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# THE BULL AS AN ADVERSARY: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON BULL-HUNTING AND BULL-LEAPING*

In a brief but penetrating exposition in his *Minoan Civilization,* S. Alexiou makes certain observations about the so-called bull games of Minoan Crete which capture the essence of this extraordinary activity. Firstly he notes that there is a relationship between bull-hunting and bull-leaping[1]. Secondly, he does away with the concept of the "bull-game" as a sport and suggests instead that the event took place in the context of a festival in which contests were performed (the evidence for the latter is the iconography of the steatite rhyton from Hagia Triada). It is not an accident that the subject is treated in his chapter on Minoan religion under the characteristic title "Bull Sports and Other Festivals"[2].

These statemants will serve as a base on which I shall build my own contribution. Due to lack of space, a full discussion of bull-leaping is impossible, nor can one hope to do justice to the rich bibliography[3]. Only those aspects which pertain to the social/

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* The following special abbreviations are used in addition to the customary ones:
Marinatos - Hirmer = S.Marinatos & M.Hirmer, *Kreta, Thera und das mykenische Hellas* (Munich 1976[3]).
*Minoan Society* = *Minoan Society. Proceedings of the Cambridge Colloquium 1981*, O.Krzyszkowska & L.Nixon eds. (Bristol 1983).
*MMR* = M.P.Nilsson, *The Minoan - Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion* (Lund 1950[2]).
*PM* = A. E. Evans, *The Palace of Minos at Knossos* I-IV (London 1921-35).
*ProcICretCongr* = *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress of Cretan Studies, 1961* (Herakleion 1961-62).

1. S.Alexiou, *Minoan Civilization* (Herakleion 1969) 109. The relationship between the hunt and leaping is explored also by F. Marz, 'Minoischer Stiergott?', *ProcICretCongr,* 215-223.

2. Alexiou (*supra* n.1) 108-110. A. also correctly notes Egyptian contests in the context of religious festivals. Extreme is the position that the bull is a god: A. W. Persson, *The Religion of Greece in Prehistoric Times* (Berkeley 1942); cf. also N.Platon, *Crete* (Geneva 1968) 182-184; idem in *Iconographie Minoenne*, 151(where he too connects bull-hunting and religion). To the other extreme goes M.P.Nilsson, *MMR*, 374, who designates bull-leaping as a very popular *secular* sport.

3. On the location of bull-games: J. W. Graham, *The Palaces of Crete* (Princeton 1987[2]) 73-83; idem in *Antichità Cretesi* I, Festschrift D. Levi, 63-65; N. Platon, in *Kernos,* Festschrift G. Bakalakis (Thessalonike 1972) 143-145 (in Greek). Iconography: Evans, *PM* III, 207ff; A. Ward, 'The Cretan Bull-Sports', *Antiquity* 42 (1968) 117-122; J. G. Younger, *AJA* 80 (1976) 125-137; idem, *Muse* 17 (1983) 72-80; J. Pinsent in *Minoan Society,* 259-269; N.Marinatos, *Minoan Sacrificial Ritual* (Stockholm 1986) 51-72. Many of the above authors deal with the *manner* in which bull-leaping was conducted and with the problem of how realistic the representations are.

religious context of the games and to the identity of the participants will be treated.

It is to Sir Arthur Evans that we owe the first interpretation of the bull games. Although they were supposed to be performed in a religious context, to please the goddess, they could best be described as the "glorification of athletic excellence"[4]. Bull-leaping was to be dissociated from bull-grappling (which is what Evans calls the bull-hunt), the latter being utilitarian in character. «The skilled feats of the actors in these scenes are brought to bear on the practical needs of cattle-breeding and might be paralleled at the present day on many ranches of the "Wild West"»[5]. Although Evans was centainly right in distinguishing two types of events in the iconography, his phrasing presupposes a discrepancy in the class of the participants. On the one hand we have people motivated by "cattle-breeding" needs, on the other, aristocratic youths, who are professional acrobats. I intend to show that, as far as we can judge from the iconography, it is one and the same class of persons that participate in both events.

