A Cretan Odyssey, Part 1

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A Cretan Odyssey, Part 1

September 17, 2015   By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy   4 Comments   Edit This

The concept of "the Cretan Odyssey"—or, better, "a Cretan Odyssey"—is reflected in the "lying tales" of Odysseus in the Odyssey. These tales give the medium of Homeric poetry an opportunity to open windows into an Odyssey that we do not know. In the alternative universe of a "Cretan Odyssey," the adventures of Odysseus take place in the exotic context of Minoan-Mycenaean civilization as centered on the island of Crete.

Introduction

§0.1. The concept of "the Cretan Odyssey"—or, better, "a Cretan Odyssey"—is reflected in the "lying tales" of Odysseus in the Odyssey. These tales give the medium of Homeric poetry an opportunity to open windows into an Odyssey that we do not know. In the alternative universe of a "Cretan Odyssey," the adventures of Odysseus take place in the exotic context of Minoan-Mycenaean civilization as centered on the island of Crete. That is my thesis for this posting of 2015.09.17.

§0.2. As in my postings for 2015.08.26, 2015.09.03, and 2015.09.10, I say "Minoan-Mycenaean civilization" here, not "Minoan" and "Mycenaean" separately. That is because, as we saw in those three postings, elements of Minoan civilization become eventually infused with elements we find in Mycenaean civilization. And such an infusion has to do with the fact that Minoan civilization, which had evolved in the context of a "Minoan Empire," was eventually taken over by a "Mycenaean Empire." This takeover, as I argued, is reflected not only in the evidence of material culture but also in the evidence of mythological traditions as reflected in visual and verbal narratives. More specifically, I argued that the takeover from Minoan to Mycenaean civilization resulted in modifications of myths about the Minoan Empire by way of myths about the Mycenaean Empire.

§0.3. I must stress here again that the myths stemming from Minoan-Mycenaean civilization need be studied from a diachronic as well as a synchronic perspective.[1] I will consider here primarily from a diachronic or evolutionary perspective not only the relevant Minoan-Mycenaean myths but also, more specifically, the kaleidoscopic world of Homeric mythmaking as a medium that actually conveyed some of these myths.

§0.4. From a diachronic or evolutionary perspective, the system of mythmaking that we know as Homeric poetry can be viewed, I argue, as an evolving medium. But there is more to it. When you look at Homeric poetry from a diachronic perspective, you will see not only an evolving medium of oral poetry. You will see also a medium that actually views itself diachronically. In other words, Homeric poetry demonstrates aspects of its own evolution. And I should add that references to Minoan-Mycenaean myths in Homeric poetry can reveal also the evolution of these myths as they existed independently of Homeric poetry.

Minoan-Mycenaean Crete as viewed in the Odyssey

§1. In the Third Cretan Tale of Odysseus, the hero assumes the "false" identity of a Cretan prince who is a grandson of the king Minos himself. Here is how the Tale gets started:

> |172 Κρήτη τις γαῖ' ἔστι μέσῳ ἐνὶ οἴνοπι πόντῳ, |173 καλὴ καὶ πίειρα, περίρρυτος· ἐν δ' ἄνθρωποι |174 πολλοὶ ἀπειρέσιοι, καὶ ἐννήκοντα πόληες· |175 ἄλλη δ' ἄλλων γλῶσσα μεμιγμένη· ἐν μὲν Ἀχαιοί, |176 ἐν δ' Ἐτεόκρητες μεγαλήτορες, ἐν δὲ Κύδωνες |177 Δωριέες τε τριχάϊκες δῖοί τε Πελασγοί· |178 τῇσι δ' ἐνὶ Κνωσός, μεγάλη πόλις, ἔνθα τε Μίνως |179 ἐννέωρος βασίλευε Διὸς μεγάλου ὀαριστής, |180 πατρὸς ἐμοῖο πατήρ, μεγαθύμου Δευκαλίωνος. |181 Δευκαλίων δ' ἐμὲ τίκτε καὶ Ἰδομενῆα ἄνακτα. |182 ἀλλ' ὁ μὲν ἐν νήεσσι κορωνίσιν Ἴλιον εἴσω |183 ᾤχεθ' ἅμ' Ἀτρεΐδῃσιν· ἐμοὶ δ' ὄνομα κλυτὸν Αἴθων, |184 ὁπλότερος γενεῇ· ὁ δ' ἅμα πρότερος καὶ ἀρείων.

