

# The Perennial Axe

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As we look at the development of the axe from the stone age to the present, we note the perennial interest in the symbolism of the image. It appears that the single axe has connoted power of gods and men and that the double-axe has been associated with goddesses. However, whether attributed to male or female gods or to human beings, the axe has been a symbol of power throughout history.

The oldest surviving objects made by man are bone and stone tools. Knives made of reindeer antlers, with which the early Scandinavian hunting groups could carve grooves in bones, have been dated from the end of the glacial period. In the Paleolithic age about 12,000 B.C., during the Pleistocene epoch, axes, also made from reindeer antlers, came into use. The Mesolithic age's Continental phase, 9000-5000 B.C., produced flint core or flake axes. The earliest known settlement at Maglemoss, Denmark, has yielded axes with sharpened flint-stones inserted in grooved handles with zoomorphic inscriptions. In the later Atlantic phase, 5000-3500 B.C., greenstone axes were made by grinding. T-shaped antlers were also used and may have been the forerunner of the double-axe.

Thickbutted battle-axes were buried in the megalithic dolmens of the Neolithic period of 2500-1500 B.C. Several generations were inhumed in these burial chambers along with their crude flint axes and more elaborate battle-axes. The term 'battle-axe culture' was coined to describe the Jutland groups.

Scandinavian stone axes have been found in bogs inscribed with runes attributing them to the Nordic gods: Loki, Thor, Odin, and Belgthor or Balder.<sup>1</sup> Ancient lore held that the stone axe-heads had celestial origin and were sent by the gods through lightning. It was believed that if one dug in the spot three years after the strike, one might find a magic stone called a celt which could be used as an axe-head. Some celt-shaped stones have a natural hole at the centers of gravity and were used as hammers, wedges, or axes.<sup>2</sup> Many of these stones were also thought to have protective powers against lightning and were kept in houses in Sweden.

The axe was used to cut, to kill, and to intercede with the gods. Magic names were given to celts in many parts of the world, and ancient axe worship appears to have been universal.<sup>3</sup> The animistic belief that wind, trees, and rocks are alive and have souls also undoubtedly contributed to the myth of the magical origin of the celts. Thus, the axe made from a magic celt became a symbol of the gods. A Boetian goddess, the *Lady of the Beasts*, 2500 B.C., has a double-axe painted on her skirt (Fig. 1).

At the Palace in Knossos, the Cretan seals made from steatite, clay, and onyx which have been dated from the Early Minoan period, 2500 B.C., also depict double-axes (Fig. 2). The "Spiritual Transformation Seal" (Fig. 3) pro-

vides us with a great number of details regarding worship in the Middle Minoan period, 2100-1600 B.C. The double-axe is the central theme; it is surrounded by female votives, a tree bearing fruit, and the sacred lily of Crete. A sun, a moon, and water are represented at the top along with a small warrior behind a figure-eight shield.

A Late Middle Minoan fresco shows the mother goddess holding two upright double-axes before her worshippers, who are all young male celebrants (Fig. 4). It appears that priestesses were replaced by priests during the Minoan period. One might be tempted to conjecture that this reflects a shift from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society.

The Minoan linear script has clear images of double-axes in all three calligraphic forms (Fig. 5). The inscriptions occur throughout the Tomb of the Double-Axe in Knossos and indicate the intimate connection of the Minoan goddess to the cult of the dead. The sepulchre was itself a columnar shrine with ritual double-axes and vases for libations, and the rock-cut grave was actually hewn in an outline of the sacred symbol.<sup>4</sup> In Psychro's cave at Hagia Triada, thin ritual axes are inserted into a socket of black steatite stone (Fig. 6).

