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ON THE USE AND MISUSE  
OF THE TERM «PRIEST-KING» IN MINOAN STUDIES

Here in the Heraklion Museum is preserved almost all of the surviving evidence for the nature of Minoan religion, and for its relationship to Minoan society and its political structure. There is reason to doubt, however, that the interpretation of that evidence has always been as admirable as is the evidence itself.

We have, all of us, a fairly well-defined picture of the monuments of Minoan religion, to which we append without much discrimination the monuments of Mycenaean religion in Crete or elsewhere, and we have an appreciation of the religious sentiments, the terror of destructive nature, the awful reverence of productive nature, which were the foundation upon which the rites and beliefs of Minoan religion were based. We have an opinion on what those rites were, not in detail, but in general, and we know where they were performed in grotto, on mountain peak, or in palatial rooms and theatral areas. Especially we know who performed the rites, at least in the Englishspeaking world, where we unhesitatingly say it was the Priest-King, with the assistance of priestesses and priests, who with processions, with dances, with bull-leaping, accompanied by the display of sacred symbols, the «Double Axe», the «Horns of Consecration», and with characteristic ritual dress celebrated the mysteries of a Mother-Goddess or of an earth-shaking God.

We have in Nikos Kazantzakis' *Odyssey*, in several historical novels in English, in a French play or two, and I know not where else, dramatic presentations of this interpretation of Minoan religion, and we shall soon have another cinematographic version, bound by the sensational nature of our modern view of Minoan religion to be most attractive and to make a lot of money. But have we all considered, as some of us have, whether this interpretation is true to the facts, whether it disregards unpleasant aspects of what Minoan people actually practised in religion, or whether it may not have imported entirely modern notions, not all of them wholesome, into what the evidence of the monuments tells us? I, at least, believe that our normal view of Minoan religion contains a

series of concepts not attested in the remains of Minoan sanctuaries, nor in the representations of Minoan rites, myths, or symbols, but derived from entirely modern theories. And I think these concepts have been wrongly attributed to Minoan religion through an accident. The accident occurred in 1903, and it was embodied in the sentence Arthur Evans then wrote in his annual report on Knossos: «It seems that there were here, as in early Anatolia, Priest-Kings»<sup>1</sup>. Up to that moment no one had supposed that Minos was a «Priest-King»; indeed no one had yet defined a «Priest - King». From that moment, for Evans' readers, at least, a wholly new interpretation of Minoan religion was introduced, through the use of that term, and without serious regard for Evans' real opinions or the evidence on which he based them. I imagine it will be impossible to outlaw the term «Priest - King» from our vocabulary, and to expunge the false view of Minoan religion which so strongly hold our imaginations, but if I can show that it was indeed by accident that the King of Knossos was first called «Priest-King», if I can show that Evans, who best knew what he meant by it can hardly have meant anything like what we mean by it, perhaps the problem will be re-examined by those who can tell us, from the evidence, what was the true character of Minoan religion.

What I propose here is to point out what Evans said, and presumably thought, about Minoan government and Minoan religion in the first three campaigns at Knossos, in 1900 to 1902, when he had not yet used the term «Priest - King», when the particular connection of religious and political elements he expressed in those words had not yet occurred to him. I shall point out what intermingling of the two he did see in the fourth campaign, and I shall indicate the source from which Evans derived the phrase—for though he did create several names new to English, «Horns of Consecration», for example, he did not invent this one<sup>2</sup>.

It is evident from Evans' first report that he began to dig at

<sup>1</sup>) Arthur J. Evans, «The Palace at Knossos. Provisional Report for the Year 1903», *Annual of the British School at Athens* 9 (1902 - 3), 38. The passage is quoted in context further on in this paper.

<sup>2</sup>) In another discussion I intend to consider at length the history of the term «Priest-King» and its near relations up to 1903, show its several different meanings, and on still another occasion I intend to consider how the term has been used since it has become so closely connected with Minoan civilization.

Knossos in full confidence of finding the remains of the palatial dwelling of what were then called the «Mycenaean» rulers of Knossos, of finding the ruins of sanctuaries and of the utensils of cult of that period, and of discovering in religious symbols the identity of the deities worshipped. Except that he thought it easy to find the traces of prehistoric political organization and of religious practice in the same region we cannot suppose he imagined any close connection between the two<sup>3</sup>.

