



Minoan-Mycenaean Signatures Observed by Pausanias at a Sacred Space Dominated by Athena

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Home » [By Gregory Nagy, Pausanias commentary](#) » Minoan-Mycenaean signatures observed by Pausanias at a sacred space dominated by Athena

Minoan-Mycenaean signatures observed by Pausanias at a sacred space dominated by Athena

May 15, 2020 Posted By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy, Pausanias commentary](#)

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2020.05.15 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. In the previous posting, [Classical Inquiries 2020.05.08](#), I noted the obvious fact that the acropolis of Athens was not at all the only such place that was sacred to the goddess Athena, and that the traveler Pausanias, who lived in the second century CE, visited a wide variety of other places that were likewise sacred, each in its own way, to goddesses likewise named Athena. As I engage in my long-term project bearing the title [A Pausanias Reader in Progress](#), where I selectively retranslate the text of Pausanias, with annotations, I have been keeping track of these sacred places visited by our traveler. For the moment, I highlight one such place as described by Pausanias. In this case, I note details that I would describe as signatures, as it were, of an earlier Minoan-Mycenaean phase in the evolution of the figure known in classical and post-classical times as Athena. And I note also a detail that points to a Minoan-Mycenaean version of a related figure, known in classical and post-classical times as Hēraklēs, heroic protégé of the goddess Athena. In the illustration for this posting, I show what I think is a relevant picture, dating back to the glory days of Minoan civilization in Crete.



Imprint (= impression, on a clay sealing, stamped by a signet ring that has not survived), known as "The Master Impression," Late Minoan (1450–1400 BCE, Kastelli, Chania, Crete). Archaeological Museum of Chania, museum number KH 1563. [Image](#) via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

§1. The picture here is a photograph of an impression made on a clay sealing, stamped by a magnificent signet ring that has not survived. The original picture that had once been carved into that signet ring must have been a wonder, since even the impression that it made on the clay sealing is a wonder in its own right. This Minoan sealing, reverently described by archaeologists as "The Master Impression," bears the image of a heroic figure who is I think comparable to the classical and post-classical Hēraklēs. There he is,

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standing proudly on top of a palace, with a commanding view of the landscape that surrounds him. This landscape—a composite of sea, land, and sky—is personified, I also think, by a goddess comparable to Athena, who figures prominently in later myths as the vigilant patroness of Hēraklēs. But how can such a personification be imagined, when there is no goddess to be seen in the Minoan picture? I offer an answer to this question in the final paragraph of this posting.

§2. For the purpose of developing such an answer, I first have to review some details we see pictured in “The Master Impression.” My review follows closely some relevant observations made by a most perceptive archaeologist, Erik Hallager (1985), who thinks, I should note in passing, that the clay sealing stamped with the signet ring bearing the picture of “The Master Impression” had been attached to a text written on parchment (p. 14). Viewing the overall picture shown by “The Master Impression,” Hallager starts from down below, where we can see a rocky shore by the sea (p. 16). Further up, there is a likewise rocky and mountainous “landscape,” with “a clearly marked summit, near to the sea,” and with “a building complex placed upon it” (p. 17). Standing on top of the “building complex” is “a male figure surrounded by four objects which it has not been possible to identify.” [...] Hallager goes on to describe this male figure (p. 22), and I now quote him without further interruption (though I do not include his parenthetical references to illustrations that accompany his statements): “Compared with other representations in Minoan art, this male figure is unusually sturdy and strongly built, with large thighs and upper arms, although he has been rendered with the typical, Minoan wasp-waist. The impression is not clear in respect of the face and hair treatment, but he does have long hair, which falls down behind his back and flares out on each side of his body in four tresses. He wears a necklace, has a ring on his upper, left arm and apparently also a ring on his left wrist, indicated by a small projection. He is dressed in a typical, short kilt with a belt around the waist and the codpiece in front. His footwear is of a type well known in Minoan art. The whole pose of the figure gives an immediate impression of strength.” [The italics here are mine.]