Sir John Evans, in his massive work on stone implements, tells of at least one instance when the Greek god Bacchus was worshipped under the form of a hatchet or *πέλεκυς*.<sup>5</sup> He also describes the image on a Chaldean cylinder, in which a priest is represented as making an offering to a hatchet placed upright on a throne. Greek inscriptions on celts with Mithraic scenes and perforated axes with Chaldean characters can be seen in the Borgia collection.<sup>6</sup>

The double-axe image was called a *Sagaris* by Pliny, and the Greek author catalogues the Amazonian arsenal of weapons as consisting of shields, bows, arrows, and double-axes. Greek legend also tells of Hephaestus, who was ordered by his father Zeus to split his head with a double-axe. From the opening sprang the goddess Athena. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus tested Penelope's suitors by setting up twelve axes in a single file and challenging the suitors to shoot an arrow through the holes of the axes using a bow. As they failed, Odysseus caught up his bow and sent his arrow straight through the twelve axes. It sounds like an impossible feat, but the excavations at Knossos, which have uncovered bronze axes with flaring crescent blades and holes in the center of the heads, make us reconsider that judgment.<sup>7</sup>

The double-axe has also been used as a symbol of power over life and death. The Roman magistrates at the time of Christ used that image as a badge of their authority. Benito Mussolini adopted the same axe image for his fascist political organization. The bound sticks with an axe projecting was called a 'Fascine,' and each rod represented

a local branch of the party, called 'Fascio'.<sup>8</sup>

The axe, single or double, seems to have symbolized both male and female deities. Mackenzie warns in his *Myths of Crete and Pre-Hellenic Europe* against the hypothesis that patriarchal conditions were preceded by matriarchal and that goddesses preceded gods everywhere. He cited India as a place where male and female deities were worshipped simultaneously.<sup>9</sup>

Mary Daly, in *Beyond God the Father* and now in her latest book *Gyn-Ecology*, suggests that God the Father did indeed replace God the Mother. Daly states that "the killing of the goddess was necessary in order to establish a male-dominated society. The killing has continued

throughout the world in the form of customs that ritually maim and kill women." She notes African genital mutilation, Chinese footbinding, and the burning of widows in India as accepted norms in their cultures. An image of a Minoan gold votive double-axe (cf. Fig. 7) is engraved on the cover of her new book,<sup>10</sup> while the concert poster of Holly Near, a feminist singer, composer, and performer, uses the double-axe image inside the female symbol (Fig. 8).<sup>11</sup>

Since the stone age, the axe has been attributed to gods and goddesses and has been a recurrent symbol of authority over life and death. It continues to be a tool, a weapon, and a power symbol.

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1 John Evans, *The Ancient Stone Implements, Weapons and Ornaments of Great Britain* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1897), p. 58.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

3 D. Mackenzie, *Myths of Crete and Pre-Hellenic Europe* (London: Gersham Pub. Co. Ltd., 1917), p. xxxvi.

4 Arthur Evans, *Palace of Minos at Knossos* (London: McMillan & Co., 1928), vol. II, p. 438.

5 John Evans, p. 62.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

7 A. C. Vaughan, *House of the Double-Axe* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1959), pp. 168-170.

8 The collective organization, represented by all the rods bound together for strength, is termed 'Fasci.'

9 Mackenzie, p. xxxv.

10 Mary Daly, *Gyn-Ecology: Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (New York: Beacon Press, 1979), pp. 111-112.

11 Holly Near's message is female unity, political awareness, and a demand for a future free of nuclear danger. As a result of awakened interest in the double-axe image, some women in the United States are wearing small double-axes in gold or silver on a chain as a symbol of strength and solidarity.

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Fig. 1, *The Lady of the Beasts*, ca. 2500 B.C., Louvre, Paris.

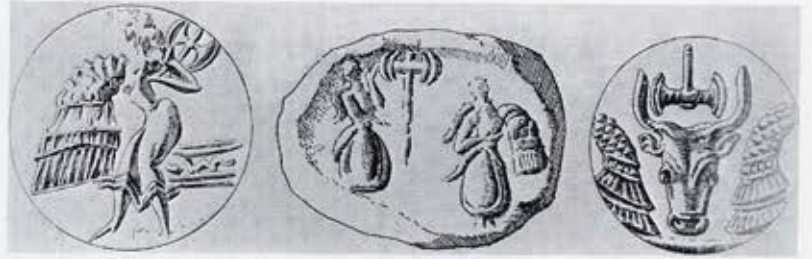


Fig. 2, Line drawings after *Seals from Knossos* (steatite, clay and onyx), ca. 2000 B.C. (Evans, II, p. 435).