Most important is Evans's idea about the sex of the participants: that female acrobats took part along with male ones is an accepted dogma today which has rarely been questioned[6]. And yet, even this is open to doubt.

To start with the bull-hunt, this is depicted often and in a variety of media. Suffice it to mention the fresco from the north entrance of the Knossos palace, the Vaphio cups, a seal from Routsi *(CMS* I, 274), the Katsambas pyxis[7]. A characteristic of the iconography is the nature ambiente with trees, rocks etc. which indicate an outdoor setting in the wilderness.

There are two main ways to capture the wild bull. Either he gets caught alive in a net (Vaphio cups, Routsi seal), or he is hunted down by spears (Katsamba pyxis=Fig. 1). Yet these two types of hunt are linked by one common feature: the bull is caught by the horns (Routsi seal, Katsamba pyxis=Fig. 1). On the Katsamba pyxis the man is being tossed high like the bull-leaping acrobats[8]. The question then arises, why it was necessary to have this contact with the bull when the aim was to capture or hunt him. Matz suggested that the purpose of grappling with the animal was to make it even more wild so that it would be caught in the net[9]. This is rather unlikely; one can think of other, less dangerous methods of achieving the same goal. Besides, how can the Katsambas scene, where the animal is hunted by spears, be explained in Matz's hypothesis? It seems to me that it was not practical considerations that dictated bull-grappling but ritual/symbolic ones. The whole procedure looks like ceremonial hunt, an important aspect of which is the confrontation with the wild animal.

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4. Evans, *PM* III, 232.

5. *Ibid.*, 206.

6. An exception is S. Damiani- Indelicato in a paper delivered during the 6th Cretological Congress at Chania 1986.

7. Marinatos-Hirmer, pls. XIV; 200-206; 231; also: p. 166, fig. 34; p. 174, figs. 38-39. For discussion of hunting scenes: Matz (*supra* n.1).

8. This similarity of bull-leaping and bull-hunting has led scholars to hypothesize that the latter evolved out of the former. This goes contrary to common sense and denies hunting its primeval importance. Matz (*supra* n.1) put it very poignantly when he said: «Priorität liegt nicht bei dem Spiel» (219).

9. *Ibid.*, 219.

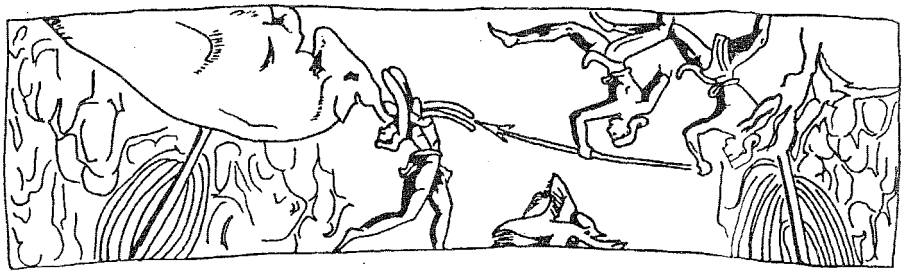

Fig. 1 Bull-hunt: acrobat and hunter with spear. Katsambas pyxis. Drawing after S.Hood, *The Arts of Prehistoric Greece*, fig. 111

Already in the prepalatial period there exist zoomorphic clay vessels in the shape of bulls with small human figures hanging from the horns. These will be discussed briefly as their early date may throw light on the significance of bull-grappling[10]. Three features are important. Firstly, the vessels were found in or around tombs and there is little doubt that they did not serve a secular, utilitarian purpose but were used for libations[11]. This would suggest that the significance of the man-bull complex is religious. Secondly, the bulls are disproportionately large in relation to the humans. Thirdly, some of the animals have a painted decoration which «clearly represents harness of some kind»[12]. The bull is thus represented as simultaneously formidable (hence the overwhelming size) and tamed (hence the meaning of the net). The men hanging on the horns (Fig. 2) might signify an attempt at dominance of the animal. These elements continue in palatial times: the bull rhyta with nets on their backs from Pseira, Mochlos and Thera are direct descendants of the Mesara vessels[13]. I would further suggest that bull-hunting, which is commonly represented in art of the neopalatial period, is ceremonial in nature and exemplifies the desire to tame the most dangerous and strongest animal indigenous to Crete, the wild bull.