> |172 There's a land called Crete, in the middle of the sea that looks like wine. |173 It's beautiful and fertile, surrounded by the waves, and the people who live there |174 are so many that you can't count them. They have 90 cities. |175 Different people speak different languages, all mixed together. |176 There are Eteo-Cretans, those great-hearted ones. And Cydonians. |177 There are Dorians, with their three divisions, and luminous Pelasgians. |178 In this land [plural][2] is Knossos, a great city. There it was that Minos, |179 who was renewed every nine years [enneōros], ruled as king. He was the companion [oaristēs] of

Zeus the mighty. |₁₈₀ And he was the father of my father, Deukalion, the one with the big heart. |₁₈₁ Deukalion was my father, and the father also of Idomeneus the king. |₁₈₂ That man [= Idomeneus], in curved ships, went off to Ilion [= Troy], |₁₈₃ yes, he went there together with the sons of Atreus [= Agamemnon and Menelaos]. As for my name, which is famous, it is Aithōn. |₁₈₄ I'm the younger one by birth. As for the other one [= Idomeneus], he was born before me and is superior to me.

<div align="right">Odyssey 19.172–184</div>

There are many details in this remarkable passage that I cannot analyze right now, and I will return to them in later postings. Here I concentrate simply on the synthesizing of Minoan and Mycenaean "signatures." A clearly Minoan signature is the detail about Minos as the grandfather of the Cretan speaker Aithōn. And a clearly Mycenaean signature is the detail about Idomeneus as the older brother of the same speaker: this king Idomeneus is of course one of the most prominent Achaean warriors in the Homeric Iliad as we know it.

§2. And here, at this confluence of Minoan-Mycenaean signatures, is where the hero of the Odyssey enters the stream of mythmaking:

|₁₈₅ ἔνθ' Ὀδυσῆα ἐγὼν ἰδόμην καὶ ξείνια δῶκα. |₁₈₆ καὶ γὰρ τὸν Κρήτηνδε κατήγαγεν ἲς ἀνέμοιο |₁₈₇ ἱέμενον Τροίηνδε, παραπλάγξασα Μαλειῶν· |₁₈₈ στῆσε δ' ἐν Ἀμνισῷ, ὅθι τε σπέος Εἰλειθυίης, |₁₈₉ ἐν λιμέσιν χαλεποῖσι, μόγις δ' ὑπάλυξεν ἀέλλας. |₁₉₀ αὐτίκα δ' Ἰδομενῆα μετάλλα ἄστυδ' ἀνελθών· |₁₉₁ ξεῖνον γάρ οἱ ἔφασκε φίλον τ' ἔμεν αἰδοῖόν τε. |₁₉₂ τῷ δ' ἤδη δεκάτη ἢ ἑνδεκάτη πέλεν ἠώς |₁₉₃ οἰχομένῳ σὺν νηυσὶ κορωνίσιν Ἴλιον εἴσω.

|₁₈₅ There [in Crete] is where I [= Aithōn] saw Odysseus and gave him gifts of guest-host friendship [xenia]. |₁₈₆ You see, he had been forced to land at Crete by the violent power of a wind. |₁₈₇ He was trying to get to Troy, but the wind detoured him as he was sailing past the headlands of Maleiai, |₁₈₈ and he was dropped off [by the violent wind] at Amnisos, exactly where the cave of Eileithuia is situated. |₁₈₉ It was a harsh landing, and he just barely avoided being destroyed by the blasts of the sea-gales. |₁₉₀ Right away he asked to see Idomeneus as soon as he came to the city [= Knossos].|₁₉₁ You see, he was saying that he was a guest-friend [xenos] [of Idomeneus] and that they had a relationship of mutual respect. |₁₉₂ But it was by now already the tenth or eleventh day since he [= Idomeneus]|₁₉₃ had departed, sailing off with a fleet of curved ships on his way to Ilion [Troy].

<div align="right">Odyssey 19.185–193</div>

I highlight here line 188, where we learn about the place in Crete where Odysseus landed. That place is Amnisos, and we also learn that the cave of Eileithuia is located there. As we know from the reportage of Strabo, who flourished in the first century BCE, Amnisos was reputed to be the sea harbor of Minos the king:

Μίνω δέ φασιν ἐπινείῳ χρήσασθαι τῷ Ἀμνισῷ, ὅπου τὸ τῆς Εἰλειθυίας ἱερόν.

They say that Minos used Amnisos as his seaport, and the sacred space of Eileithuia is there.