The marvellous discoveries of the first campaign not only made it clear that the Knossian political power reflected in the monumental palace had been of the first order, but it showed that the symbols of religion, the places of cult, and the representation of worship or myth were to be found concentrated in the palace. I may mention one or two items in which religion and politics are considered together, as it were. First, there is the «Corridor of the Procession», where the frescoes with the feet and lower parts of robes of male and female figures. Of Evans' views of the relations of kings and religion at this moment we may say there was confusion, as of oil and water, but no mixing, for he says of these figures: «These were no doubt princely, priestly, or official personages—long robes characterizing certain persons of distinction on Mycenaean gems»<sup>4</sup>. Second, there are the rooms of the Double Axe Pillars, whose seventeen markings with the Double Axe sign gain, as he says, «added significance from the fact that the Double Axe is the special emblem of the Cretan Zeus, and that deposits of votive double axes of bronze have come to light in cave sanctuaries of the God both on Ida and Dikta»<sup>5</sup>. By etymological connections Evans brought in the idea of the Labyrinth as the equivalent of the Palace, and as the «House of the Double Axe». Again we see religion and politics mixed but separate, when he concludes his observations on these rooms, saying: «The House of the Double Axe» was doubtless a palace, but it was dedicated in a special way to the chief indigenous divinity»<sup>6</sup>. The apparently votive cups found here, the representation in fresco of a shrine gave further instances of the importance of religious elements in the Palace.

<sup>3</sup>) Arthur J. Evans, «Knossos. Summary Report of the Excavations in 1900», Annual of the British School at Athens 6 (1899 - 1900), 3 - 5.

<sup>4</sup>) Op. cit. 43.

<sup>5</sup>) Op. cit. 32.

<sup>6</sup>) Op. cit. 33.

In the Throne Room, however, all is still civil pomp, not religious ritual. Of this area he says: «the specially rich character of the relics found in the chamber itself corroborates the general conclusion that a royal personage once sat here for council, or for the enjoyment of the oriental *kéif*. The smaller size of the hollowed seat itself as compared with that from the neighbouring chamber points to its occupant as a king rather than a queen. The stone benches round may have afforded room for twenty counsellors»<sup>7</sup>.

We need not say more of the impression the palatial residence of the Knossian Kings made on Evans. Indeed he says less and less of it in his reports, though it receives due attention in *The Palace of Minos*. But we may point out that it was at the time of the first excavation report that his *Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult* was published<sup>8</sup>. Here we see the foundation on which observations of religious practice at Knossos rested. He had, in effect, picked out the marks by which he could recognize the memorials of religion – the employment of symbols, the use of «sacral» implements, the provision for pomp and ceremonial ritual, richness and peculiarity of dress, and the representation of deities and their worship. For this he had a sharp eye; for imagining the sentiments of the worshippers he did not seem to care. Even the baetylic worship he experienced and recorded in that essay, he looked at as a ritual, pure and simple, and did not pretend to know more of their feelings than that the worshippers looked for a beneficial result.

Evans' reaction to the discoveries of 1901 and 1902 showed no essential change in his view of the relation of court and cult. We may note from the second campaign these particulars. Evans imagines that one might, in the Western Court, «see the Elders of a Mycenaean Assembly seated..., while the King himself sate at the gate on the Seat of Judgement, in the stately portico beyond»<sup>9</sup>. In this year was found the fresco of the male head with the crown of fleur-de-lys. «But», he asks, «was the personage who wears it in this case royal or divine? The processional frescoes» suggest

<sup>7</sup>) Op. cit. 42.

<sup>8</sup>) *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 21 (1901), 99 - 204.

<sup>9</sup>) Arthur J. Evans, *The Palace at Knossos, Provisional Report of the excavations for the Year 1901, Annual of the British School at Athens* 7 (1900 - 1), 6.

that we have «to do with human personages», and together with other evidence they «afford a real presumption that in this crowned head we see before us a Mycenaean King»<sup>10</sup>.

