The idea of 'finders keepers' as a signature for two sea-empires

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Classical Inquiries

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The idea of ‘finders keepers’ as a signature for two sea-empires

August 26, 2015  By Gregory Nagy  listed under By Gregory Nagy

This posting for 2015.08.26 is part of a larger project concerning what we can learn about Minoan-Mycenaean civilization by reading the Homeric Odyssey. In this part of that project, I concentrate on a myth emanating from Minoan-Mycenaean civilization based on an idea that I paraphrase by way of the popular expression “finders keepers.” This same expression, as we will see, applies also to a ritual that evolved in a historically unrelated context, the sea-empire of Venice in its heyday. In terms of my argument, the mentality of finders keepers that comes to life in a myth about the Minoan sea-empire also comes to life in a ritual that evolved in the historical context of the Venetian sea-empire.

Introduction

§0.1. This posting for 2015.08.26 is part of a larger project concerning what we can learn about Minoan-Mycenaean civilization by reading the Homeric Odyssey. In this part of that project, I concentrate on a myth emanating from Minoan-Mycenaean civilization. From the start, I say “Minoan-Mycenaean civilization,” not “Minoan” and “Mycenaean” separately. That is because, as we will see, some of the myths that we encounter about Minoan civilization are infused with elements that are distinctly Mycenaean as well as Minoan. And such an infusion has to do with the fact that Minoan civilization, which had evolved in the context of a “Minoan Empire,” as archaeologists know it, was eventually taken over by a “Mycenaean Empire.” This takeover, I argue, resulted in the modification of myths about the Minoan Empire by way of myths about the Mycenaean Empire. And one of these myths, as we will see, is based on an idea that I paraphrase by way of the popular expression “finders keepers.” This same expression, as we will also see, applies also to a ritual that evolved in a historically unrelated context, the sea-empire of Venice in its heyday. In terms of my argument, the mentality of finders keepers that comes to life in a myth about the Minoan sea-empire also comes to life in a ritual that evolved in the historical context of the Venetian sea-empire.

§0.2. Proceeding now to the essay, I start by reviewing some essentials first about the Minoan Empire and then about the Mycenaean Empire.

Minoan Empire

§1. The Minoan Empire makes its appearance in the early second millennium BCE in Crete, which is an island situated in the middle of the Aegean Sea, and the power of this empire was sustained by its dominion over the sea. Here is an aerial photograph of the island:

§2. The blue sea surrounding the island seems serene at the moment—no troubled waters. As we will see later, at §45, the distinction I am making here between the ‘serene’ and the ‘troubled’ waters of the sea will help visualize the metaphors applied to the good and the bad fortunes experienced by the sea-empire of Venice.

§3. The concept of a Minoan Empire is linked to the name of a mythical figure who was once upon a time the king of Crete. He was Míndos or Minos. Even if Minos existed only in myth, archaeological research has shown that there really did exist a sea-empire that evolved in the context of “Minoan” civilization. This Minoan sea-empire flourished in the second millennium BCE, from roughly 1700 till 1450, and it left behind
a multitude of aftereffects in the first millennium BCE, long after it ceased to exist. A good example is a place-name like 'Minoa' (Minōia), which was the old name of Paros, an island in the Aegean Sea. In this and in other such cases, the name 'Minoan' means something like 'outpost of Minoi'. Archaeologists have discovered traces of Minoan outposts throughout the Cyclades islands of the Aegean Sea and beyond. The Minoan maritime network extended to places even as far away as Sicily.

§4. A decisive witness to both the myth and the reality of a Minoan sea-empire is Thucydides (1.4.1):

Μῖνως γὰρ παλαιότατος ὃν ἀκόμη ἔμνευεν ναυτικόν έκτήσατο καὶ τῆς νῆσου Ἑλληνικής θαλάσσης ἐπί πλείστων ἐκράτησε καὶ τῶν Κυκλάδων νῆσων ἠδὲ τοῦ σιδηροῦ πρῶτος τῶν πλείστων ἐγένετο.