Fig. 3, Line drawing of *Spiritual Transformation Seal*, Crete, ca. 1500 B.C. (Neumann, p. 59).

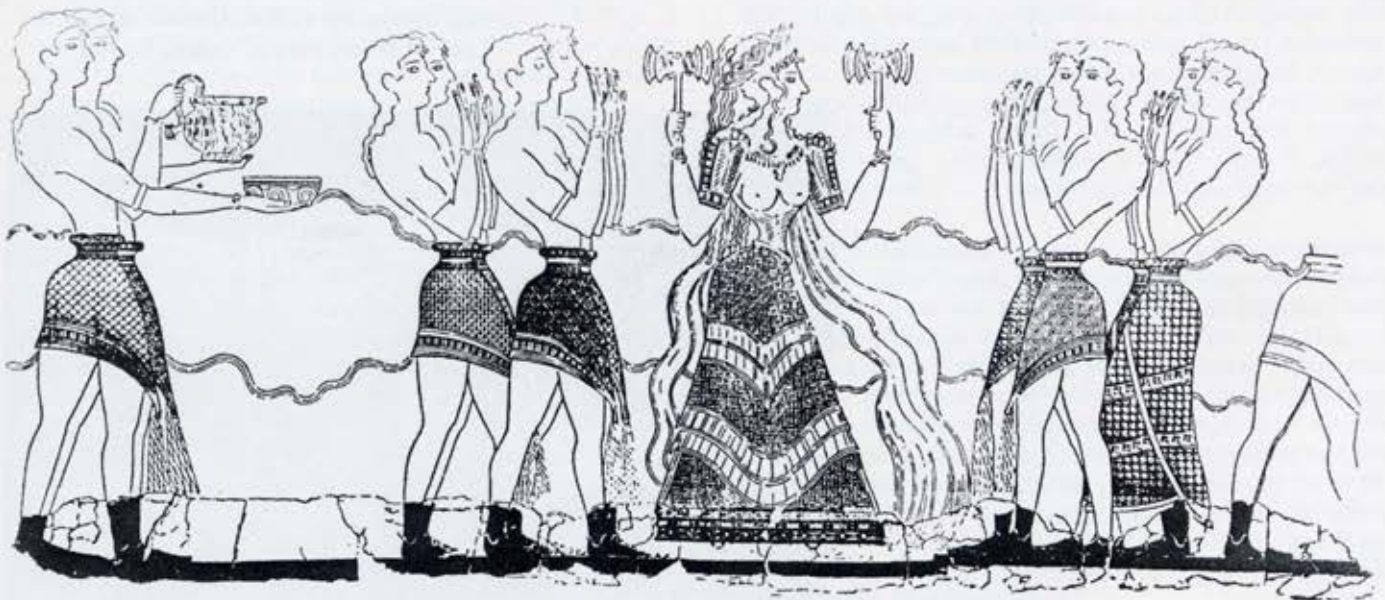


Fig. 4, Line drawing of *Cretan Goddess Before Her Worshippers*, 2nd millenium B.C., fresco, Crete (Neumann, p. 117).

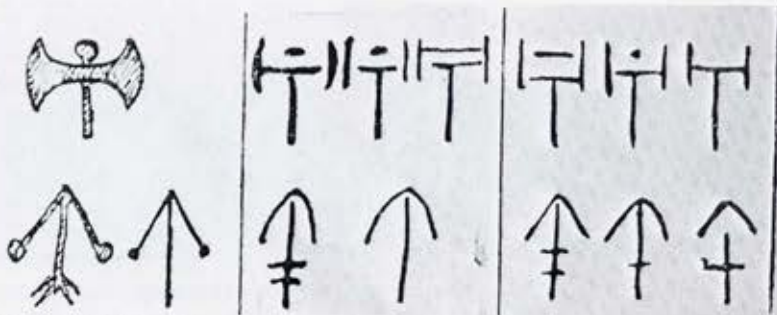


Fig. 5, *Middle Minoan Linear Script*, Crete (Pendlebury, p. 28).