In the third campaign we may notice that the «Minoan» character of the Palace, as distinct from «Mycenaean», prepared the way for finding religious expression unrelated to the background of Classical, Homeric or Legendary Greece from which parallels had so readily been drawn heretofore. But from the finds of 1902 he was led to observations about Minoan Palaces and Cities, without special reference to Minoan Kings. On the other hand religious documents were plentiful. The significant find of the year was the «Shrine of the Double Axe»<sup>11</sup>, in which the simultaneous presence of the idol of a goddess and a double axe's head led to an extension of the meaning of the Double Axe. It could no longer symbolize Cretan Zeus alone — the trace of male deities at Knossos was still remarkably rare — but at first it could, and later it must, symbolize a female deity. Evans' final announcement of this theme was that «The Double Axe, the proper emblem of the male God, was also common to the Goddess — just as in Asia Minor it survived in the hands of the Amazons — and there are indications that of the two it was Rhea who took the precedence in Minoan cult»<sup>12</sup>. There is one other capital piece of evidence from this year, the clay model which seemed plainly to represent a portable seat for a personage, to be carried by runners, and which seemed best interpreted in connection with a fragmentary fresco as «the sella gestatoria of a divinity or priest»<sup>13</sup>.

Up to this point the king and his counsellors, governors of Knossos and Crete, were assumed without question to be distinct from the priests and priestesses who served the gods. They were both parts of Minoan life — but it was not in Evans' tradition to imagine that the separation of Church and State was not the natural condition of human society. Still, in the next year's report he had changed his view.

In 1903 there were the Temple Repositories in the Central Pa-

<sup>10</sup>) Op. cit. 15.

<sup>11</sup>) Arthur J. Evans, The Palace at Knossos. Provisional Report of the Excavations for the Year 1902, Annual of the British School at Athens 8 (1901 - 2), 95 - 105.

<sup>12</sup>) Op. cit. 102.

<sup>13</sup>) Op. cit. 32.

lace Sanctuary, from which came the faience Snake Goddess and votaries, which called attention to a chthonic aspect of Minoan religion, permitting the suggestion that in the same Goddess there were to be found her chthonic aspect (with snakes), her matronly aspect (with lions), and her heavenly aspect (with doves)<sup>14</sup>. With this strong indication of the pervasiveness and the unified nature of Knossian religion we need not list the other remains of cult in the Palace, but can go on to the Priest - King, who appears here for the first time.

The first question to ask in «what did Evans imagine a Priest - King to be?», for it had not yet any fixed meaning. What Evans meant by it must be found in his own words, and this is its first use and most important :

«This whole section of the palace represented according to the original plan an extensive sanctuary and its dependances. The existence of minor shrines such as that of the Double Axes in the North East quarter, the religious symbols found in the North West building, and the constant reference to religious themes traceable in the seal types, miniature paintings, and terracotta models, as well as the votive double axes and other objects found within the Palace make it more and more probable that there was a sacerdotal as well as a royal side to the Minoan dynasts of Knossos. It would seem that there were here, as in early Anatolia, Priest-Kings. An old tradition, that made Minos son and «Companion» of Zeus and a Cretan Moses, is once more seen to have a basis in fact»<sup>15</sup>.

What is characteristic of a «Priest - King» in this passage? He is at once royal and sacerdotal, and the combination makes him something more than a king who happens to be a priest, or a priest elevated to the throne. There is a relationship to deities which makes the «Priest - King» what he is. His duties, his privileges, his hopes, his fears are not mentioned here. It is only implied that one of the important quarters of the Palace was at all times specially devoted to his religious functions. The other point of importance is that this office of «Priest - King» is said to be characteristic of Anatolia — so that we must suppose he had heard of Anatolian

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<sup>14</sup>) Arthur J. Evans, *The Palace at Knossos. Provisional Report for the Year 1903*, *Annual of the British School at Athens* 9 (1902 - 3), 74 - 87.

<sup>15</sup>) *Op. cit.* 38.

«Priest - Kings», though we hear little of them today. Nothing more is said of the essential character of the «Priest - King» when, in another place, it is pointed out that the lily or fleur-de-lys is specially associated with him as a religious symbol in the so-called Priest - King Fresco<sup>16</sup>. This gives him a sanctity, no doubt, as do the double axe signs to the walls and pillars of the palace, but his function in state or in cult is made no clearer by this fact. Still a third passage, the discussion of the primitive basilica of the Royal Villa, does not add, as it might, any further details of the Priest - King's functions. That basilica was reminiscent of the basilica of «the Archon Basileus at Athens, who stood forth as the sacral representative of an earlier King». The context is entirely one of ceremony, with «Tribunal, cancelli, and exedra answering to the place of the episcopal throne in the early Christian buildings of the same name». He continues, «the tendency of (the type the basilica) to survive would be all the greater if, as seems to result from the great religious element in the palace finds, we have here to do with rulers who performed priestly as well as religious functions. It was indeed this side of the old Athenian Kingship that survived in the later office of the Archon Basileus»<sup>17</sup>.