The hunting urge goes back to the beginnings of mankind. While it was originally necessary for sustenance, as human societies and cultures became increasingly complex, it became a symbolic behavioural pattern, one aspect of which is dominance over nature[14]. Thus, ritual hunting is neither unexpected nor unique to Crete. In the

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10. S. Xanthoudides, *The Vaulted Tombs of the Mesara* (London 1924) pl. II; Evans, *PM* I, 188-190; Marinatos-Hirmer, pl. 14. K. Branigan, *The Tombs of Mesara* (London 1970) 81 suggests a possible foreshadowing of bull-leaping. Idem, *The Foundations of Palatial Crete* (London 1970) 102, 110 with pl. 11. There, p. 102, he points out that thereis also a jug from Koumasa with a human around its rim and finds that puzzling. But if the jug is a libation vessel, the small human figure can be explained as a servant of the deity, who is small in comparison with the cultic vessel.

11. Branigan, *Foundations* (*supra* n.10) 110.

12. *Loc. cit.*

13. Evans, *PM* II, 259-260; Sp. Marinatos, *Excavations at Thera* III, pl. 52.2. Recent treatment: N. Marinatos (*supra* n. 3) 30-31.

14. For the origins of ritual hunting and its connection with sacrifice: Burkert, *Homo Necans*

Ancient Orient examples of ceremonial hunt are not uncommon: the Egyptian Pharaoh and the Assyrian King had to kill, even struggle with beasts, especially lions[15]. In Crete, the most ferocious animal indigenous to the island was the bull. Experienced both as hostile and awesome[16], he dominates the imagery of Minoan Crete. The entrances of the palace of Knossos, as well as the Throne Room, were decorated with bulls charging or galloping outwards, thus emitting messages of power to the approaching visitor[17]. Bull-leaping scenes also abound in Knossos. But what do they mean?

If the above thesis, that the hunt represents a contest between man and wild animal, is correct, then bull-leaping can be seen as a feat of similar character. What changes is not the essence but the technique and the locality. Whereas in hunting spears or nets are used, it is only the superior skill and intelligence of man that counts in bull-leaping. We have seen, however, that even during the hunt, acrobatics were performed; no doubt they were meant to confuse the animal, even to outwit it. Bull-leaping then represents a metamorphosis of the more primeval hunting into an acculturized form; a transference from the wilderness into the urban centre under the control of the palace of Knossos.

A unique feature of the Minoan bull-hunt is that, unlike in the Orient, it was not conducted by the king. Who then are the figures that we see in the iconography? Two features stand out: only males are involved and they are all young[18]. Their youth can be deduced by their long hair, wasp-waists and lack of beards[19]. That they come from the aristocracy can hardly be doubted, but what did they achieve by this feat? One occasion fits the situation particularly well: Rites of Passage. Ever since the seminal work of A. van Gennep[20], the phenomena accompanying these rites have been shown

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(Berlin 1972). A recent summary of his views in *Violent Origins*, R. G. Hammerton-Kelly, ed. (Stanford 1987) 149-176. Paleolithic ritual hunt is, of course, vividly represented in the caves of the period.

15. Concerning Egyptian ritual hunt, the coronation ceremony of Tutankhamen in the lively account of Ch. Desroches-Noblecourt, *Tutankhamen* (London 1963, Engl. transl.) 176, can serve as an example: «On the eve of the coronation ....kings customarily displayed their hunting prowess-taming wild horses, baiting savage bulls, or wrestling with lions...» For Assyrian examples see H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (Harmondsworth 1954) 89, pl. 87.

16. However, F. Schachermeyr, *Die minoische Kultur des alten Kreta* (Stuttgart 1964) 156, exaggerates when he says that the bull was experienced as a hostile deity of earthquakes whose power had to be overcome through bull-leaping.

17. *PM* II, 160-176, 772ff.; IV, 905.

