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A ZOOMORPHIC GOLD FIGURINE FROM THE LATE BRONZE AGE ON THE ISLAND OF THERA (SANTORINI), GREECE

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ABSTRACT

A zoomorphic figurine in pure gold was found at the Late Bronze Age settlement of Akrotiri, on the island of Thera (Greece). This discovery raises questions about the significance and the origin of this object, which remain to be answered. It has been suggested that the artefact may portray a member of the Caprinae subfamily (Mammalia, Artiodactyla), possibly a wild goat or an ibex. The absence of a beard, however, suggests that it could be identified as a gazelle. The problem is that gazelles did not exist in the natural environment of the Aegean in the 2nd millennium BC, and representations of these ungulates are extremely rare in Aegean Bronze Age art. In fact, the iconography of the Theran gold figurine presents marked similarities with Caucasian artistic productions, such as the decoration of one of the famous silver vases of Maikop (Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg). It cannot be excluded that the animal portrayed might be one of the ungulates which until relatively recently were still characteristic of the Caucasian region: the goitred gazelle, *Gazella subgutturosa* (Gueldenstaedt, 1780), or even the saiga antelope, *Saiga tatarica* (L. 1766).

Keywords: Zoomorphic gold figurine, Thera, Aegean Late Bronze Age, *Gazella subgutturosa*, *Saiga tatarica*, *Capra aegagrus*.

RÉSUMÉ

*Une figurine zoomorphe en or pur a été trouvée à Akrotiri, daté du Bronze récent, sur l'île de Thera (Grèce). Cette découverte soulève des interrogations sur la signification et l'origine de cet objet qui restent à résoudre. Il a été suggéré que cet artefact pourrait figurer un représentant de la sous-famille des Caprinae (Mammalia, Artiodactyla), comme une chèvre sauvage ou un bouquetin. L'absence de barbiche, cependant, suggère qu'il pourrait être identifié comme gazelle. Le problème est que les gazelles ne vivaient pas dans l'environnement naturel égéen du II^e millénaire av. J.-C., et les représentations de ces ongulés sont extrêmement rares dans l'art égéen de l'âge du Bronze. En fait, l'iconographie de la figurine en or de Thera révèle des similarités marquées avec les productions artistiques caucasiennes, comme la décoration de l'un des vases en argent renommés de Maikop (Musée de l'Hermitage, St. Petersburg). Il ne peut pas être exclu que l'animal figuré soit rattaché aux ongulés qui, jusqu'à récemment, étaient encore caractéristiques de la région caucasienne : la gazelle à goitre, *Gazella subgutturosa* (Gueldenstaedt, 1780) ou même l'antilope saïga, *Saiga tatarica* (L. 1766).*

Mots-clés : Figurine zoomorphe en or, Thera, Bronze récent égéen, *Gazella subgutturosa*, *Saiga tatarica*, *Capra aegagrus*.

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INTRODUCTION

A clay casket (*larnax*), referred by the archaeologists as the “Ark of the Covenant”, was found in the Late Bronze Age settlement of Akrotiri on the island of Thera (Greece). It contained a zoomorphic figurine in pure gold, enclosed in a wooden box (Doumas 2000) (*fig. 1*). The discovery raised questions about the significance and the origin of this object, which remain to be answered. The first problem concerns the animal represented. From a zoological point of view, the Thera gold figurine appears to represent an ungulate (*fig. 2*). A huge pile of hundreds of pairs of horns and antlers was also found buried directly under the pumice, not far from the *larnax* with the gold figurine. These contained cranial appendices of domestic *Ovis* or *Capra*, and of red deer, *Cervus elaphus* L. 1758 (A. Devetzi, pers. com. 2003). But the horn shape of the gold figurine suggests that we are dealing with a representative of the Bovidae family (Mammalia, Artiodactyla) rather than with a deer (Cervidae). More specifically, it has been suggested that it may portray a representative of the Caprinae subfamily, possibly a goat. Doumas (2003a) argued, for example, that the artefact represents an ibex or a wild goat. In fact, the wild goat is perhaps the most celebrated mammal in Minoan art (Hood 1971; Vanschoonwinkel 1990, 1996; Masseti 2003a).

Fig. 1—The clay larnax containing the zoomorphic gold figurine (from Doumas 2003).



Fig. 2—Side view of the zoomorphic gold figurine (courtesy of the Society for the Promotion of Studies on Prehistoric Thera, Athens).