Minos was the earliest of all men we know about from oral traditions who possessed a fleet and seized power over most of the sea that we now know as the Greek sea (= the Aegean) and over the Cyclades Islands [of the Aegean Sea]. He was also the first to establish colonial outposts at most of these islands.

§5. In fact, Thucydides is the primary source for a most apt term for this sea-empire, which is thalassocracy, derived from the Greek compound formation thalasso-krat- / θαλασσο­κρατ­ as used by the historian in the sense of 'control over the sea' (as in 7.48.2, 8.30.2, 8.41.1, 8.63.1), and the earlier historian Herodotus uses the same compound formation thalasso-krat- / θαλασσο­κρατ­ in referring specifically to the sea-empire of Minos (3.122.2).[1] For both Herodotus and Thucydides, the thalassocracy of Minos was viewed as a prehistoric precedent for the historical thalassocracy of the Athenian Empire in the fifth century BCE.[2] This "Athenian connection" will figure prominently in my argumentation ahead.

§6. I finish this part of my analysis by noting in general that the concept of a Minoan thalassocracy is well attested in many other classical sources besides Herodotus and Thucydides: going backward in time, I list the following examples: Plutarch, Strabo, Virgil, Catullus, Plato (especially in the Phaedo), and, most prominently, the "Homer" of the Iliad and Odyssey as we know those epics.

**Mycenaean Empire**

§7. The Mycenaean Empire makes its appearance in the middle of the second millennium BCE on the mainland of continental Europe, in a region that we now know as Greece. This empire dominated only a part of that region—especially the part that is still known today as the Peloponnesus. It can be said that the Mycenaean Empire was the first empire that ever existed in continental Europe.

§8. The term Mycenaean stems from the place-name Mukēnai or Mycenae, an ancient fortified site located in the northeast region of the Peloponnesus. This site, dominated by a walled citadel, was the administrative center of that region, as we see from the evidence of clay tablets that were used for the records of the center. Modern archaeological excavations have recovered some of these tablets, which had been accidentally preserved because they were baked in fires that burned down the center or at least parts of the center. The formulation of Jan Driessen is most apt: “tablets need a fire catastrophe to be preserved.”[3] These fires did not necessarily happen all at once, but in any case the final destruction of the administrative center of Mycenae by fire can be dated around the twelfth or eleventh century BCE. [4] The script that was used for writing on these tablets is known today as Linear B, and the decipherment of this script by Michael Ventris in 1952 showed that the language in which the Linear B texts were written was a form of ancient Greek. This form of Greek resembles most closely the oldest aspects of Homeric language—which is the language of a special kind of oral poetry that shaped the ancient Greek epics that we know as the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey.[5]

§9. Linguists generally describe as Mycenaean the Greek language of the Linear B tablets, even though Mycenae is not the only ancient site in mainland Greece where archaeologists have found such tablets. Excavations at other sites on the mainland have yielded further examples. Most notably, there were tablets found at Pylos and at Thebes; at these sites, the dating of the fires that baked most of the tablets has been estimated at around the early twelfth century BCE in the case of Pylos and at around the second half of the thirteenth century BCE in the case of Thebes.[6] And, as of this writing, the Greek Ministry of Culture announced on the 25th of August 2015 that a Mycenaean “palace” near Sparta has been discovered. Here is a write-up dating from the next day, 2015.08.26.

§10. The language of the Linear B tablets found at these and other sites is remarkably consistent: what we see at work is a kind of lingua franca reflecting the bureaucratic agenda of the administrative centers. Given that Mycenae was not the only administrative center that used the lingua franca represented by Linear B texts, can we even say that the Mycenaean Empire was controlled from one unified administrative center, which was Mycenae itself? The most likely answer is: no. It would be more realistic to view the Mycenaean Empire as a loose federation of multiple administrative centers, small as well as large. Still, from the standpoint of all archaeological findings put together, Mycenae was clearly the most prosperous, powerful, and prestigious of all such centers. For me these “three Ps”—the words prosperity, power, prestige—sum up the essence of empires in general.