18. It is noteworthy that bearded priests are represented as hunters also in Minoan art. Evans, *PM* IV, 413, thinks he recognized a bow in the hands of one of the long-robed priests. On a steatite vase from Knossos, a bearded man (I think he is a priest because of his characteristic hairstyle and beard) is depicted as an archer: *PM* III, 106, fig. 59. But the capture and hunting of bulls is conducted only by young men.

19. On hairstyles and youth see N. Marinatos, *Art and Religion in Thera* (Athens 1984) 62, and especially E. Davis, *AJA* 90 (1986) 399-406 and R. Koehl, *JHS* 106 (1986) 99-110, esp. 99-104. In general: E. Leach, 'Magical Hair', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 88 (1958) 147-164.

20. A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (1908, Engl. transl. Chicago 1960). For Greek religion see A. Brelich, *Paides e Parthenoi* (Rome 1969) as well as H. Jeanmaire, *Couroi et Couretes* (Lille 1939).

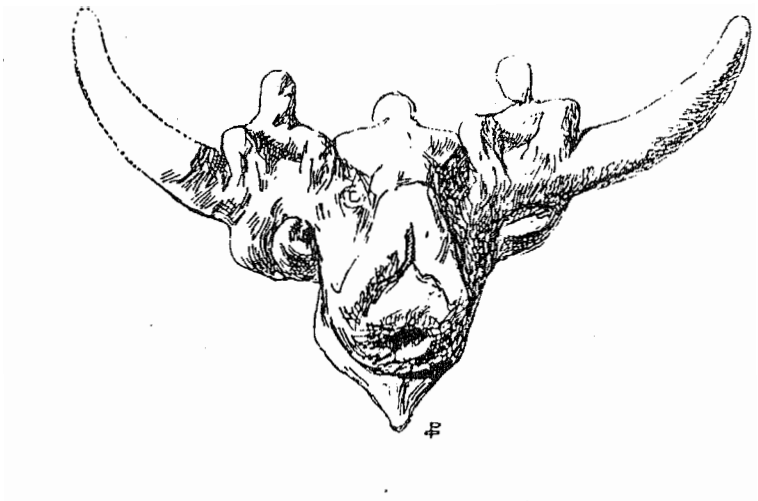

Fig. 2 Bull-rhyton from Koumasa with men hanging on the horns of the bull. After Evans, *PM* I, fig, 137 d

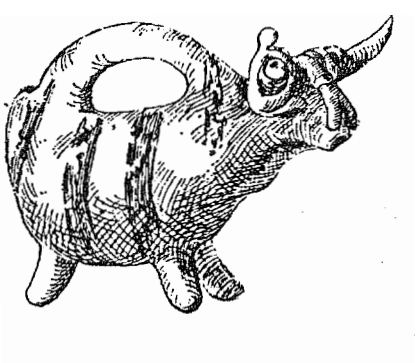

Fig. 3 Bull-rhyton from Koumasa. After K.Branigan, *The Tombs of Mesara*, fig. 18

to have universal traits which transcend cultural boundaries[21]. One of the procedures that young men (especially those that belong to the aristocracy) have to undergo is a series of difficult ordeals in which their strength is tested[22]. Hunting is a common ordeal; it may even represent a phase in the life of young men during which they live in the wilderness, away from the urban environment, and practice their hunting skills[23]. The capturing of the bull, which sometimes resulted in fatal injuries, would confer desired status on the young hunters. Seen in this light, bull-leaping is a test of skill connected with Rites of Passage. To this interpretation concurs the iconography of the Boxers' Rhyton from Hagia Triada[24] where the acrobatic ordeal is part of an iconographical programme consisting exclusively of contests[25]. In all of them youth confronts youth except in one case where man confronts bull and loses: the acrobat is gorged by the animal.