§3. I now propose to compare the details reported in Erik Hallager’s description of this Minoan picture carved into a signet ring and impressed on a clay sealing dated to the fifteenth century BCE with some details I happened to find while reading Pausanias. Before I start the comparison, however, I find it essential to note a further detail about “The Master Impression”: it was unearthed in the environs of the city of Chanià in Crete—and the ancient name of this city was *Kudōniā*. That said, I am ready to quote and to translate what Pausanias says about his visit to a place called Phrixa in the region of Triphylia, a territory dominated by the state of Elis (6.21.6):

ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ χώρᾳ λόφος ἐστὶν ἀνήκων ἐς ὄξυ, ἐπὶ δὲ αὐτῷ πόλεως Φρίξας ἐρείπια καὶ Ἀθηνᾶς ἐστὶν ἐπίκλησιν Κυδωνίας ναός. οὗτος μὲν οὐ τὰ πάντα ἐστὶ σώς, βωμὸς δὲ καὶ ἐς ἐμὲ ἔτι· ἰδρῦσασθαι δὲ τῇ θεῷ τὸ ἱερὸν Κλυμένον φασὶν ἀπόγονον Ἡρακλέους τοῦ Ἰδαίου, παραγενέσθαι δὲ αὐτὸν ἀπὸ Κυδωνίας τῆς Κρητικῆς καὶ τοῦ Ἰαρδάνου ποταμοῦ. λέγουσι δὲ καὶ Πέλοπα οἱ Ἥλειοι τῇ Ἀθηνᾷ θῆσαι τῇ Κυδωνίᾳ πρὶν ἢ ἐς τὸν ἀγῶνα αὐτὸν τῷ Οἰνομάῳ καθίστασθαι.

In this region there is an elevation [*Iophos*] culminating in a sharp peak, and on top of that elevation are the ruins of an acropolis [*polis*] called Phrixa and a temple [*nāos*] of Athena, whose name-of-invocation [*epiklēsis*] is *Kudōniā*. This temple is not completely preserved, but it still has an altar [*bōmos*], even in my time. And the people say that this sacred-space [*hieron*] was founded in honor of the goddess [*theós* (feminine)] by Klymenos, descendant of Hēraklēs, the-one-from-Mount-Ida [*Idaios*], and that he [Klymenos] came on the scene from the city of *Kudōniā*-in-Crete and from the river Iardanos. And the people of Elis say that Pelops sacrificed [*thuein*] to Athena *Kudōniā* before he entered the contest [*agōn*] [of a race-to-the-death in chariots] with Oinomaos.

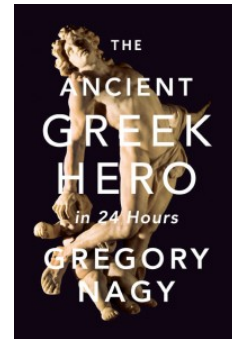
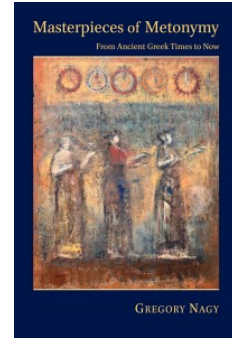
§4. Pausanias is speaking here about an ancient *nāos* ‘temple’ of Athena, situated on top of a steep elevation, and he says that this temple, in ruins, is the centerpiece of a whole complex of ancient ruins that he found there—ruins that he describes as the *polis* of Phrixa. In situations where our traveler is describing a living city, he will of course refer to such a city as a *polis*, but in situations where he is reconstructing in his mind the distant past, he uses this same word *polis* to mean ‘acropolis’ or ‘citadel’. The best example of such usage is a reference made by Pausanias himself to the acropolis of Athens, and I quote here the text, along with my translation (1.26.6):

