disease, 'an attempt to depict an internal disease or ailment', see fig 1:35.
- a figurine understood as a paraplegic (Rutkowski 1991: item 3.1.24 HM 4863)

We shall here remember that Aratos describes how Andromeda's right side begins to rise divided lengthwise at the same time as the Fishes begin to rise, 'So too the tragic arms and knees and shoulders of Andromeda extend all divided, one side ahead, the other behind, when the two Fishes are just emerging from the ocean' (Aratos: ll. 704-706). She is thus bisected vertically from groin to the top of the head (as Fig 1:35).

This means that out of about 2400 figurines, Arnott identified about a dozen figurines with defects that can be interpreted as showing medical problems for which the figurines were offered in a healing cult. After the presentation of these figurines, Arnott (1999: 4) states, 'but due to their crude rendering, the pathology in all these cases is uncertain.' The figurines are, in almost all museums, called votive gifts.

## The sitting female figurines

Three of the figurines discussed in this connection are sitting humans, but there is one (HM 16443) that is emphasized and is in rather good condition. It was found on Traostalos and depicts a woman sitting on a chair. The head is similar to the standing female figurines, while the body and her left leg are formed by one clay cylinder; her left foot is missing. Her right leg is carefully formed, as if it were intended to be accentuated. Her breasts are clearly shown, to indicate a female. Her hat differs from that of other standing female figurines; it looks like a crown. Her arms, what remains of them, are outstretched (Figs 2a and b).



Figure 2: a) Figurine HM 16443, frontal. From Traostalos. Photo and permission to publish by 'Heraklion Archaeological Museum, MERACS-TAP. b) Figurine HM 16443 side view. Photo by the author.

In studying Aratos (ll. 188-196, 653-658, esp. the commentaries to those lines; Allen 1963: 142f, s.v. Cassiopeia) and the illustrated manuscripts of the *Phenomena* or other illustrations of that constellation, you will recognize the sitting lady with outstretched arms as Cassiopeia (many good pictures are available on the Internet s.v. Cassiopeia and then Pictures).

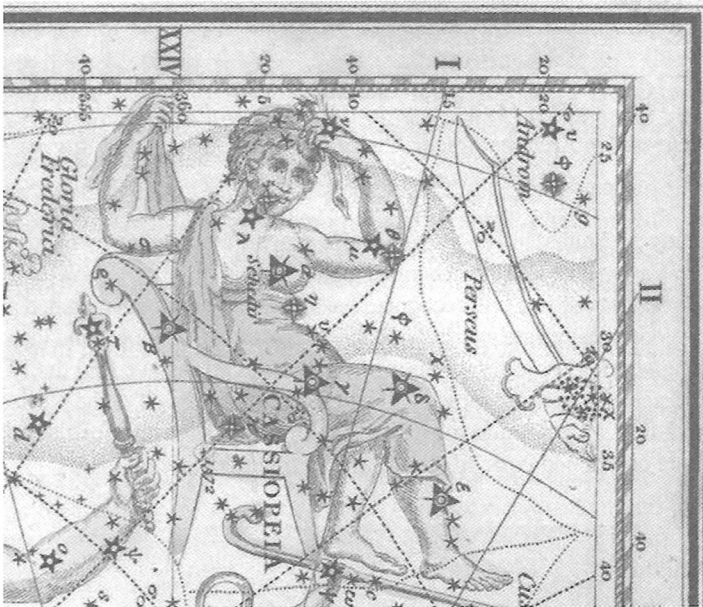
When we look for early pictures of the constellations, we find the Farnese Atlas which is a 2nd century Roman copy of a Hellenistic sculpture. It is the earliest complete map of the sky that we have and most likely is the earliest picture of the constellations with Cassiopeia positioned correctly amongst the other constellations.



Figure 3: Cassiopeia on the Farnese atlas. Roman copy of a Hellenistic sculpture.

According to the Greek myth, the Ethiopian queen Cassiopeia offended the Nereides by boasting that she was more beautiful, which was viewed as an offence. Due to her vanity she was doomed to be a constellation and there she remained, chained to a chair, looking at her daughter Andromeda who, in turn, was chained to a rock, expecting Cetus to come and kill her.

Early illustrations of Cassiopeia in Aratos manuscripts show her as a sitting lady with minor variations when compared to the terracotta figurine from Traostalos, a female figure depicted most often with a bare leg. If we look for the constellation Cassiopeia on star maps we recognize the arms, the bare breasts associated with a major star and then a star on her bare leg, see e.g. on a star map from 1822. The star Cassiopeia epsilon, Segin, on her leg can be on either leg, but that leg is portrayed as bare and exposed.



*Figure 4: Cassiopeia on a star map from 1822. Alexander Jameison 1822.*

A support for the interpretation of the symbolism of the sitting woman would arise if we should find similar figurines at sites that have no connection to a healing cult. Thus, a very interesting little figurine was found at Agia Triada, a site with no indication of a healing cult, but with indications of an interest in the heavenly bodies (see the article by M. Blomberg and Henriksson in this Proceedings). It is situated almost at sea level on the south coast of Crete. The constellation Cassiopeia appeared above the major mountains to the north of the site.



*Figure 5: Sitting lady from Agia Triada, HM UNN. Photo and permission to publish Heraklion Archaeological Museum, MERACS-TAP.*

Other sitting ladies have been found, for example in graves in that area (see e.g. Nilsson 1968: 296ff.).

## **Conclusions**

When studying the terracotta figurines found on Crete, not only in peak sanctuaries but also at other sites such as graves, it seems that the figurines depict constellations or parts thereof. Although the symbolism of the figurines is in question, it is most likely that their use was connected in some fashion to calendarics and the movement the heavenly bodies, knowledge that would have been important for the passage of time and navigational purposes during the night. Understanding the figurines as depicting constellations does not contradict their possible religious meaning, as it could very well be that the stars and constellations had some spiritual significance in Minoan culture.

It seems clear that the sitting lady most likely depicts the constellation Cassiopeia and do not indicate that the hilltops were places for healing cults. She is another indicator of the Minoan interest in the stars and constellations, and the fact that our western map of the constellations in the sky derives from the Minoans.

## **Acknowledgement**

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