If the above is correct, bull-leaping presents us with an anomaly: female acrobats. They would be an incongruity because although females also undergo ordeals, these are very different from the ordeals of men. Their purpose is to prepare women for their roles as wives and especially mothers[26]. Where confrontation of a girl with a wild, male bull would fit in a social scheme, I do not know. A further difficulty is that males and females rarely mingle in ritual; on the contrary, there usually is strict segregation[27]. Nor can one argue that there is a hidden sexual contrast, a juxtaposition of the young

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21. V. Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*' in *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, N. Y. 1967) 93-101.

22. Many Greek myths reflect initiatory patterns involving the prince defeating the wild beast or monster and marrying the princess, for example. See W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley 1979) 29ff. Hunting in connection with initiatory practices has been also postulated by Koehl (*supra* n.19) 104-110.

23. Thus Ephorus, *FGrHist* 70 F 149 (Strabo X 483-484) describes how Cretan youths of the Greek period were secluded in the mountains and learned how to hunt from their tutors/lovers. See also Koehl *(supra* n. 19) 104-106, who sees the origin of this institution, including homosexual relations between tutor/initiate, in Minoan times. I disagree here: the existing similarities in puberty rites of the Minoan and Greek periods can be explained phenomenologically as repetitions of constantly recurring features. But each social system has its own distinctive code. In this sense it is dangerous to project the Greek code into a totally different type of society such as palatial Crete.

24. Marinatos-Hirmer, pls. 106, 107.

25. G. Säflund, 'The *Agoge* of the Minoan Youth as Reflected by Palatial Iconography', in *The Function of the Minoan Palaces*, R.Hägg, N. Marinatos eds. (Stockholm 1987) 230-231, stresses the initiatory character of the scenes on the Boxers' vase. He makes some penetrating observations regarding the increasing difficulty of the trials if you read the scenes from bottom to top, and notes that only the victors wear boots. A mark of higher status? R.Koehl ('The Boxer Rhyton and the 'Famous Ones' of Minoan Crete', paper presented at the College Art Association: Session on Greek Iconography) connects the iconography of the same vase with initiation. I am grateful to R. Koehl for making his manuscript available to me.

26. I have proposed a female puberty rite which involves wounding on the foot and shedding of blood for Thera: N. Marinatos *(supra* n. 19) 73-84. In general see Turner (*supra* n. 21).

27. N. Marinatos, 'Role and Sex Division in Ritual Scenes of Aegean Art', *Journal of Prehistoric Religion* 1 (1987)23-34.

girl with the male bull-god[28]. If that were the case, the male acrobats would be out of place.

As we have seen, we owe the idea of girl leapers to Sir Arthur Evans himself. The reason is, of course, the colour: only women are painted white in Minoan art. That a more complex colour code may have existed has not been seriously considered, despite the fact that the woman acrobats are extremely peculiar, not to mention abnormal looking.

First of all, they wear a male costume, the kilt. It is normally stated that this is dictated by the nature of the activity which required that the limbs be free. However, this does not explain why the kilt should have a pronounced phallus sheath! Indeed, it is precisely this sheath which gives the male costume connotations of manhood[29] and may be considered a counterpart to the 'feminine' open bodice of female dress. Thus, while it is true that had girls taken part in bull-jumping, they would have worn some kind of practical outfit, I do not see the necessity for an ostentatiously male costume. Noteworthy are also the male boots (Fig. 4).

Secondly, not only do our presumed girls have no breasts, but they have pronounced abdominal and stomach muscles. Such musculature is rendered on male but never female figures. If artistic convention is so absolute as not to allow a multivalent meaning for the colour white, why does the rule not hold for the rendering of the anatomy? Without belabouring the point, I suggest a comparison of the 'prince' from the Chieftain's Cup and one of the 'female' taureadors from the palace of Knossos (Fig. 5). It becomes obvious that, had it not been for the white colour, there would have been no doubt whatsoever that the taureador is male. Anatomical details, kilt, boots, even hairstyle are the same in both figures. It should also be noted that in all other media where bull-leaping is depicted, the male sex of the taureadors has never been questioned.