ἱερὰ μὲν τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς ἐστὶν ἢ τε ἄλλη πόλις καὶ ἢ πᾶσα ὁμοίως γῆ, καὶ γὰρ ὅσοις θεοὺς καθέστηκεν ἄλλους ἐν τοῖς δήμοις σέβειν, οὐδὲν τι ἦσσαν τὴν Ἀθηνᾶν ἄγουσιν ἐν τιμῇ, τὸ δὲ ἀγιώτατον ἐν κοινῷ πολλοῖς πρότερον νομισθὲν ἔτεσιν <ἦ> συνήλθον ἀπὸ τῶν δήμων ἐστὶν Ἀθηνᾶς ἄγαλμα ἐν τῇ νῦν ἀκροπόλει, τότε δὲ ὀνομαζομένη πόλει· φήμη δὲ ἐς αὐτὸ ἔχει πεσεῖν ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ. καὶ τοῦτο μὲν οὐκ ἐπέξειμι εἴτε οὕτως εἴτε ἄλλως ἔχει.

Both the city [*polis*] [of Athens] and the whole of the land [*gē*] are alike sacred [*hierā*] to Athena; for even those who in their demes [*dēmoi*] have traditions of worshipping [*sebein*] other gods nevertheless hold Athena in honor [*tīmē*]. But the thing that was customarily-thought [*nomizesthai*] to be the most holy [*hagion*] thing by all in common [*en koinōi*] already for many years before the demes [*dēmoi*] came-together [*sun-elthein*] is the statue [*agalma*] of Athena [*Polias*] that is on what is now called the Acropolis, but was in early days [called] the *Polis*. A tale [*phēmē*] concerning it says that it [= the wooden statue of Athena *Polias*] fell from the sky [*ouranos*]; but I will not follow up and say whether it was this way or some other way.

§5. In the case of a living city like classical and post-classical Athens, as I showed in Nagy 2020.05.01, the name of the city is an elliptic plural, *Athēnai*, to be interpreted etymologically as meaning ‘*Athēnē* and everything that belongs to *Athēnē*’. In terms of this interpretation, the singular *Athēnē* had formerly referred to the acropolis of Athens, which dominated not just politically but even visually the surrounding city and the overall environs of the city. This etymology of *Athēnai*, which was the name of the city of

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Athens, as the elliptic plural of singular *Athēnē*, which had formerly been the name of the acropolis of Athens, validates the observation made by Pausanias in the passage I just quoted, where he notes that the word *polis* had formerly referred to the acropolis of Athens and that it was only later that this same word became the standard way of referring to the entire city of Athens. This observation of Pausanias is relevant to his reference to the acropolis of Phrixa in Triphylia, which he describes as a *polis* in ruins. In the case of this city, which was no longer a city at the time of Pausanias, the ruins of the city's acropolis could be seen simply as a city in ruins. To be contrasted is a passage in Herodotus (4.148.4), where the historian mentions this same city as a member of a confederation of six cities in the region of Triphylia. For Herodotus, who lived over half a millennium before Pausanias, this city was still a city, as we see from the name that he records for this place: the name here is not the singular *Phrixa* but an elliptic plural, *Phrixai*. Such a form, recorded by Herodotus (again, 4.148.4), can be compared with the elliptic plural *Athēnai*, referring to the entire city of Athens. Similarly, *Phrixai* as mentioned by Herodotus is still a city, though the historian goes on to say that some of the six cities of Triphylia—he does not specify which ones—had already been demolished by the rival state of Elis.