Its image has been portrayed in a large number of wall paintings and in various craft objects. In the majority of cases, the rendering of the morphological features of the artiodactyls is so accurate that they can be identified without doubt as the Cretan wild goat, or *agrimi*, *Capra aegagrus cretica* (Schinz 1838) which still survives in the White Mountains range (Lefka Ori) (Masetti 1997, 1998, 2003a). However, one of the most distinctive features of the artistic rendering of the wild goat is the presence of a beard, either small or large, depending on whether it is female or male. In the course of the eastern Mediterranean Bronze Age, goat-head representations are characterised by a protuberance with a distinctive beard, and backward-curving parallel horns. In almost all the representations of the animal in the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age of Cyprus, for example, there is a clear suggestion of the beard, albeit somewhat abbreviated for sculptural purposes (Morris 1985). The gold ungulate of Thera is however represented without any beard at all.

A POSSIBLE ICONOGRAPHIC PRECEDENT FROM INNER ASIA

Not all the ungulates represented in Aegean Bronze Age art are necessarily identified with wild goats. The interpretation suggested by Porter (1996), for example, of the “white antelopes” portrayed in the wall-paintings of building Beta (room Beta 1) at Akrotiri (Thera) as a free elaboration of the morphology of the Cretan *agrimi* is not at all convincing (Masetti 2003a). Furthermore, as the beard is absent, the Theran gold figurine could be identified as a gazelle. In the Aegean natural environment of the 2nd millennium BC, however, gazelles did not exist (cf. Masetti 1984; Trantalidou 2000). They were, as they still are today, dispersed in a vast geographic range which extends from Africa to the Indian subcontinent, central Asia and China, but they have never been recorded as a zoogeographical element in the northern Mediterranean region and/or southern Europe. Thus, images of gazelles are not common in western art of the 3rd-2nd millennium BC. They would be completely unknown, for example, among the Bronze Age artistic productions of the Aegean area, were it not for the representation of the “white antelopes” in the wall paintings of Akrotiri, which have been identified as East African gazelles, such as Grant’s gazelle, *Nanger granti* (Brook 1872), or perhaps Soemmering’s gazelle, *N. soemmeringi* (Cretzschmar 1826) (Masetti 1980, 1984, 2000, 2003a). In this case, the morphological rendering of the ungulates is so accurate that the artist presumably knew the subject well, and may even have used a live specimen as a model. Beyond the morphological knowledge displayed, the painters also showed particular talent in evoking the behavioural characteristics of the animals that they were commissioned to paint. The gazelles would have been present on Thera as a result of trade in exotic animals from foreign countries, possibly indicating the importation of Ethiopian faunal elements through Egypt (Masetti 2003b).

As suggested by Doumas (2003b), the origin of the Theran gold figurine is to be found beyond the borders of the Aegean world. Indeed, the workmanship of this artefact is reminiscent of the contemporary metalworking techniques of inner Western Asia, the Anatolian Bronze Age artistic repertoires (cf. Uzunoğlu 1983) and the craft traditions of the Caucasus region. The iconography of the Theran gold figurine reveals marked similarities with Caucasian artistic productions, as may be seen in one of the famous silver vases of Maikop, still preserved in the collections of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (cf. Gibellino Krasceninnicowa 1957). This artefact comes from the area of Kuban, in the northern Caucasus, and has been chronologically dated to the first half of the 2nd millennium BC (Frankfort 1956). The decoration of the vase is characterised by images of rivers, trees and animals. According to Gibellino Krasceninnicowa (1957), the study of the individual details reveals a striking affinity between: “... *the Bronze Age of Maikop and that of Mesopotamia* [...]. *The products of Caucasian art were however marked by a particular characteristic which distinguished them and guaranteed the authenticity of their direct, local production, consisting of...*” among other things, the representation of the local fauna. In the silver vase in question we can easily recognise the distinctive phenotypical features of certain mammals of medium and large size, which up to a relatively short time ago were still characteristic of the Caucasian region. At the top of the decoration of the vase, from left to right, we can identify, for example, the representation of a wild ox, *Bos primigenius*