The above does not explain the use of white which in all other cases is used exclusively to designate women. Yet, the colour code may have been more complex, than we suspect. In Egypt, lighter/darker tones indicate age, status[30], or possibly superiority in strength/skill[31]. One of the Boxing Boys from a Theran fresco has a lighter face than the other and I see here a case of hierarchy: he is the eventual victor[32]. On

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28. For example M. Cameron believed that the significance of bull-leaping was the shedding of blood in connection with a fertility festival. The female element was represented by the goddess impersonator, the male by the bull. In *The Function of the Minoan Palaces*, R. Hägg, N. Marinatos eds. (Stockholm 1987) 325.

29. E. Giesecke, *OpAth* 17 (1988) 91-98.

30. In the tomb of Usherat, for example, the priest Usherat it shown together with his wife and mother. The two females are identical except that the mother is painted darker than the wife. *Egyptian Wall Paintings: The Metropolitan Museum of Art,* reprinted from the Metropolitan Museum Art Bulletin 1979, fig. 39. In the tomb of Queen Nefertari at Thebes, the queen has a colour different from the goddess leading her. K. Lange - M. Hirmer, *Ägypten* (Munich 1955) pl. 247.

31. On an Egyptian painting with two wrestling boys, one is lighter possibly to indicate he is superior in strength. Illustrated in N. Marinatos (*supra* n. 19) 111, fig. 77.

32. Sp. Marinatos, *Excavations at Thera* IV (Athens 1971) 46 ff. col.pl. E; N. Marinatos (*supra* n. 19) 106-112. I think that the left Boxing Boy with the light face is a victor because: 1. His body

Fig. 4 Bull-leaping figure from the palace of Knossos. After Evans, *PM* III, col. pl. XXXI

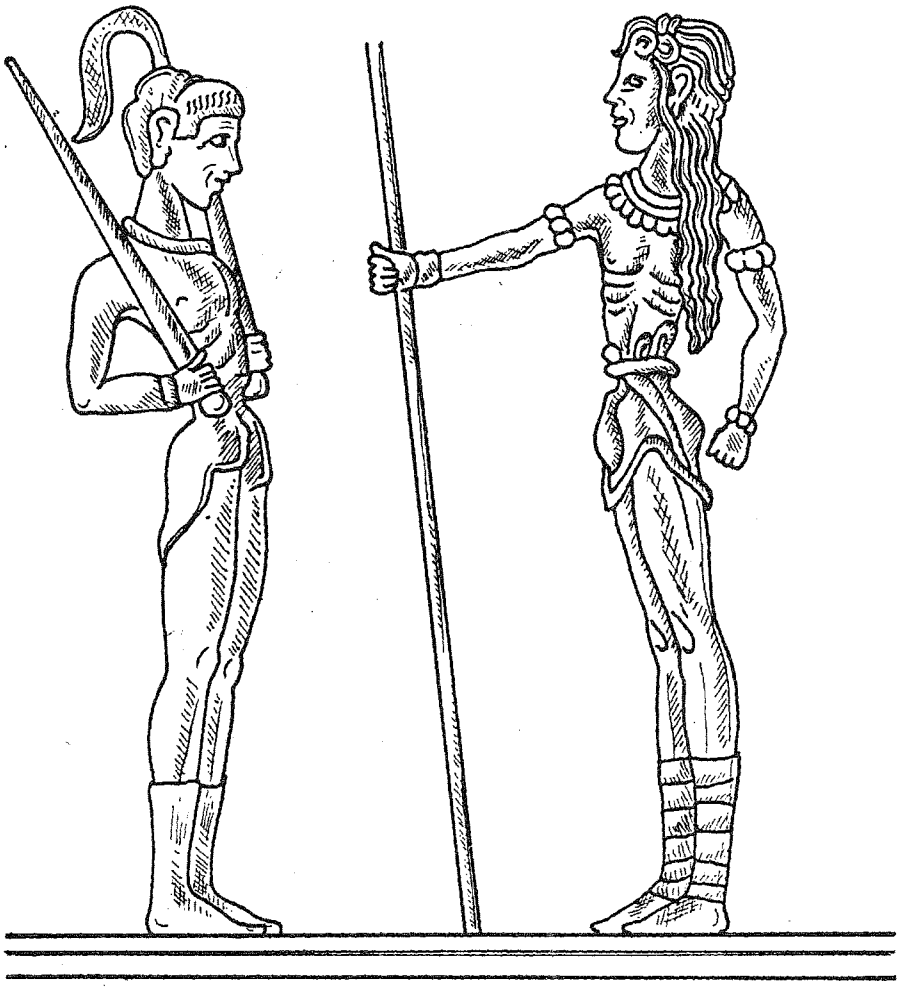

Fig. 5 The 'Prince' on the 'Chieftain's Cup' from Hagia Triada. After Evans, *PM*, II, fig. 516