It is clear that it was chiefly the frequency of occurrence of religious elements which led Evans to look for a more intimate connection of King and Priest than he had expected. He now recognized the predominance of female deities over male, and that might be conceived as universally powerful, embodying in several aspects the baleful and the beneficent forces of nature. But aside from identifying the objects of worship with their symbolic expression, and naming the principal worshipper, and aside from appreciating the magnificence with which the worship was carried out, the spiritual and emotional bases of Minoan religion were ignored, and the relative importance of religious elements within Minoan society, government, and economics was left undefined.

It is this which the use of the term «Priest - King» by Evans' successors has introduced. The ritual Evans imagined was theatrical and solemn. The ritual of Kazantzakis' *Odyssey* is orgiastic, appealing to the grosser passions of participants and readers alike. The Priest - King of Evans' fresco is a man of pomp, but also of

<sup>16</sup>) Op. cit. 92.

<sup>17</sup>) Op. cit. 148 («priestly as well as religious» sic).

power, of wealth and of intelligence. The Priest - King of Mary Renault's novel is one who must die miserably, one weak, one circumscribed by countless tabus, one not loved as a just judge and companion of Zeus, but either dreaded with superstitious terror, or hypocritically despised. These things are now, I think you may agree, the essential attributes of the term «Priest - King» as it is found in English novels, and in entirely too many serious historical discussions of Minoan civilization. Evans surely had no notion of such an interpretation of «Priest - King», when he so named the Kings of Knossos. This interpretation in fact comes not from the surviving remains of Minoan cult, but from popularized modern theories in the fields of religion, anthropology, and psychology. The strongest influences on this interpretation came not from those who know Minoan monuments, but from students of the theory of comparative religion. Among them it was Sir James Frazer who has been the most effective, and we may easily see in the «Priest - Kings» of the novels fallen and corrupted leaves from *The Golden Bough*.

Without going into detail, I shall conclude by indicating the sources from which Evans took the term. In a footnote to the passage quoted<sup>18</sup> A.B. Cook is credited with having seen the connection of the two sides, sacerdotal and royal, in the Knossian Dynasts, as well as with seeing the religious element in the lily - crown Evans had set upon the king's head. Cook did not in fact speak of a «Priest - King», but of priestly kings, the phrase Frazer used. For Cook and Frazer both, the priestly king was at the head of a primitive community, a king whose life was hedged about with superstitious and magical practices, who had a momentary and sensuous existence, without power, without hope. This conception is so far from Evans' view that we must suppose that Cook's article, which Evans quoted, was no more than the stimulus to adopt an expression similar to Cook's priestly king from another source. That source I cannot at the moment document, but it was transmitted, I am sure, through conversations with Hogarth, who must have spoken of the Priest - Kings Ramsay had found in the dynasts of Asia Minor from Roman and Hellenistic times, with hints from the impressive Hittite sculptures of Yazilikaya. These Priest - Kings

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<sup>18</sup>) Op. cit. 38, with a reference to A. B. Cook's article, «Zeus, Jupiter, and the Oak», *Classical Review* 17 (1903), 409 - 410.



were not savages, but civilized—controlling prosperous states in the form of theocracies, presumably from palaces, and they were represented in processional and ceremonial sculptures, in the presence of gods who then seemed very close to Cybele, to Magna Mater, to the universal many - faceted Mother Goddess. But Evans did not take over much even of this conception of a Priest - King, which Ramsay had invented as the original type of Anatolian civilization. He simply adopted a convenient name to express his own independent concept of a Minoan ruler, whose religious and ceremonial functions had impressed him as much as had the wealth and power for which his palace had given ample evidence.

All the rest, which has so thoroughly distorted our view of Minoan religion and its relation to Minoan government and economy, which has obscured the functions of the palace and its surrounding city within Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations, has come, I believe, from the accidental choice of the words «Priest - King» to express the highly important place which Evans in 1903 had seen for religion within the Palace at Knossos. I think that a careful re - examination of the evidence will show better the true character of Minoan religion—a character we cannot perhaps sell to Hollywood, but which we might at least describe faithfully in scholarly works.