§11. What I just formulated can be backed up by the indirect evidence of archaeological findings at Božačký, a small town located in the north central region of the modern state of Turkey. It was here that the great ancient city of Hattusa, capital of the Hittite Empire, was found. And it was here that archaeologists uncovered the archives of this empire. The tablets found in the archives, written in cuneiform script, documented written correspondences between Hittite kings and counterparts who were kings of other empires, including even the pharaohs of Egypt.[2] I focus here on the place-name referring
§11. From the Ahhiyawa Texts of the Hittite archives, we can see that the kings of the Hittite Empire in the land-mass of Asia Minor—an empire that was and always had been land-based—speak about the empire of Ahhiyawa as a seafaring power that is somehow ruled by a king whose own land-base is in the west, on the other side of the Aegean Sea, situated somewhere on the land-mass of Europe. In the ongoing research on the Ahhiyawa Texts, the current consensus is that the land-base called Ahhiyawa by the Hittites is the Peloponnese, and that the centerpoint of that land-base is Mycenae. So, the evidence of the Hittite archives points to the existence of a Mycenaean Empire, whether or not we consider the administrative center at Mycenae to be powerful enough to control all the regions that archaeologists would describe as belonging to the civilization of the Mycenaeans.

§12. And how did the populations of Ahhiyawa refer to themselves in their native Greek language? The form used in the Hittite texts, Ahhiyawa (older variant Ahyiya), gives the answer. In the Hittite language, this form approximates what the Mycenaeans themselves would have called their empire: 'land of the Akhaioi'.

§13. In terms of the Mycenaean Greek language as spoken in the second millennium BCE and as later reflected in Homeric poetry, Akhaioi can be translated as 'Achaeans', which in Homeric Greek was a collective heroic name for the Greek-speaking warriors who fought in the Trojan War.

§14. So, the Hittite evidence indicates that the Mycenaean Empire, whether or not it is to be viewed merely as a loose confederation of states, was a sea-based as well as a land-based power to be reckoned with, rivaling the land-based power of the Hittite Empire in Asia Minor.

§15. But how did the Mycenaean Empire become a sea-based power in the first place? Seeking an explanation, I return to a term I used at the beginning when I referred to "the Minoan-Mycenaean civilization." This compound term Minoan-Mycenaean is meant to reflect the fact that Minoan civilization was ultimately absorbed by Mycenaean civilization. And this fact is correlated with another fact: that the Minoan Empire was eventually taken over by the Mycenaean Empire. Even the original power base of the Minoan Empire, the island of Crete, was eventually occupied by Mycenaeans, and that is why the administrative centers of the island adopted the same administrative system that we see operating on the Greek mainland. The most distinctive feature of this system was the Linear B script, used for writing Mycenaean Greek, as opposed to the Linear A script, which had been used for writing the pre-Greek language or languages of Minoan civilization on the island of Crete. The clearest attestations of a distinctly Mycenaean administrative system as superimposed on an earlier Minoan administrative system in Crete are the Linear B tablets found at the ancient site of Knossos in the north central region of the island and at Chaniá, the ancient name for which was Kydonia, in the northwestern region. The dating of the Linear B tablets found at such Cretan sites even matches for the most part the datings of Linear B tablets found at the mainland Mycenaean sites. At Chaniá, for example, the Linear B tablets that have recently been found can be dated around 1250 BCE. At Knossos, there are different sets of tablets that had been baked by fire at different phases of destruction during the lengthy existence of that administrative center, and the dates of destruction range from 1400 BCE in the case of the so-called Room of the Chariot Tablets all the way to as late as 1200 BCE in the case of another administrative zone.

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§18. I must add here a general observation about both Linear A and Linear B as media of writing in Minoan and Mycenaean administrative contexts respectively. I think it is possible that the attested practice of writing Linear A and Linear B on clay tablets with a stylus was only a transitional phase of recording information, to be followed up by a final phase that involved writing on parchment with brush or possibly with pen. The parchment would then be sealed, as with a signet ring.