(Bojanus 1827), a wild horse, *Equus przewalskii* (Poliakov 1881), a lion, *Panthera leo* (L. 1758), and another wild ox (fig. 3). Lower down, proceeding in a clockwise direction, we can identify a bharal or blue sheep, *Pseudois nayaur* (Hodgson 1833), another large feline which is not immediately recognisable (possibly another lion, since the coat is not characterised by any pattern), a wild boar, *Sus scrofa* (L. 1758), and finally a bovid which appears to feature the morphology of a goitred gazelle, *Gazella subgutturosa* (Guldenstaedt 1780) (fig. 4), or even a steppe saiga, *Saiga tatarica* (L. 1766) (fig. 5). The saiga is in fact still present in the northern Caucasus, southern Russia and north-western Uzbekistan (Knystautas 1987; Grubb 2005), whereas the gazelle ranges from central Arabia and the eastern Caucasus to China, though Iran and Mongolia (cf. Masseti 2004). This zoomorphic image of the gazelle, represented in the Maikop vase, is one of the closest to the gold figurine of Thera.



Fig. 3—Detail of the decoration of the vase of Maikop, northern Caucasus (first half of the 2nd millennium BC), Hermitage Museum (St. Petersburg, Russia) (from Gibellino Krasceninnicowa 1957).



Fig. 4—Goitred gazelle, *Gazella subgutturosa* (Guldenstaedt 1780) in Ceylan Pinar (Ras el Ain), on the border between south-eastern Turkey and northern Syria, the westernmost range of the geographic distribution of this ungulate (photo by Marco Masseti).

INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN THE AEGEAN BRONZE AGE WORLD CONCLUDING REMARKS

The occurrence of an artefact from inner Asia within the ruins of the Akrotiri settlement is perhaps not so surprising as it may seem. In the Aegean Bronze Age world, the evidence of trade with foreign lands is relatively well known. The importation from the Middle East and Africa into south-west Asia and the eastern Mediterranean of exotic zoological species—and/or the durable parts of these animals, such as elephant tusks or ostrich eggs—was merely a continuation of a practice which had been going on for centuries, if not millennia, whenever political and economical conditions were favourable (Masetti 2003b). This tradition had its oldest roots in the trade that had been taking place between North Africa, the Near East, the eastern Mediterranean basin and the Middle East since prehistoric times (cf. Masetti 2000, 2001). The Pre-ceramic Neolithic levels of Shillourokambos, on the island of Cyprus, have revealed evidence of the importation of an exotic mainland Levantine fauna, including cattle, Mesopotamian fallow deer, sheep, goats, boars and cats, which were entirely absent in the Quaternary of Cyprus, and which replaced the indigenous animals, such as pygmy hippopotami and dwarf elephants (Guilaine *et al.* 1996, 2000). On the other hand, typical Middle Eastern species, such as the black rat, *Rattus rattus* (L. 1758), made their first appearance in Natufian times (10,000-8,300 BC) along the coastal areas of the Levant (Tchernov 1986; Masetti 1995). In early historical times, during the course of the 2nd millennium BC, evidence of trade between eastern Africa and the eastern Mediterranean basin is attested by the importation through Egypt of Ethiopian faunal elements, such as the above-mentioned sub-Saharan gazelles, painted on the walls of Akrotiri (Thera) and/or the “blue monkeys”, *Chlorocebus aethiops* (L. 1758), depicted in the palace of Knossos (Crete) and in several other Bronze Age settlements of the Aegean islands (Masetti 1980, 2000, 2003a). Under favourable political and economic conditions, the long-established tradition of trade between the Aegean world and the surrounding Eurasian and African lands continued from prehistory through to historical times.

It is therefore possible to fit into this context the importation into the Aegean world of zoomorphic images of exotic provenance, giving them the importance which had been attributed to them by Bronze Age peoples. According to Doumas (2003a), the Thera gold figurine suggests that the ungulate portrayed must have been associated directly with a deity venerated at Akrotiri. In this regard, it may be interesting to observe the widespread propensity of the Late Bronze Age peoples of Santorini to include the images of exotic animals in their cultural practices, such as the already mentioned “blue monkeys” (Marinatos 1987; Ferrence, Bendersky 2004) and/or “white antelopes”. As in the latter case, it seems that with the gold figurine of the “Ark of the Covenant” we are again dealing with the stylised image of a gazelle, or a saiga. It is therefore possible to hypothesise that the zoomorphic iconography of the gold artefact contained a symbolic meaning. In the case of the “white antelopes”, for example, it has been suggested that their depiction alluded to rites of passage from childhood to manhood (Masetti 1984, 2000, 2003a; Trantalidou 2000).

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