<div align="right">Strabo 10.4.8 C476</div>

According to Pausanias 4.20.2, as we saw in the posting for 2015.02.20, the priestess of Eileithuia at Olympia makes a regular offering to this goddess as also to her cult-hero protégé Sosipolis, and this offering is described as mazas memagmenas meliti 'barley-cakes [mazai] kneaded in honey [meli]'. In Laconia and Messenia, Eileithuia was known as Eleuthia, and this form of the name for the goddess is actually attested in a Linear B tablet found at Knossos.[3] Here is my transcription of the relevant wording in that tablet:

a-mi-ni-so / e-re-u-ti-ja ME+RI AMPHORA 1

Amnisos: Eleuthiāi meli [followed by the ideogram for "amphora"] 1
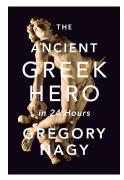
Amnisos: for Eleuthia, honey, one amphora'

<div align="right">Knossos tablet Gg 705 line 1</div>

Cherchez la femme

§3. And how should we imagine such a goddess in the era of the Minoan sea-empire, in the middle of the second millennium BCE? One aspect of the answer is this: we should look not only for goddesses but also for human votaries of goddesses. An ideal case in point is Ariadne, who figures in myth as the daughter of Minos the king of Crete.

§4. Here is an essential piece of evidence, to be found in the Alexandrian dictionary attributed to Hesychius, where we read: ἀδνόν· ἀγνόν Κρῆτες 'the Cretans use the word hadno– for hagno–'. So, since hagno– means 'holy', Ariadnē means 'very holy'.

§5. Elsewhere in the dictionary of Hesychius, we read: Καλλίχορον· ἐν Κνωσῷ ἐπὶ τῷ τῆς Ἀριάδνης τόπῳ 'Kalli-khoron was the name of the place of Ariadne in Knossos'. And the meaning of this 'place of Ariadne', Kalli-khoron, is 'the place that is beautiful'. The word khoros here can designate either the 'place' where singing and dancing takes place or the group of singers and dancers who perform at that place. Such a beautiful place is made visible by the divine smith Hephaistos when he creates the ultimate masterpiece of visual art, the Shield of Achilles:

> |590 Ἐν δὲ χορὸν ποίκιλλε περικλυτὸς ἀμφιγυήεις, |591 τῷ ἴκελον οἷόν ποτ' ἐνὶ Κνωσῷ εὐρείῃ |592 Δαίδαλος ἤσκησεν καλλιπλοκάμῳ Ἀριάδνῃ.

> |590 The renowned one [= the god Hephaistos], the one with the two strong arms, pattern-wove [poikillein] in it [= the Shield of Achilles] a khoros. |591 It [= the khoros] was just like the one that, once upon a time in far-ruling Knossos, |592 Daedalus made for Ariadne, the one with the beautiful tresses [plokamoi].

Iliad 18.590–592

§6. Then, at lines 593–606 of Iliad 18, we see in action the singing and dancing that happens in the picturing of the divine place. So the ultimate place for the singing and dancing becomes the ultimate event of singing and dancing, the word for which would also be khoros—this time, in the sense of a 'chorus', that is, a grouping of singers and dancers. And the prima donna for such singing and dancing can be visualized as the girl Ariadne, for whom Daedalus had made the ultimate place for song and dance.

§7. The Minoan painting that I previewed in the previous posting captures a moment when a girl like Ariadne engages in such song and dance.

Detail from a fresco found at Hagia Triadha in Crete. Reconstruction by Mark Cameron, p. 96 of the catalogue Fresco: A Passport into the Past, 1999 (for an expanded citation, see the Bibliography below). Reproduced with the permission of the British School at Athens. BSA Archive: Mark Cameron Personal Papers: CAM 1.

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Notes

1 I elaborated on these terms synchronic and diachronic in my posting for 2015.09.10, with reference to Saussure 1916:117. See also Nagy 2003:1.

2 The pronoun τῇσι that refers to the land of Crete here in Odyssey 19.178 is in the plural, not in the singular, as we might have expected. I will offer an explanation in the posting that follows this one.

3 I first made this argument, with further documentation, in Nagy 1969. For a brilliant analysis of Odyssey 19.185–193, along with a wealth of still further documentation, see Levaniouk 2011:93–96. For more on what is said by Pausanias 4.20.2 about Eileithuia, see Nagy 2015.02.25.

Tags: <u>Ariadne</u>, <u>Crete</u>, <u>Minoan-Mycenaean civilization</u>, <u>Odyssey</u>