§6. If we compare the acropolis at Phrixa, which was for Pausanias a city in ruins, with the acropolis at Athens, which remained a living city, could there be something that is missing in the picture that our traveler gives us in describing what he actually saw when he visited the acropolis at Phrixa? I think that there was in fact something that was very much missing in this picture, and this something, I also think, can best be described as an *absent signifier*. Here is what I mean: *at Phrixa, there was no statue of the goddess for Pausanias to see.*

§7. In terms of Greek mythological traditions, however, such a situation does not rule out the idea that the goddess Athena is nevertheless ever present, ever ready to be worshipped by the local population that venerates her sacred space on high. In the case of the acropolis at Phrixa, for example, Pausanias goes out of his way to note that the altar for worshipping the goddess on high is still functional, even if her temple is in ruins. It is the sacred space of the goddess that remains essential, not the statue that marks the space. That is why the ancient statue can in some cases even be replaced, if lost, by a newer statue, as we see in the account of Pausanias about the statue of Athena *Aleā* in the Arcadian city of Tegea, which was taken away from her temple and carried off to Rome by Augustus after his victory at Actium over Antony (8.46.1, 4). For a living city like Tegea, it was possible to replace that statue of Athena that was lost to Rome by taking another statue of Athena from another site that was sacred to her—in this case, from a neighboring Arcadian *dēmos* or 'district' by the name of Manthouria, as we read further in Pausanias (8.47.1).

§8. I now return to the text that I translated from Pausanias (6.21.6) about the sacred space of Athena at Phrixa. As we see from the wording of our traveler, the clearest indication that the goddess was still being worshipped in that space by the local population is this detail: the people of this city in ruins had an *epiklēsis* for their goddess, that is, they had a special 'name-of-invocation' for Athena when they were praying to her, worshipping her, and, presumably, sacrificing at her altar. The epiclesis or 'name-of-invocation' for Athena, Pausanias goes out of his way to say, was *Kudōniā*. Thus the name that the people of Phrixa gave to the goddess Athena when they worshipped her is identical to the ancient place-name *Kudōniā*—which was once the name of the place in Crete where archaeologists found "The Master Impression."

§9. I will have more to say in later postings about the convergences in the details given here. But I must note already now that there was a river by the name of Iardanos not only in north-west Crete (*Odyssey* 3.293) but also in the region called Elis (*Iliad* 7.135). Further, the region of *Kudōniā* in north-west Crete is not far from the heights of Mount Ida, the place of origin for Hēraklēs, the one-from-Mount-Ida [*Idaios*]. For more on this Minoan-Mycenaean version of Hēraklēs, stemming from Mount Ida in Crete, I refer to my comments at §§2–5 of Nagy 2019.11.27 on the relevant references made by Pausanias (5.7.6–7).

§10. Before closing, I return to the idea I introduced at the start of this posting. As I said there, I think that "The Master Impression" pictures a landscape—a composite of sea, land, and sky—that is personified by a goddess comparable to Athena, who figures prominently in later myths as the vigilant patroness of Hēraklēs. But how, I went on to ask, can such a personification be imagined, when there is no goddess to be seen in the Minoan picture? The answer, I think, has to do with mythological thinking about a sacred wooden statue that drops out of the sky and falls to the earth, landing on top of an acropolis where the local population is worshipping a goddess who personifies their landscape as viewed from the vantage point of the heights looming over their locale. We have seen such thinking come to life in the myth reported by Pausanias (1.26.6) about a wooden statue of Athena *Polias* that fell out of the sky once upon a time and landed on top of the Acropolis of Athens, thus marking the personification of that Acropolis as the goddess herself. In terms of this myth about the statue of Athena *Polias*, the Acropolis of Athens is already protected by an invisible goddess even before she makes herself visible in the form of a statue that descends from the heavens. But then, once she arrives at her acropolis in person, as a wooden statue, she can personally claim this sacred space as a personification of her divine self. In a posting that follows, I will be looking for Minoan-Mycenaean pictorial representations of such a goddess at the moment of her arrival, fully personified and taking her rightful place as the patroness of the hero who guards her sacred space. Although the goddess is invisible in some Minoan-Mycenaean picturings, as in "The Master Impression," her presence is there, ready to be made manifestly visible by the arrival of her statue on top of the commanding heights that she already personifies.

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