Fig. 8, *Holly Near Concert Poster*, 1979, Tallahassee, Florida.

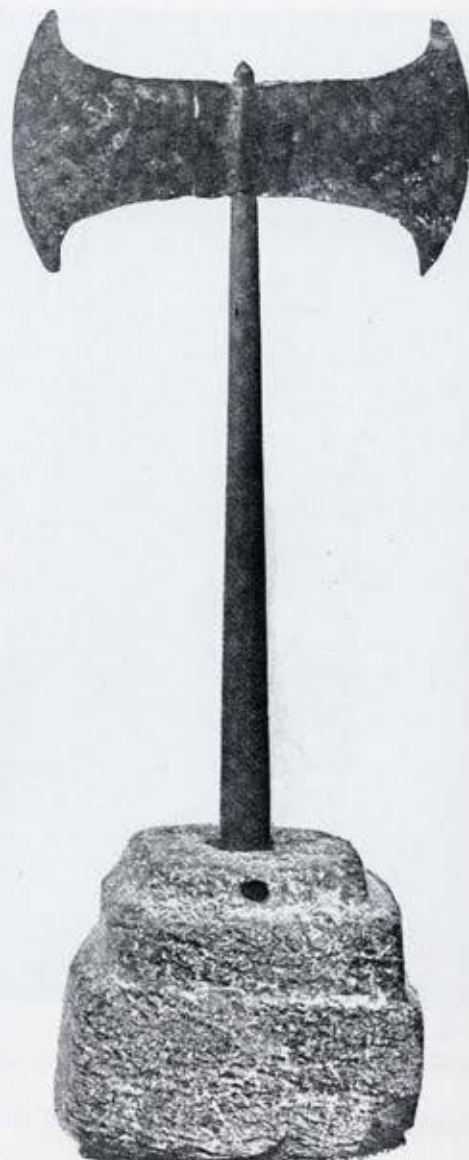


Fig. 6, *Bronze Ritual Double-Axe*, Late Minoan, Hagia Tradia, Crete.

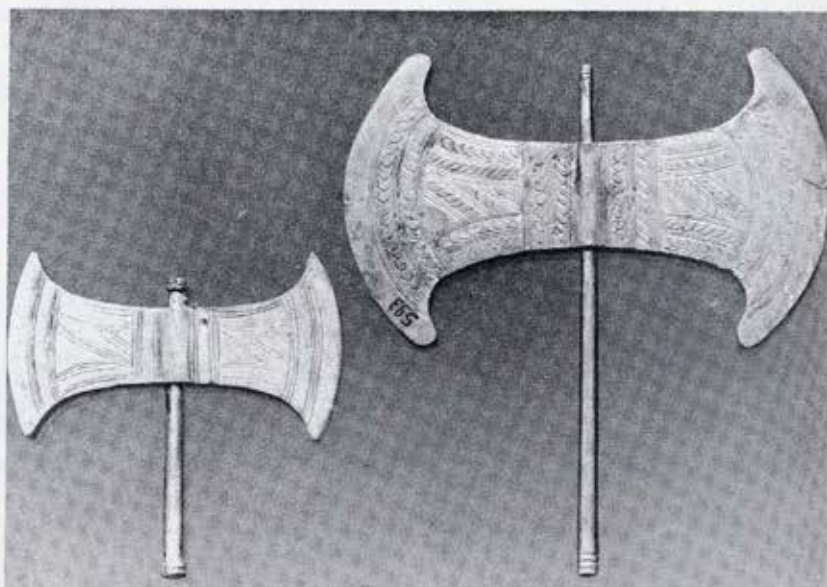


Fig. 7, *Gold Votive Double-Axes*, Late Minoan, Herakleion, Minos (Karo, p. 77).