§19. I base this observation on the relevant archaeological evidence found at Minoan administrative centers. I quote here a formulation from an earlier work of mine: Evidently, the procedure of these scribes was to use parchment for their permanent archival records, as opposed to their use of clay tablets for making temporary records. I infer that the Linear B administrative system followed an analogous procedure: they would write their temporary records on clay tablets, and these records would then be transferred at the end of a given fiscal year from clay to parchment (the notion of a fiscal year is indicated by references in the Linear B tablets to the current year as opposed to the immediately preceding and following years). There is an irony to be noted here: when the administrative centers of the Mycenaean era were destroyed by fires, the temporary
records of the Linear B scribes were made permanent for archaeologists because they were baked and thus preserved by the same fires that must have destroyed the permanent records recorded on parchment.

§20. At present I stand by my earlier formulation as I just quoted it here, though I acknowledge that my terminology concerning "scribes" and "archives" may need to be refined. Also, I note with interest a relevant observation by Jan Driessen with specific reference to the Room of the Chariot Tablets at Knossos: the clay sealings in this room, found together with the tablets, "are of a type that may have sealed parchment, a practice quite common in earlier Minoan times." These clay sealings, I should add, could be sealed by way of a signet ring.

§21. I have a most simple reason to give for having taken up all this space in arguing that the Mycenaean administrations on the island of Crete and on the mainland had retained a Minoan practice of writing documents with brush or pen on parchment—and then sealing the parchment document, as with a signet ring. The reason is this: I find it intuitively appealing to posit such an advanced system of writing for the advanced system of administration that we see it at work in the Room of the Chariot Tablets at Knossos.

§22. Keeping my focus for the moment on the Room of the Chariot Tablets, I note with special interest the Mycenaean cultural agenda reflected in the written records of the Linear B tablets that are linked to that administrative zone at Knossos. I quote from an apt description by Thomas Palaima, who notes that the administrative unit responsible for keeping written records there was using these records "mainly for the monitoring and distribution of military equipment (chariots, body armor, horses) to a Greek-dominated military elite." I wager that the Mycenaean Greek name for such a military élite would have been Akhaioi 'Achaeans'.

§23. I bring this section to a close by coming back full circle to the point I was making at the start about the term Minoan-Mycenaean. As we have just seen in the case of the scripts known as Linear A and Linear B, the transition from Minoan to Mycenaean civilization needs to be viewed in the context of a takeover where an older empire is replaced by a newer one. Accordingly, the surviving traces of the Minoan Empire, including its myths about a Cretan thallassocracy, need to be viewed in the context of the newer Mycenaean Empire, which not only replaced the reality of the older Minoan Empire but also appropriated as its own the myths about the Cretan thallassocracy.

Intermezzo: a word about myth and ritual

§24. As my argumentation proceeds, I will eventually reach a point where I have a chance to focus on a myth about the Cretan thallassocracy. Before I can get there, however, I will have to focus on a ritual that displays, I think, the essence of this thallassocracy. This ritual is represented in an elaborate painting known to archaeologists as the "flotilla scene," which is part of a miniature fresco discovered at the ancient site of Akrotiri on the island of Santorini, the ancient name for which is Thera. The dating of this Theran fresco can be placed at around 1600 BCE or even earlier, and the painting gives a most vivid glimpse of the civilization that evolved in the Aegean Sea already during the earliest phases of the Minoan thallassocracy.

§25. As I will argue later, this "flotilla scene" can be viewed as an illustration of a "ritual moment" reflecting all at once the prosperity, power, and prestige of the Cretan thallassocracy. Already now, however, I need to articulate a principle that I will apply to my reading of the evidence provided by the ancient painting we will consider. The principle is simply this: myth cannot be understood without an understanding of the ritual that goes with it.

§26. In preparation for analyzing this ritual moment, I will now compare a parallel that is illustrated in the visual arts of another thallassocracy.

A ritual moment for the sea-empire of Venice

§27. I concentrate here on a ritual that takes place at the Festa della Sensa, a spring festival in Venice that is celebrated every year on the feast day known in Venetian dialect as la Sensa, meaning 'the Ascension'. The ritual is old, attested for a span of time that exceeds a millennium. And, since it evidently kept changing over the many centuries of its existence, this yearly ritual is impossible to describe in any single definitive version. Given the vast variety of versions attested over time, I find it easiest to begin by sketching a synthesis that features some of the most spectacular attestations of this annual event celebrating the prosperity, power, and prestige of the Venetian sea-empire in its heyday. I start with a picture...