the whole, one gets the impression that colour was manipulated to express more than just the male-female distinction. One has to go to Greece of the 7th cent. to find a similar use of white colour: on the famous Proto-Attic amphora showing the blinding of Polyphemus, Odysseus is white, so that his role and superiority in status can be marked in contrast to his dark companions. Conversely, Circe, although female, is painted in a dark colour on an Archaic kylix because she is a witch[33]. It is not being argued here that there is continuity of tradition; only that artists of various periods and cultures were willing to play around with colour conventions to express nuances.

It remains to speculate what the Minoan painters of the Knossos taureadors had in mind. It is interesting to note that on the best preserved panel from Knossos[34] the white acrobats are not leaping at all. One is catching the bull by the horns, the other is behind him; only the brown figure is depicted as a true leaper. Another differentiating feature between the dark and light figures is that only the white ones wear boots. S. Damiani-Indelicato suggested that what is attempted here is rendering of time phases[35]. I think it is more likely that a type of hierarchy is expressed. But that is only a hypothesis which needs to be worked out in greater detail.

I have attempted to place bull-hunting and bull-leaping in a social context plausible for the Minoan world of the new palace period[36]. A model of ceremonial initiation has been proposed in which some of the aristocratic youths of Crete had a chance to excell. The bull was an adversary to be overcome by bodily skill and human cunning thus confirming man' s mastery over nature.

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posture shows more control. 2. His eyes are rolling (a sign of aggression and wild mood?). 3. He has blocked the blow of his opponent whereas he has perhaps managed to hit the latter. Note that the restoration may not be accurate. What stops us from restoring the fist against the opponent's face? 4. The left boy is bejeweled, the other boy is not.

33. Blinding of Polyphemus illustrated, for example, in J. Boardman, *Pre-Classical. From Crete to Archaic Greece* (Harmondsworth 1967) 90, fig. 50. For the Circe kylix: N. Himmelmann-Wildschütz, *Erzählung und Figur in der archaischen Kunst, AbhMainz* 1967, Nr. 2. pl. 4.

34. Marinatos-Hirmer, pl. XVII.

35. *Supra* n. 6.

36. I have deliberately abstained from connections with the much later Greek (and not Minoan) myth of Minos, the Minotaur and the seven youths and maidens. Myths do not always refer to past historical events, on the contrary, most often they articulate concerns of the society that generates them (in our case the myth of Minos is an Athenian invention). A structuralist analysis of the Theseus-Minotaur myth shows that it falls into a pattern too widely spread (it is common even in fairy-tales) to be a unique reflection of a distant past. Theseus is the young prince who goes to a far-away, liminal land (Crete) to overcome the monster and marry the princess. He then returns and succeeds his father. This falls neatly into a pattern of 'separation – successful completion of an ordeal – return'. The monster here is a bull who eats humans: an inversion of Greek sacrificial practice in which humans eat the bull. The story can thus fit perfectly well into a Greek (specifically Athenian) context of the historical period. For a recent collection of essays on Greek myth with methodological points: J. Bremmer, ed., *Interpretations of Greek Mythology* (Totowa, New Jersey 1986).

But even if the above is rejected,and the seven maidens are brought in as arguments in favour of the girl-taureador hypothesis, there are still insurmountable difficulties. The story tells us that the seven youths and maidens were sent to Crete to be *devoured* by the monster, not to perform a bull-dance (only M. Renault's imagination has made that mental leap). It is Theseus who confronts the Minotaur, not the youths and maidens.