§28. We are about to see a painting by Francesco Guardi, to be dated somewhere between 1780 and 1790. This picture captures in a timeless sort of way the spectacular moment when the Venetian Ship of State, a magnificently built and decorated galley named il Bucintoro, sets off from its station at the San Marco Basin and sails toward the church of San Nicolò at the Lido. The galley is headed for the open sea of the Adriatic, where an all-defining ritual will take place:
§29. So, what is the ritual? Its name is lo Sposalizio del Mare, meaning in Venetian dialect 'the Wedding of the Sea', and the two main participants are the doge of Venice, representing the bridegroom, and the feminized Adriatic Sea itself, representing the bride. On the day of the yearly feast of la Sensa, the doge commences the ritual by boarding il Bucintoro as his flagship—the painting we just saw shows the most celebrated rebuilt version of this magnificent galley—and sailing off toward San Nicolò, escorted by a flotilla of other boats. As I already noted, the ritual destination of this floating procession is the open sea of the Adriatic, to be reached at a gap in that enormous world-renowned sandbar known as the Lido, separating the Venetian Lagoon from the Adriatic Sea. Situated at that gap is the church of San Nicolò, and our painting shows the ship of state il Bucintoro together with its flotilla as it sails toward that church. Once the flotilla reaches the break in the Lido at San Nicolò and heads out into the open sea, the moment arrives for the doge to throw into the waves a golden ring, thus notionally 'marrying' the Adriatic Sea.

§30. Here is another picture of the same ritual occasion, though at a different moment of the ritual. It is a painting by Canaletto, dated around 1732, showing the flagship il Bucintoro in the background, off to the side, and the rest of the flotilla in the foreground:

§31. Here is a still earlier picture, dated around 1609, produced by the engraver Giacomo Franco. Once again we see the flagship of the Venetian doge, il Bucintoro, accompanied by a flotilla:
§32. What I find most remarkable about this particular picture is the high degree of detail lavished on the appearance of the boats. For me two details stand out. The first is the positioning of the cabins that we see more clearly at the sterns of some of the smaller boats. The word for such a cabin in Venetian dialect is tièmo, which means literally ‘covering’. And the second of the two details is the positioning, with relation to each tièmo, of the oarsman who pilots the boat.

§33. These two details are strikingly comparable to what we find in a miniature fresco I already mentioned, which was discovered at the ancient site of Akrotiri on the island of Thera. The dating of this Theran fresco, as I already noted, can be situated around 1600 BCE or even earlier. The part of the fresco that I show here pictures a flotilla of boats that are being rowed in the mode of a floating procession:

§34. In this picture from Thera, dated as it is around 1600 BCE, I isolate for the moment two details that I propose to compare with the two details I highlighted in the picture from Venice, dated around 1609 CE, over three millennia later. First, I note the positioning of the cabins that we see at the sterns of some of the smaller boats. And, second, I note the positioning, with relation to the cabins, of the main oarsmen who pilot the boats.

§35. Here is a closeup, showing the stern of one of the boats:
§36. Having just compared two sets of details taken from the picturing of floating processions in two historically distinct sea-empires that are chronologically separated from each other by over three millennia, I must emphasize that the comparisons I am making are merely typological, not genealogical. That said, however, I must also emphasize that both the empires I am comparing with each other had evolved in the overall context of the Mediterranean world writ large, of which the civilizations of the Adriatic Sea and the Aegean Sea are an integral part.

§37. Returning to the topic of floating processions as attested in the heyday of the Venetian Empire, I will now show an anonymous painting, dated to the sixteenth century, which depicts a mythologized moment in history when the doge Francesco Ziani disembarks from il Bucintoro, having docked at the Convento della Carità, in order to pay his respects to Pope Alexander III, who was then in exile and had taken refuge at the Convento. This meeting between the doge and the pope, if we view the event by hindsight, inaugurates a story about a great Venetian victory: in 1177 CE, the Venetian fleet led by Ziani decisively defeated the enemy fleet of the Holy Roman Empire, led by Otho, son of Frederick Barbarossa. In the painting, the imperial galley of the doge is represented in a simultaneously idealized and miniaturized way:

Flanking the flagship il Bucintoro here, as we can see, are two smaller ships, one in the foreground and one further behind in the background. The doge has already disembarked, and he proceeds to give his respects to the pope.[22]

§38. In celebration of the victory of the Venetian fleet led by the doge Ziani over the fleet of the Holy Roman Empire led by Otho, Pope Alexander subsequently gives to the doge the original ring to be used in the yearly wedding of Venice with the Adriatic Sea, and the gift is accompanied by these words addressed by Alexander to Ziani, according to one account:
§39. Moving forward in time to the near-present, I refer here to a video recording of a modern re-enactment of the ‘wedding’ itself, which took place in 2012. We see here the mayor of Venice in the act of throwing a ring into the sea, thus re-enacting the role of the doge as representative of the Venetian Empire:

The Marriage of the Sea

§40. And what happens to the ring after it is thrown into the waves? In modern times, as we read in touristic descriptions, “Hopeful divers are welcome to attempt to retrieve the ring (finders keepers), and the ring is free of taxes for a year.”[24] As I will now argue, the incidental expression that we have just read here, finders keepers, captures the original essence of the whole ritual as it evolved through the centuries.

§41. There are other attestations of such a ritual of marrying the community with the sea, as at Cervia, a small Adriatic coastal town near Ravenna.[25] Here too, as in Venice, we find a yearly ‘Wedding of the Sea’, lo Sposalizio del Mare, celebrated at the spring festival of Ascension Day, on which occasion the bishop of Ravenna throws a ring into the Adriatic Sea. Here is a picture of the moment when the ring is thrown.

§42. In this picture, we see swimmers in the water surrounding the boat. They are eagerly waiting, ready to compete with each other by diving after the ring once it is thrown into the waves. In the same picture, I note a detail: we can just barely see a ribbon attached to the ring that the bishop is about to throw. The small attachment evidently facilitates the finding of the ring by the lucky diver who succeeds in retrieving it. If the ring is not found in any given year, according to touristic accounts, such a failure is considered to be a sign of bad luck, affecting negatively the fortunes of local fishermen and farmers. What is at stake then, in this version of a wedding between community and sea is not the good fortune of an empire, as in the Venetian version of the ritual, but simply the prosperity of the locale.

§43. The aetiology of this localized version of lo Sposalizio del Mare goes back to 1445 CE. At that time, Cervia had its own bishop, unlike today: now it is the bishop of Ravenna who performs the ritual. Back in 1445, the local bishop of Cervia was a man named Pietro Barbo, and the originating of the ritual was
attributed to him. In the year 1445, according to the aetiological narrative, the bishop was sailing from Venice to Cervia when a violent storm arose, threatening the safety of the ship and its passengers. The bishop reacted by throwing his ring into the violent sea, thus miraculously making it serene again. And that is why, according to the aetiology, the ring is thrown into the sea every year at the spring festival of the Ascension.

§44. As we compare this aetiology dating back to 1445 in Cervia with the earlier Venetian aetiology dating back to 1177, where we saw the giving of a golden ring by Pope Alexander III to the doge Francesco Ziani, we can now see from a different perspective the significance of the ritual act itself, which is, the throwing of the ring into the Adriatic Sea. On the surface, it appears that a transfer of ownership is taking place: the pope owns a ring that he gives to the doge, and this gift makes it possible for Venice to dominate the Adriatic Sea just as a bridegroom will have dominion, in the quoted words of the pope, over a bride. But the logic of the aetiology goes deeper. Ultimately, the ring is not for the pope to give away. It does not really belong to him. He merely transmits the ring. And this ring does not even belong exclusively to the doge. After all, a new doge may be in power a year from now, who knows? But the sea will always be the sea, and it will always receive the ring that is its due, year after year. You have to give to the sea a new ring every year. In terms of the aetiology, this eternally renewed ring belongs to the sea. Every year, from one year to the next, the sea claims the renewable ring from the doge. Whoever the doge of Venice happens to be in any given year, he has dominion over the Venetian Empire precisely because the sea gives to Venice that empire for yet another year. The prosperity, power, and prestige of the Venetian Empire can be seen as the yearly gift of the Adriatic Sea.

§45. Similarly, on a far smaller scale, the prosperity of the town of Cervia is a yearly gift of the sea. If the sea is serene, both physically and metaphorically, then good fortune prevails. We see a parallel pattern of thinking in the case of Venice: the ring that the doge gives to the sea is il Serenissimo, ‘the most serene one’, because the serenity of the Adriatic is transferable to the leader or doge (dux in Latin) of Venice and, by extension, to the Venetian Empire. Without serenity, the troubled waters of the Adriatic would spell trouble for the Venetian Empire.

§46. And just as the feminized sea that gets married to the doge gives good fortune to Venice and to its worldwide imperial community, so also a bride who gets married to a bridegroom will give good fortune to the family by bearing progeny. In terms of this sexualized comparison, the generative power of the bride is so fertile that she can pass it on from one generation to the next, making it possible for the family to last forever. So also, again in terms of such a comparison, both the imperial city of Venice and a small town like Cervia may thrive forever, eternally renewed year after year, by way of re-enacting a prototypical marriage that unites the community with the fertile sea.

§47. Here I return once again to the practice, still current in Cervia and in modern post-imperial Venice, of diving after the ring after it is thrown into the sea. I think that the act of diving into the depths of the Adriatic and retrieving the ring is seen as a personal re-enactment of a collective yearly retrieval of the prosperity desired by the whole community. That is why, I also think, the modern practice of diving for the ring is still sanctioned by a mentality of "finders keepers." This mentality, in terms of my analysis, is at work also in the ancient ritual of throwing the ring away in the first place. If the community at large prospers as a result of this gift to the sea, then the counter-gift of prosperity from the sea will be happily received and kept by the community that finds it. So, the mentality of finders keepsers is expressed not only in the individual act of a diver who seeks his personal good fortune: it is expressed also in a collectivized re-enactment by the community that sanctions its own yearly re-marriage to the sea.

A mythological moment for the sea-empire of Athens

§48. The ritual moment when the doge of Venice marries the Adriatic sea on behalf of the Venetian Empire is comparable to a mythological moment when the future king of Athens, the hero Theseus, marries the Aegean Sea on behalf of the Athenian Empire, which claimed to be the successor of the Minoan Empire. As I have argued in the book Homer the Preclassic, the symbol of this empire was the Ring of Minos, which the prototypical king of the Minoan thalassocracy throws into the sea—to be recovered by Theseus, the prototypical king of Athens and the notional founder of the Athenian thalassocracy.[26] Here I return to the idea of "the Athenian connection," as signaled at the beginning.

§49. In commenting on the representation of this myth as pictured in a painting that covered one full wall of the sanctuary of Theseus in Athens, Pausanias offers a retelling of the myth, which he says is only partially retold through the medium of the painting:

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Μίνως ἴνικα θησα καὶ τὸν ἄλλον στόλον τῶν παιδῶν ἤγεν ἐς Κρήτην, ἑρωθείς Περιβοίας, ὡς οί θεσεῖς μάλιστα ἡγαντοποίο, καὶ ἄλλα ὑπὸ όργης ἀπερίφηνες εἰς σύνος καὶ παῖδα σύν ἐφί Ποσειδόνος εἷναι, ἐπί <ο> δύναναι τὴν σφραγίδα, ἣν αὐτὸς φέρμοι Ευχέν, ἄρεντι ἐς βάλλον σκαλοπαίοι συ. Μίνως μὲν λέγεται ταῦτα ἐπίων ἀφείνας τὴν σφραγίδα- θῆσα δὲ σφραγίδα τῇ ἐκείνῃ ἔξοντα καὶ στέφανον χρυσὸν, ἁμφιτρίτης δόρον, ἀνείθεν λέγουσιν ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης.
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When Minos was taking Theseus and the rest of the delegation of young men and women to Crete he fell passionately in love with Periboa, and when Theseus opposed him by objecting, he [= Minos] insulted him and said that he [= Theseus] was not the son of Poseidon, since he [= Theseus] could not recover [ana-sōzein] for him [= Minos] the signet ring [sphragis] which he [= Minos] happened to be wearing, if he threw it into the sea. With these words Minos is said to have thrown the signet ring [sphragis], but they say
that Theseus emerged from the sea holding that ring and also a golden garland [stephanos] that Amphitrite gave him.

Pausanias 1.17.3

§50. As a symbol, then, the Ring of Minos links the Minoan Empire to the imperial ideology of Athens as represented by Theseus. The mentality of finders keepers applies: Theseus finds the Ring of Minos at the bottom of the sea, where Amphitrite, pictured here as the goddess of the Aegean, freely gives it to him. Here I must add that the Ring of Minos can be seen as a signet ring that seals documents of state written in parchment. As I argued earlier, documents written on parchment and then sealed with a sealing are a distinctive feature of administrative practices perfected in the era of the Minoan Empire. Accordingly, the signet ring is a visible sign or symbol of empire.

§51. And a visible sign or symbol of the idea that Theseus actually marries the sea is the golden garland that the sea-goddess gives to him when he dives into the depths of the Aegean to retrieve the Ring of Minos. In the posting that follows this one, I will analyze the relevant symbolism of the garlands pictured on the Theran fresco.

Bibliography


Notes


[8] The original Hittite correspondences known today as the Ahhiyawa Texts have been published, in transliterated form and with translation and commentary, by Beckman, Bryce, and Cline 2011.


[10] In the same source as indicated in the previous note, I analyze the references in the Ahhiyawa Texts to sea-based activities linked with successive kings of Ahhiyawa.


[14] My formulation here does not rule out the possibility that Linear A, in the heyday of the Minoan Empire, could also be used to write Greek, even if Greek was not the standard language of Linear A.

[15] Palaima 2003:164; yet another administrative zone at Knossos can be dated around 1375–1350 BCE. See also Driessen 2008 and 2010.


[18] For a refining of the terms "scribe" and "archive" as applied by archaeologists to the procedures of writing Linear A and Linear B, see Palaima 2003, especially pp. 169–170. Further, Palaima considers the possible relevance of the Minoan archaeological evidence for the administrative practice of writing on parchment, citing Weingarten 1983a and Hallager 1997 I 135–158. I cite also Weingarten 1983b and 1986. But Palaima’s analysis also considers arguments opposed to the idea that Mycenaean administrative centers maintained permanent records written in Linear B on parchment. So, the debate is ongoing.


[20] Again, Palaima 2003:164. Driessen 2008:71 makes a relevant observation with reference to the Linear B tablets found at Chanià in West Crete and dated around 1300 BCE: one of these tablets (Sq 1) concerns chariot wheels.

[21] The earliest attestations of aetiologies concerning this ritual can be dated at around 1000 CE: see Muir 1981:119–120.

[22] I thank my friends Albert and Rebecca Ammerman for helping me analyze the details shown in this painting.

[23] The words of the pope are quoted this way by Francesco Sansovino (1521–1586), Venetia Descrìtta (printed 1663) p. 501. See also Muir 1981:124.


Tags: ‘the Wedding of the Sea’, Ahhiyawa Texts, il Bucintoro, lo Sposalizio del Mare, Minoan Empire, Mycenaean Empire, signet rings, Venice

2 Responses to The idea of ‘finders keepers’ as a signature for two sea-empires

Bill August 27, 2015 at 6:30 pm (Edit)

Greg,

Can I offer a few words from an eyewitness to the wedding ceremony? “Bucintoro, on which the Doge was going, as usual, to wed the Adriatic, the widow of so many husbands, and yet as young as on the first day” Book XI of the Memoirs of Casanova

Bill

Bill September 22, 2015 at 11:47 pm (Edit)

Greg,

With familiar delight I am re-reading Alexandre Dumas’ “Adventures in Caucasia” I ran across this scene towards the end.

“...the ceremony of blessing the waters of the Kura, an annual event which took place on January 6 (,1859)

It was a cold morning with fifteen degrees of frost and a biting winds ... In spite of the cold all Tiflis was